Great Expectations

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, September 22, 2019

Is this your religion? If so, what are you doing with it? These questions were posed by A. Powell Davies when he served as minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. from 1944 until 1957. His words still resonate today. Our faith tradition has always been a religion of high and great expectations.

The Unitarian Universalism we know today was planted and grew in American soil from the country’s very beginning. We can see the values laid out by the founders of the United States of America echoed in Unitarian Universalist values of freedom, equality, and the ideal of e pluribus unum – out of many one. The Universalist view that salvation is available to all, that all are equal and welcome in God’s kingdom, that there is no division between the damned and the saved is an expression of our oneness. The Unitarian view of the oneness of God is an expression of the unity or oneness of all life and the view that there is a spark of the divine in everyone is an expression of equality. Religious freedom was a driving force for both sides of our religious family tree, the freedom to practice one’s faith free from interference of governmental power and authority. We still hold these values of freedom, equality, and unity today.

The great expectations of our faith tradition echo American expectations that have been around since the founding of our country – expansiveness and exploration, unlimited possibilities and opportunities – equal opportunity through hard work and education – and the expectation that each generation would achieve more financial wealth and stability than the one before.

The Unitarian James Freeman Clarke, wrote in 1885 about “the Continuity of Human Development in all worlds, or the Progress of [Hu]mankind onward and upward forever.”

When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, The Rev. Donald Harrington preached a sermon for the ceremony of celebration. In it he said, “What we have seen emerging in Unitarian Universalism in this century is nothing less than a new synthesis, the coalescence of a new consensus, and new world faith, formulated by and fitted for this great, new world age. It is taking its place beside the Big Three religious groups on the continent, the Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.” He goes on to say, “Looking forward, I see the need for us to prepare ourselves to absorb the incredible growth which will accompany our newly-won relevance.”

Talk about great expectations!

A research psychologist at the University of North Dakota, Bob Rosenthal conducted an experiment about expectations. One night he went into his lab and put signs on the rat cages, labeling some of the rats as smart and other rats as dumb, even though neither of these things were true. In the morning, the lab assistants were instructed to run the rats through the exact same maze. Surprisingly, the rats labeled smart outperformed the rats labeled dumb. The experiment has been replicated with teachers and military trainers. Teacher expectations can raise or lower students IQ scores and military trainer expectations can make a soldier faster or slower.

So, what has become of those great American expectations and those great Unitarian Universalist expectations? Younger generations today no longer expect to do better financially than their parents did. Crushing student debt is affecting basic life choices like owning a home and having children – the American Dream out of reach. Of course, the American Dream has never been equally available to all. Practices of redlining in real estate sales kept people of color out of higher property value neighborhoods. The system of property tax funded schools insures that lower property value neighborhoods will have poorly funded schools. It used to be that higher education was a pathway out of poverty. Now, for too many, it is the pathway into debt induced poverty.

The American spirit of expansiveness has met its limit. The reality is that an economic system built on consumption is not sustainable. Economic growth that is dependent on more consumers consuming more goods is wreaking havoc on the planet’s ecology and climate.

Our country’s founders had great expectations that democracy, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people was possible. Today our democracy is devolving into political divisions, polarization, and blatant disregard for the rule of law.

How have those great Unitarian Universalist expectations fared?

Donald Harrington’s prediction of numerical growth was realized during the 1960’s. Our UU congregations did grow as did every other religious and educational institution of the time – growth fueled by economic well-being and population growth. Sunday school classrooms were filled to overflowing. UU religious education programs were busy schooling young people in the celebrated stories of Unitarians and Universalists, of their involvement in the underground railroad, in work for abolition, and women’s suffrage. Then of course, during the 60’s, UU’s worked for Civil Rights, marching alongside Martin Luther King in Selma. Two of our own were killed in the effort – James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo.

Liberal Religious Youth, fondly known as LRY, was a precursor to the merger. The Unitarian youth and Universalist youth became one body in 1954, leading the way for their two parent organizations to merge in 1961. LRY, with a focus on youth empowerment, was growing and thriving. In the 60’s and 70’s, UU congregations started to be safe havens for the LGBT community.

The curriculum About Your Sexuality was developed to provide scientifically accurate information about sexuality, reproduction, and contraception to middle and high school youth. These were high times for Unitarian Universalist youth.

It turns out that after the merger, our congregations did have difficulty in absorbing the incredible growth, difficulty that came in the form of conflict, some of which was driven by societal pressures. One source of conflict was the war in Viet Nam. Congregations divided over what position to take – for the war, against the war, or to take no position at all. Many people left congregations over conflict about Viet Nam. Another source of conflict was the Black Empowerment Movement. Within Unitarian Universalism, there was controversy over how to engage the issues. Was it through the Black Affairs Council for Black Self-determination or was it through the Black and White Alliance? Funding that was voted by the General Assembly was later rescinded as the fledgling new Unitarian Universalist Association faced a financial crisis. It is estimated that in the late 60’s and early 70’s, nearly 1,000 African Americans left Unitarian Universalism.

Even with these declines, Unitarian Universalist congregations collectively have held our very small percentage of the American population steady, even while other denominations are experiencing drastic declines in membership.

LRY, Liberal Religious Youth was disbanded in 1984 and replaced with YRUU, Young Religious Unitarian Universalists. YRUU was disbanded in 2009. The success of both LRY and YRUU was due in part to district-wide youth cons. Experiences that youth had in these programs was wildly divergent. For some it was an opportunity to develop leadership skills. For others, in an environment without close adult supervision, it was an opportunity to explore behavior that wouldn’t be acceptable in other settings. In the LRY years, some groups and cons reflected the sex, drugs, and rock and roll culture of the time. Some of that behavior carried over into some YRUU groups and youth cons. While some youth developed great leadership skills and some youth experienced tremendous freedom, others were deeply wounded by the experience. In 2009, the General Assembly received the results of a four-year study by the Youth Ministry Working Group. Among their recommendations was for youth programming that is spirit-filled, congregationally-based, robust, flexible, and diverse.

About Your Sexuality was revised into what we know today as Our Whole Lives, Comprehensive Sexuality Education. It now encompasses the whole life. It now includes a faith-based emphasis and has updated information about gender and sexual orientation.

So, what do we do when our great expectations are not met? Our small but mighty Unitarian Universalism has achieved some great things. Still, we clearly have not become a fourth major religion in the U.S. as Harrington predicted. And we have not fulfilled expectations for numeric growth or growth in racial and ethnic diversity. What then, are the great expectations of our time?

What I know is that we cannot rest on the laurels of the past. We no longer hold the corner on LGBTQ inclusion as more denominations are becoming open and affirming of diversity in gender identity and sexual orientation. Our approach to sexuality education is making its way into school and community programs. The good news is that we have had an impact on mainstream culture. And we can no longer count on our uniqueness in these areas to draw people here. We aren’t the only religious denomination working for racial justice and climate justice. We must our shift our expectations in keeping with our current time.

Here are some of my great expectations for the future of Unitarian Universalism.

First great expectation: In response to the times in which we live, we will become more creative, innovative, and resilient. We must bring these qualities to bear in all we do as a religious community. The challenges of our time are not technical challenges but adaptive challenges. No one has the answers because we have never faced these challenges. We must be creative in how we minister to and with younger generations who are getting by with fewer resources of time and money. We cannot recreate programs of the past to shape new generations in our own image. We need new faith formation models for a new generation.

Second great expectation: we will more fully engage the fullness of the religious pluralism of Unitarian Universalism. Our world is becoming more religiously diverse. We need to develop the skill of translating theological language so that religious difference need not be threatening but can be enriching.

Third great expectation: not to be alarmist, but in the future, I believe that we may very well be called to keep the spirit of democracy alive. We do this by using democratic processes in our congregations. Not necessarily the democracy of our U.S. founders, not the democracy of majority rule. As long as our congregations are predominantly white, when decisions are made by majority vote, those currently on the margins will be kept on the margins. We need to be inventive and create processes that are in alignment with our principles of human worth and dignity, of justice, equity, and compassion, making room for and listening to and amplifying voices of those with marginalized identities. We need to create processes that take into account the interdependent web, processes that give voice to our beautiful planet Earth.

To do this, those of us who are white must do the inner work of dismantling our own internalized prejudices and biases that are part of our U. S. American culture. Without this inner work, those of us who are white are likely to unconsciously perpetuate systems that privilege whiteness. Our systems of capitalism and democracy were built on assumptions of white privilege, privilege which if left unexamined, is damaging to our siblings of color and damaging to our climate. This work is not easy. It can make us feel uncomfortable and bring up feelings we would rather not feel. It asks us to hold high expectations of ourselves and each other.

We have the resources of our faith tradition to sustain us for what lies ahead. We have a heritage that has survived and even thrived through periods of persecution. We have a heritage that has always adapted to the changing times through innovation and forward thinking. We have sources of truth and wisdom that are deep and wide. We have a set of principles that call us to high aspirations and great expectations. Ours is a religion that affirms and promotes human worth and dignity -- justice, equity, and compassion -- acceptance of each other and encouragement to spiritual growth – a free and responsible search for truth and meaning – the right of conscience – the use of the democratic process – the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all – and respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

Like those who came before us, we too must ask: If this is our religion, then what are we doing with it?