

Unitarian Universalism and the Working Class

A chapel service at UUA headquarters in Boston.

Opening Words

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. – Albert Schweitzer

Sermon

My hometown is in downstate Illinois, in the farm country. We had one high school, so whether your dad was a millionaire or ran off when you were three never to be seen again, that's where you went.

My father worked in a factory, the same factory for my entire childhood. You could do that in those days, if you showed up on time every day and did what they told you.

It was a good job. The factory made cattle feed, and cattle always need to eat, so the work was steady. If you were careful, it paid well enough to support a family.

It was also a bad job. Dad always came home stinking of fish oil. Over time, the noise ruined his hearing. And the schedule flickered. He worked the day shift one week and the night shift the next. Back and forth every other week until he retired. All the workers in that factory did that.

If the night shift was working overtime, I didn't see him all week. But otherwise I got off school about an hour before he had to leave for work. I'd race home on my bike and we'd play baseball. He taught me to hit by throwing me tennis balls in the front yard.

Dad had an interesting method for teaching me not to be afraid of the ball. "Let it hit you," he said. Because that's how Dad thinks: If the worst has happened already and you survived, what's to be afraid of?

Unitarian Universalism has a class problem. We talk about it some, but not a lot. And when we do we often focus on the very poor: the homeless, panhandlers, people on welfare.

But we also have a problem with the working class. I don't meet many people like my Dad in UU churches, not even at the church in my hometown. I've preached there twice now. Dad came to hear me the first time, but I don't think I sold him on Unitarian Universalism. He hasn't been back.

Meanwhile, I've met a lot of educated professionals there – the newspaper editor, the superintendent of schools, a professor from the local university. Because that's who goes to a UU church.

Why is that? In some ways it's the same mystery as our race problem: We try to stand *for* all people, but when we look around we're usually standing *with* people like ourselves. We promote equality, but perversely, the less privileged would rather join conservative

churches, churches that seem to us to serve the interests of the rich, churches that tell them it's their own damn fault their lives are such a struggle.

One reason this mystery is hard to talk about, I think, is that a lot of us believe an explanation that we don't want to say out loud: Working class people are stupid. The powers-that-be have duped them into pining for Heaven instead of changing Earth.

It's a tempting explanation, because it absolves us. We don't have to ask if *we're* being stupid, if the working class doesn't listen to us because we're really only talking about our lives, not theirs.

Let's go back to baseball for a minute. Batting helmets. Did you know the major leagues didn't make batting helmets mandatory until 1971? You know who fought that rule? Players. Hitters. The league had to grandfather the active players in, so that they could keep facing Nolan Ryan without helmets until they retired. The last batter without a helmet was Bob Montgomery in 1979.

The same thing happened in hockey. The last helmetless player retired in 1997.

Now, from the outside it sounds crazy that the players would fight a rule that protects them, but it makes an odd kind of sense. You see, the players knew the lesson my Dad taught me: If you're afraid of the ball, you can't hit it. They just took it one step further: If you're really not afraid, why do you want a helmet?

When you're doing something hard, like hitting a baseball, sometimes the mindset that works is not the objective, big-picture view – the one that tells you to wear a helmet.

Another sports example: I remember hearing Muhammad Ali say, "I am the greatest. There ain't never been no fighter like me. There ain't never been no nothing like me."

If you ask whether those statements were objectively true, you miss the point. Ali was doing something hard. He needed to think that way to do what he did.

Working class people are doing something hard.

Picture it like this: Imagine society as a giant maze, with success as a prize at the end. Some people are born right by the exit. Others start in more difficult places. They can't just wander out. They have to make all the right moves.

Now, you might stand in a high place outside the maze and feel compassion for the people deep inside. You might ask: "Why does it have to be so hard to find the prize? Couldn't we knock out a few walls? Why can't the minimum wage be higher? Why can't the government hire the unemployed? Why can't college be free?"

When you're standing in a high place those are great questions.

But if you're inside the maze, that mindset won't get you out. "Why does this maze have to be so hard? Why does that wall have to be there? Why can't I have a clear path to the prize?"

It doesn't help. No matter how good those questions are objectively, if I'm in the maze I don't need them in my head.

Ten-twelve years ago I was visiting my sister in Tennessee. She also got an education and joined the professional class. My nephews never had any doubt they were going to college.

That Saturday night I got her husband Ed talking. He was researching clean ways to burn coal. It was a demanding job, but he believed in it and thought it was important. So he worked long hours and traveled a lot. He was also finance chair of their conservative, not-quite-fundamentalist church. They were raising money for a new building. That seemed important too. And his sons, my nephews, were both in elementary school. Ed worried that he wasn't spending enough time with them.

Job, church, family – every part of his life wanted more from him. What to do?

The next morning I went to church with them. The sermon topic was “Resisting Temptation.” I boiled the entire 20-minute sermon down to three words: *Don't be bad*.

I felt smug that morning, because I knew that Ed would have been so much better off in my church. We talk about real life, *his* real life. He didn't need to be told not to be bad. His issue wasn't Good vs. Evil; it was Good vs. another Good vs. a third kind of Good. And that's the issue in my life and in the lives of all my professional class friends.

The primary spiritual challenge of the professional class is discernment. There are so many good things we could do with our lives. How do we choose?

A UU church will help you figure that out.

But I don't think discernment was Dad's issue. Because the factory was not a competing Good. It was a necessary Evil.

When he was pitching me tennis balls in the front yard, I don't believe that any part of him actually *wanted* to go off to that dirty, hot, noisy, dangerous factory. He went because if he didn't something bad would happen. He'd be punished. And in the long run, if he lost his job, I'd be punished.

He didn't need help discerning what to do. He just needed to make himself do it.

And that's working class life in a nutshell. You're not following your bliss. You're not pursuing your calling. You're selling your time for money. The way out of the maze, and the way to get your kids out of the maze, is to go out every day and do something you'd rather not do.

Professionals have trouble grasping that. Because we imagine that we also do things we don't want to do. We don't get that extra hour of sleep in the morning. We have meetings with people we don't like. We fill out forms that we know are pointless. It's on a whole different scale.

Here's what sums it up to me: When professionals retire, we keep dabbling. The newspaper editor in my hometown – he's retired; he still writes. When the professor retires, he'll keep reading journals and going to talks. But in the thirty years since my Dad took early retirement, he has *never* brought home some fish oil and mixed up a batch

of cattle feed in the garage. When you retire from WalMart, you don't set up a bar-code scanner in the basement, just to stay busy. You do that stuff for money, and when they stop paying you, you never ever do it again.

UU churches also help with the second major spiritual challenge of the professional class: inspiration. That's what discernment is for: to find a consistently inspiring path through life. The ideal profession is a calling, and inspiration is how you work those 12-hour days without burning out. Inspired people bounce out of bed in the morning with ideas and ambitions. They stay late because there's always one more thing they want to try. Those are the people who really make it in the professions. If you have to push yourself, and you're competing with somebody who's inspired, you're at a huge disadvantage.

That's why professionals tell their children: "Find something you love, so that you'll be brilliant and creative and energetic. You'll run rings around the guys who are just doing what they have to do."

In the professional class, inspiration is the road to success. It's the way out of the maze.

In the working class the road to success is self control. That's what you want to teach your children: Resist temptation. Walk the narrow path. Do the hard thing you don't want to do, so that you and the people who are counting on you won't be punished.

That almost sounds like a theology. But not our theology.

Let's throw one more thing into the mix: Second chances. Rich kids, professional kids – they get them. The door never completely closes on you. If your parents are doctors or lawyers, you can flunk out of two or three colleges. It'll work out. If your name is Bush, you don't have to get serious until you're 40. The sky is still the limit.

In the working class it's not that way. Listen to Eminem's song *Lose Yourself*. He asks: "What if you had one shot?" And the fantasy, of course, is that you *get* one shot. What if you *had* one shot? You wouldn't blow it, would you?

So you're deep in the maze. There's a church in there. It tells you that there's Good and there's Evil. And because somebody has done something incredibly generous, you get a chance to choose Good. One chance. You get it wrong, you go to Hell forever.

There's another church. It tells you there are a lot of ways to be good. And if the good you pick doesn't turn out to be the best good, pick again. It'll work out.

Which church is talking about the world you live in? Which message do you want your kids to hear? Which one gives you the mindset you need to get out? You see, it isn't just that a harsh theology justifies a harsh world. It also works the other way: a harsh world justifies a harsh theology.

Of course, if you're already outside the maze, if you're standing in a high place and have the big view, then the whole good-and-evil, heaven-and-hell theology doesn't sound so

impressive. It's crazy. It's stupid. Almost as stupid as batting against Nolan Ryan without a helmet.

The question I want to leave you with is whether Unitarian Universalism is bringing the world a message about life, or just a message about *our* lives? Can we speak in words that make sense *both* in the high place *and* in the maze? Can we teach *both* subtle discernment *and* making yourself do the obvious hard thing? Inspiration *and* self control?

I hope so. Because otherwise we're a boutique religion. Otherwise we've surrendered the working class to the religious right.

My hunch, my faith – or maybe just what I need to believe to do what I do – is that we can find such a message, that there can be a truth that encompasses all times and all places, a wisdom big enough for all people.

Closing Words

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;

its temple, all space;

its shrine, the good heart;

its creed, all truth;

its ritual, works of love;

its profession of faith, divine living.

-- Theodore Parker

Doug Muder

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