

## *I Beg to Differ*

A Sermon delivered by the Rev. Norm Stewart  
at the First Unitarian Church of Louisville, KY  
June 1, 2003

Many years ago, in the comic strip *Peanuts*, there was a Charlie Brown line that has stuck with me ever since. Charlie said, “I don’t know if I’m unpopular because nobody likes me or if nobody likes me because I’m unpopular.” Based upon that line at least, I’d almost guess that young Master Brown was a budding Unitarian Universalist or maybe even a UU minister. If you are into winning popularity contests there are a lot easier ways to do it then by being a UU.

Barb Donnelly recently came across an article which she made a copy of for me. It was entitled, *Unitarians like it or not*. It was written in late 1979 upon the occasion of this congregation’s then upcoming 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration here in Louisville. The catch phrase under the title of the article was this: *the Unitarian Church, which is celebrating 150 years in Louisville and the Ohio Valley, has always been a church of controversy*.

The article said that in 1827, three years before there was a First Unitarian Church of Louisville, “Dr. Horace Holley resigned under pressure as president of Transylvania University in Lexington. During the years that he had headed the school he had brought it to national prominence. But he was accused of not believing in a personal devil” [can you imagine that?] and he was also accused “of other general infidelity.” Wade Hall, the author of the article goes on to say, “He was an easy target. He was a Unitarian.”

Unitarians do seem to have a propensity for getting into controversies on a fairly frequent basis. How would you liked to have been around here when the Rev. John Healy Heywood was the minister from 1840 to 1880? Almost right in the middle of his ministry the Civil War started. It has been said that this church, which became know as the Church of the Messiah in 1870, represented “the extreme’s of view concerning the burning question of slavery.” The controversy was of course, not limited to this church. Even the Louisville Courier and the Louisville Journal fought on opposite sides during the Civil War. What a divided town this must have been back then. For those of you who enjoy controversy and arguments – you would have thought that you had died and gone to heaven.

Fast forward 100 years or so and we find a large part but not all of this church opposing the war in Viet-Nam. By the late 60's, if this church was like many UU churches of the day, my guess is that there were probably people exploring the notions of Free Love and Open Marriage. And, I am fairly certain that there were people who were appalled at such behavior and who no doubt cut their pledges and / or left the church in protest. The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary article reports that our Minister Emeritus, the Rev. Bob Reed was doing abortion counseling two years before the Supreme Court's Roe vs: Wade decision.

Pro-Choice advocacy, the Sanctuary movement, Civil Rights and gay rights were just a few of the many issues over the years which have generated great controversy and threatened the existence of this religious community.

In the early 70's, the Metropolitan Community Church, a progressive Christian church "where people can seek out their spiritual path regardless of their sexual orientation" came to Louisville. In those early days, the MCC first rented from us. This turned out to be more controversial than opposing the Viet Nam War or favoring desegregation of public schools by busing. [From someone in the Gay Community, I have heard that there is a myth that the cause of our 1985 fire was arson by someone opposed to our stance on the MCC.]

The aforementioned anniversary article mentioned among others, Phoebe Gibson, Carol Whaley and Nell McGlothlin... women who many of you have known and whose names are now legend in this congregation. Phoebe Gibson, who in 1979 was already described as a "long-time member" back then said, "we don't all agree on [things]" and "some people have left the church over the 'gay' issue." In the same article, Carol Whaley said, "We are pleased that our church has always been a place where unpopular causes [and ideas] can be heard in public."

Phoebe's comment about us not all agreeing on things reminded me of a favorite line of mine from a Dave Mason song that says, *There ain't no good guys, there ain't no bad guys... There's only you and me and we just disagree.* That might be a pretty good mantra for us all right now, *There ain't no good guys, there ain't no bad guys... There's only you and me and we just disagree.*

If you are planning to come to the annual meeting tomorrow and are experiencing any anxiety

about that, you might want to repeat that line 100 times or so before you get here?

In any case, since the earliest days of Unitarianism in what is now the Commonwealth of Kentucky controversy has found its way into our religious communities. With over a 175 years of experience you might think that we would be getting pretty good at disagreeing with one another by now.

Do any of you here think that we are pretty good at disagreeing with one another?

My personal sense is that we still have more work to do before we can call ourselves competent at disagreeing with civility which is probably one of the reasons we need to keep coming to church.

Nearly five months ago, when we came up with the idea for today's service we thought "how to disagree" might be an appropriate topic for the day before our annual meeting.

By now, I am sure that many if not all of us have heard about many of the techniques available for engaging in more civil discourse with one another. Perhaps the concept already most familiar to many of us is the use of "I statements." Taking responsibility for your own feelings, beliefs and fears without attacking someone else's. A variation on this approach was the technique from group dream work that I offered to many of you last month. In group dream work the only appropriate response to someone else's statement about their dream or their experience is to begin by saying something like, "in my version of your dream, in my version of your experience..., in my version of Unitarian Universalism, in my version of the First Unitarian Church of Louisville" and then speaking your truth or your experience clearly without demeaning the truth of the other. This method simultaneously lifts up your experience and acknowledges the validity of the other person's experience, beliefs or ideas.

Of course, as I used to point out to the children I helped raise, "nothing is as easy as it looks or sounds."

According to my Worship Associate David Leighty, the technical term for the opposite approach

to “I statements,” is the Latin phrase **Ad hominem**: which means “attacking an opponent’s character rather than answering an argument.” Ad hominem, attacking the person rather than the idea, is a classic error of logic. A popular contemporary notion of this can be found in the phrase, “don’t shoot the messenger.”

A teacher of mine by the name of Michael Ryce introduced me to another idea that I find useful in heated discussions. Michael says, that if you are engaged in a relationship of any kind and there is something discomfoting going on and you are trying to figure out “is my discomfort caused by your stuff or is it caused by mine? Ryce says there is a simple test to figure out whose stuff is causing you discomfort and bringing increased drama and trauma into your life.

The test is to ask yourself, “are you feeling it? If you are feeling it, then it is your stuff.” You might say, yes but you are pushing my buttons. To which Michael Ryce would say, “yes, but they are your buttons.”

The good news of this is that if it is your stuff and your buttons there is something you can do about it. If it is my stuff that is causing you discomfort there is not all that much that you can do about it except to avoid me or at least refuse to engage with me in any way.

In any case, try to be mindful of your own anxiety and discomfort and try to figure out what that is about for you.

These are just a few of many ways you might begin to reduce your own stress level with the conflicts that inevitably come up in Unitarian Universalist churches. Our Heartland District has a new conflict management team that is planning workshops that will offer additional insights into how we can respectfully disagree with one another.

While conflict management skills are important and useful, I do find myself resisting the contrived feeling they sometimes bring up in me. It is even more important to me to begin with the idea that we are a religious community that welcomes diversity and diverse thinking. Like Carol Whaley, I too am “pleased that our church has always been a place where unpopular causes [and ideas] can be heard in public.”

Each of us must then struggle to stretch our own selves to understand those of us who don't see things the way we do. The real challenges happen of course when those of us who don't see things the way I do are not down the street at the Baptist, Methodist or Jewish house of worship but instead they are sitting right here in the chair next to us – as they have been for over 170 years now. At times like that it is especially difficult to keep in mind the mantra, *there ain't no good guys, there ain't no bad guys, there's only you and me and we just disagree.*

At times like this, we all seem to know what the person next to us “should” be doing or thinking. Singer-songwriter David Roth has written a little song about this that I would like to share with you now.

### *DON'T SHOULD ON ME*

[The chorus to the song is “don't should on me and I won't should on you.” You can make up your own verses or get your hands on a copy of the CD. FYI, coincidentally (?), David's sister and brother-in-law are both Unitarian Universalist ministers.]

David's song does not mean that there are not unacceptable behaviors that must be confronted. This congregation is working to become a Safe Congregation. The Safe Congregation program is intended to protect our children and members from abusive behaviors. A part of what it means to be a Safe Congregation is that everyone here should feel safe from unwanted sexual advances. Two-and-a-half years ago in the congregational survey that was prepared for your ministerial search packet, someone complained that they “personally often felt unsafe in church” because of unwanted advances by polyamorous members of our church community. To me such behavior is unacceptable and should be confronted if it continues.

Since I have arrived here I have heard reports from a male congregant about a gay man making repeated advances to him and basically not being able to take “no” for an answer. Such behavior is also unacceptable. And, I have heard about a heterosexual woman who was repeatedly pursued by a man who also could not take “no” for an answer. Such behavior is equally unacceptable. It is important that we all feel safe from these kinds of behaviors in our church. I mention this to point out that bad behavior is bad behavior regardless of your affectional preferences.

Not “shoulding” on others and saying “no” to inappropriate behaviors are two sides to personal boundary issues that often seem difficult for laissez faire liberals to clearly establish.

Tomorrow night at 7 p.m. we will hold the 172<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of this congregation. It has come to my attention that there are some items on the Agenda that have generated some passion and controversy at recent Annual Meetings. One of them involves how we spend and / or don't spend our money here in support of our perceived notion of the mission and ministry of this church. My Worship Associate, David Leighty and the Capital Assets task force have put together a proposal about this for your consideration. Copies of that proposal are available on the counter in the volunteer area near the copier.

An other item that is on the agenda for tomorrow night is a request by the local Polyamory Awareness organization to enter into a Covenant with our congregation that would more closely align them with the mission and ministry of this church. Since I came here last September this issue has been one that has come up in many private conversations that I have had with parishioners; all of whom seemed to have their opinion on the matter. A few weeks ago, someone who I believe has a very definite position in this matter told me that “both sides of this controversy believe that the minister is on the other side of it.” In some churches that might be a good place for the minister to position his or her self. However, if that means that nobody likes you because they perceive you to be on the other side from them, in a church where the congregants hire and fire the minister, one might get a little nervous if you happen to be that minister.

Regardless of whether or not I am unpopular because nobody likes my position or... whatever... our church has always been and continues to be a place where unpopular causes [and ideas] can be heard in public” and I like being a part of that. Over the past several years the polyamory issue has been unpopular with many people in this congregation. Nevertheless this congregation has provided a forum over the past year where this issue was heard about perhaps 20 times or more. Those of you who have wished to engage more deeply in the conversation about this issue have been provided the opportunity. Tomorrow night you will be asked to take the existing relationship with the Polyamory Awareness group into an even closer connection and identification with this congregation by entering into a covenanting process with them. Simply

put you can choose to enter into that covenanting process or to leave the relationship intact as it now stands.

For me one of the most exciting things about being a Unitarian Universalist is that you get to decide who and how you want to be connected with others in a religious community. A religious community that for 172 years now has wrestled with controversy.

It is interesting to look back upon the controversies that have plagued us over the years. I would suspect that given the vantage point of time, most of us know where we stand on issues like the devil, the Civil War, civil rights, gay rights and abortion rights. For most of us the passion around those issues no longer threatens the health and well-being of our congregation.

Hopefully, our collective wisdom, joined with the wisdom of the ancestors of this congregation will guide us through our current controversies in ways that we will eventually look back upon with pride.

May it be so . . .

don't quote Norm - i.e., don't say that Norm said.... Like Tom Lehrer I'm still making up my mind....

*You've got to walk that Lonesome Valley*

Agree to disagree . . . .

What would it mean to Covenant with a group? What is an affiliate?

Lenny Bruce – say the words....

Iraq War Resolution