

Spirit: The Necessary Foundation of Social Justice
Confluence Lecture
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Before I begin, I thank my beloved colleagues for offering me this challenge of speaking today. It's an honour to know that others want to hear from you. It's also frightening to be asked to give a fiftyish-minute lecture when all I am is a practitioner, not an academic. But as a preacher, I'm not gonna let that stop me!

A couple of days ago one of my congregants sent me a cartoon. If you can paraphrase a cartoon, that's what I'm doing. The setting is a Mayan-style temple: many high square steps lead up to the top and the top step leads into the gaping maw of a gigantic fire god, all teeth and flaming mane. At the bottom is a man speaking to a couple of other men who are trying to take him up the steps of the temple. "Wait, wait," he says, "I'm not a member. I just come on Sundays!"

Well, none of us here at the CUC meetings can claim we're not members, and some of you may see some of what I have to say today as that gaping maw of the fire god. But we like to try new things, don't we?

Introduction

A story that I love to tell from time to time comes from writer and mother Holly Bridges Elliott in Frederic and Mary Brussat's wonderful compendium called *Spiritual Literacy*. Holly Elliott is in her kitchen at lunch watching her children eat PB&J sandwiches when she stops "mid-bustle," as she puts it and looks around.

The entire room became luminous and so alive with movement that everything seemed suspended – yet pulsating – for an instant, like light waves. Intense joy swelled inside me, and my immediate response was gratitude – gratitude for everything, every tiny thing in that space. The shelter of the room became a warm embrace; water flowing from the tap seemed a tremendous miracle; and my children became, for a moment, not my progeny or my charges or my tasks, but eternal beings of infinite singularity and complexity whom I would one day, in an age to come, apprehend in their splendid fullness."¹

If you ask Unitarian Universalists if we've had something like this happen in our lives, you'll find that we often have. You might feel surprised as these are moments that challenge our usual sense of reality, and we UUs tend to be very focused on what's

¹ Brussat, Frederic and Mary. *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. Simon and Schuster, New York: 1996. 505.

real. The thing is such experiences *are* intensely real: the shimmering of the air is more concrete to Holly Elliott than the kitchen counter. Memories of such moments remain vivid. Life is enlivened for merely seconds yet the impact of them is profound. Often some change or even transformation results: a new attitude; a heightened awareness; a decision to make a turn. Some of you have had these moments; some of you are immediately starting to categorize them in a way that helps you contain them. But they're not for containing; not for defining or measuring. They're for awakening us.

We all need awakening of some kind, in my opinion. Moments like the one I just told are truly powerful only for those who have experienced them yet we need something to awaken us, and I see UUs as needing that a lot! We do and want to do so much good work in this world that we need all of ourselves to be alive, humming and present or we run dry, burn out or, worse, are unaware of our impact. And without being aware, we can be harmful despite our intention to live well and make a positive difference.

That in a nutshell is my whole message today. Life offers more value to us than we imagine, not only for a shimmering moment. We must find our way to wake up to that. And we must be so self-aware that we avoid harm when we're trying to do good.

In fact, this today is an old-fashioned three point sermon: I just get extra time. First, we'll look at the emerging field of 'neurotheology' that studies what's happening in the brain when spirituality or beliefs are involved. Our brains are the common ground on which we both experience reality and by which we understand it: the brain is our spiritual organ. Then I want to consider our Third Principle, "the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations."² There are too often painful barriers against cohesiveness in our communities, based simply on different ways we interpret and speak about our brain's experiences. Finally, let us consider that attending to our spiritual lives, individually and together, is necessary for us to be wise, committed and effective in how we address the hurt and unfairness in the world.

It's customary to define Spirituality at some point, but I resist this precisely because the church I serve, North Shore Unitarian in West Vancouver, today offered its 28th service this year 'defining' spirituality: this long-weekend Sunday it's canoeing as a spiritual practice. We're considering many answers to this year's big question: What does it mean to live spiritually? We hope that each of us either discovers or begins to seek a spirituality that emerges from our unique deeper selves; for some a spirituality, whether we use that term or not, that we have never recognized as such which can still lead us to greater depth, meaning and purpose. Our Mission Statement is: Belong with Heart, Thrive in Spirit, Act in Service, and if we want to offer others a spiritually enriching community to thrive in, we figure we better know what we mean. For instance, by

² <http://cuc.ca/principles-and-sources/>

focusing on living spiritually in our relationships and from a position of integrity, we have been attending to our True Selves, an idea I'll expand upon later. I've become uninterested in defining Spirituality because that tries to contain it in the frontal cortex when it belongs to the whole brain, and the endocrine system, the gut, the breath, the unconscious, the... well, choose your favourite organ. Yes, the frontal cortex needs a grasp of spirituality, but I'm deeply reluctant to allow it to dominate.

To me spirituality is what most moves you; charms you; lifts you; excites you; even what scares you because it feels too big or seems beyond your grasp. Feel it with your whole body. Conjure up the feelings you have about it. Notice your pulse, your breathing. Listen, look, feel, smell what's just beyond your ordinary perception. Then, notice what that makes you think... your spirituality is in there, in all that. It's cognitive, visceral and ethereal all at once.

What drives me to speak this afternoon is a vision that I'm full of hope about. It's of our being loving and accepting of each other as we are: every one of us both a wondrous and gifted being and a mass of contradictions and failings. In this love and acceptance is a great patience with each other and a true welcoming of how we are different.

I am also driven by a yearning. Until we achieve the qualities of connectedness I'm presenting, some of us are suffering needlessly. I see many of us too often narrowing our peripheral fields down to one or a couple of favourite Principles and often only one Source. Some of us do that or we pick and choose those that confirm what we already think or feel, or worse, those that challenge us the least. Inevitably this leaves out, diminishes or disregards some people within our own communities who see the world differently. I yearn for us to open our minds to the degree we claim to value.

Every dream has its opposing nightmare so I'm also driven to speak from my fears for us. At the UU Ministers Institute for Excellence last February, I'm shocked to hear that a church like mine is dying: not necessarily gasping its last breath but in the process of dying. We have not adequately sustained ourselves financially for many years, and through both deaths, relocations and a society hotly competing for people's time, we're at risk of losing a sense of upward momentum in terms of enthusiasm and energy. We will die unless we find a way into renewal or even rebirth.

What is true for North Shore is also so for most, though gladly not all Canadian congregations and our national community: by not adequately sustaining ourselves financially, and by gradually losing the enthusiasm and zest for the work, we too are dying. I know this is hard to hear, but the most important truths are so someone must say them. We have two options: renew or die.

I'm proud that North Shore already has plans towards its rebirth as a church truly ready to serve current and future generations, but it will be a lot of work. In the interest of full disclosure, many of you know that I'm leaving my ministry there this summer partly because of their eagerness to recreate themselves for the future and my ignorance of how to lead them there.

But if our congregations are to renew themselves, we must solve some of the problems, chronic, institutional problems that cause us to languish. The first of these is our difficulty finding a common theological ground; I do not mean a dogma, but a common deep, inspiring and path-setting foundation that we all respect. I think we can agree that one part of that common ground is recognizing that, whatever we experience or believe, our truth is in our brains.

Neurotheology

To begin looking at the part the brain plays in our various spiritualities, join me in a short exercise if you care to; don't worry, it's all in the head – just like we like it, right? You might want to close your eyes. Choose some favourite physical activity of yours that you'll think about briefly: an activity that to some extent you practice or rehearse; something you want to get better at. It might be a sport, it might be fine chopping vegetables, and for some it might be as simple as flexing that painful arthritic joint. Take a moment to choose the activity. Now without moving your body, imagine in your mind every step of that activity. In your mind pick each movement of the action and internally rehearse sending that motion to your finger or elbow or hips or wherever it should go. Like stop motion, think about each part of the whole movement. When you've gone through all the parts, let the imaginary motion flow all at once: practice the flow of your tennis serve; thin slice a whole carrot; move that painful joint. Add in the sounds, sights and other sensations you usually feel when doing this activity. Run through it all again.

Neuroscience teaches that without moving you have just practiced that activity. To the brain, the thought of doing or feeling something is virtually the same as doing it. It's not a stretch then to say that the neurological experience of a mental event – an internal event – is the same as if it were real. This is important when we consider the brain's experience of spiritual events.

Neurological researchers such as Andrew Newberg, the late Eugene D'Aquili and Richard Anderson, study spiritual or mystical experiences as processed by the brain. Newberg and D'Aquili publish *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* in 2001. It's a fascinating, expansive, technical, even philosophical work but very accessible; I highly recommend it.³

³ Newberg follows up with a series of other books: <http://www.andrewnewberg.com/all-books/>

Newberg, D'Aquili and Anderson⁴, among others, are best known for performing brain imaging in meditating Buddhists and praying nuns, among other groups and practices. Even using different techniques for studying brain activity, data show that experienced people performing a spiritual practice display particular but equal patterns. In meditation or prayer, the attention centre in the prefrontal cortex is highly active, while an area in the right parietal lobe is less active than usual; this area governs orientation in space and time so it makes sense that this function would be reduced as meditating and praying alters one's sense of space and time. In praying nuns, another centre that's involved with speech is activated; this again makes sense because, unlike meditation, most forms of prayer are like speaking and listening. Neurologically speaking apart from activation of the language center, Franciscans praying and Buddhists meditating are doing the same thing. Further, they describe the experience similarly as being in a state of communion with something larger than themselves: identified respectively as God and Universal Consciousness. Newberg does not dismiss this state of communion as unreal; rather he describes them both as a state of "Absolute Unitary Being" – states of being in union with something. But understand this: it's a *neurological* state of Absolute Unitary Being. It's visible in the scans.

Next, Newberg does something scientifically controversial: I find it fascinating. He accepts at face value assertions made by those who meditate and pray skilfully that mystical experience is *more real* to them than physical reality. Most scientists would call this subjective experience and question its validity, but Newberg asserts that, neurologically, there's no distinction between objective data, such as blood flow, and a person's inner experience: they are both measured by the scans and occur simultaneously.

Similarly, Newberg accepts participants' claims that Absolute Unitary Being *feels* more real to them than ordinary reality. (Newberg & D'Aquili 152) In comparison, people who have religious or spiritual experiences as part of an abnormal condition, such as epilepsy or mania, usually describe the experiences as vague or confusing which, after the seizure or manic episode is over, no longer feel real. If the disordered state continues, their lives deteriorate, while in fact states of Absolute Unitary Being are associated with greater happiness, stability and calm increasing over time. Newberg adds a layer to what can be seen as neuro-scientific evidence: subjective experience while being scanned is not separate from the hard evidence. It *is* hard evidence.

What is more, skillful meditation and prayer are described as going deeply into the self to find the state of Absolute Unitary Being, in which the sense of self then dissolves; I want you to get this: one goes *into the self* until the self *dissolves* – yet *this* is

⁴ <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/sustainable-happiness/compassion-is-good-for-the-brain>

experienced as more real than day-to-day reality. For thousands of years in virtually every culture, human beings describe such experiences in culturally distinct but descriptively similar terms. (128-141) Taking all this into account, Newberg concludes that “neurology does not contradict... [that] there is a deeper self, a state of pure awareness that sees beyond the limits of subject and object, and rests in a universe where all things are one.” (155) Neurology doesn’t prove this, but it doesn’t contradict the possibility of a deeper self... in a Universe where all things are one.

Many of us might balk at this, but it’s simply the First Source of our living tradition: “The direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” Those who find a deep source of understanding of reality and themselves through direct experience of what can’t be explained away are called mystics. So mysticism is both part of our tradition and its grounded in neuroscience. Imagine that!

Here’s a story: In the mid-80s, I begin my exploration of the practical wisdom of the twelve steps and find “a way to a faith that works,” including sharing honestly in groups and practicing daily prayer. Ten years later, I’m in a prolonged personal, emotional and spiritual rut – no meetings, no prayers. Then one day at lunch in my office, I finally feel it’s time to pray. I glance at my old brass clock; I have about 40 minutes until my next patient: lots of time for a quick, little, grumpy prayer.

All I do is shut my eyes and think: “OK, here I am.” Instantly, an aura as warm as a shawl envelops me, and I begin weeping. It’s like a palpable energy is swirling around me as if the northern lights are dancing around my head and shoulders. This continues for what feels like a long time till I’m thinking I’ve got to get ready for the next patient. It occurs to me to ask if there’s a reason to keep going. That’s when the ceiling opens up.

Not the real ceiling, of course; not like the one in *Angels in America* when the angel bursts through Prior Walter’s roof, raining chunks of wood and plaster dust on him – mine’s not like that – but absolute Love and Acceptance pour down in a torrent from above me. Somehow certainty appears: my life is just as it is supposed to be; I have always been OK, and even my worst choices have been OK. Mercy for me and a sense of delight in me flows down, and I am given to ‘know’ that it has always been there – this acceptance and love. Only with great effort do I ‘say’ to all this that I have to get back to work, and it recedes, leaving behind a man with a changed soul, an expanded heart, and a renewed commitment to life.

Clearly, this experience is occurring in my brain; nothing is going on in my office – at one point I open my eyes, just to check – no, nothing’s there – but a rich, profound and even sensual event is unfolding internally. Yet, I also feel that my very cells are

energized. What begins then leads me, step by step, not into madness but to you here this afternoon.

This is a First Source experience: direct and mystical. Another Source is important to me, too, the Fifth one: “Humanist teachings... counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” Neurotheology undermines the seeming, and somewhat widespread sense of contradiction between these Sources. The Sufi poet Rumi writes of a field “out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,” but we can think of that also as simply beyond wrong and right. Newberg scientifically sets out for us a kind of Rumi’s field where mysticism and humanism aren’t thought of as wrong or right. I’m suggesting we can meet each other there, and if we can, I bet that what we do together there is grow spiritually as we more deeply accept a comfortable unity of values, including the value that what you experience and what someone else *doesn’t* experience have equal room among us. This is how I read the aim of being “spiritually grounded” in the CUC Vision Statement being studied. For too long those who do not have mystical experience have claimed that it’s meaningless and says nothing about reality; neurotheology tells us different.

Third Principle: Spiritual Growth

Moving to my second point, the Third Principle, every part of my personal and professional experience convinces me that to live a vibrant life, we must continually grow as a person. Growth comes from living consciously: sometimes in therapy, self-help groups or spiritual practice; sometimes by facing and learning from our mistakes. Congregations at their best nourish and make room for personal growth. It’s not easy; we are programmed to resist change. The natural goal in the living universe is homeostasis; living systems work to keep things the same, even when they seem to change dramatically, such as in the transformation from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly.

We human beings, with our “soft animal bodies” as Mary Oliver describes us,⁵ want homeostasis too. True: some people thrive under change, and some actively seek transformation, but most of us don’t welcome change. Many of us stick to routines, or attend only to what reinforces what we already believe. Some people joke about UUs running after every new shiny object, but, on the contrary, we’re often quite satisfied with who and how we are both personally and in our communities. In fact, I see a tendency to self-satisfaction, complacency and even arrogance at the idea that we might need to change.

⁵ Oliver, Mary. “Wild Geese,” in *New and Selected Poems: Volume One*. Boston: Beacon, 1992. p110

A spiritually devastating effect of this is to avoid examining let alone correcting one's thoughts, attitudes and behaviours. If we're called into question, we might take offense instead of listen. We allow our communities to offer refuge for us from what we do not want to deal with when they could be spiritual fitness centres where we exercise our values. They could still offer us the sense of belonging we seek while challenging ourselves to keep moving forward: towards more acceptance, compassion and appreciation of difference.

Unitarian Universalists are good at supporting each other through difficult times, sharing our ups and downs, but I fear that we think more about sustaining who we are than transforming who we are. For example, some of us feel affirmed by Principles that support where we stand while we ignore others that suggest we need to adjust ourselves. We can miss the point that the Principles are vision statements shining forth what we hope to become individually and communally. None of us are there yet.

The late Rev. Gordon McKeeman observes, "Too many of our members, finding religious freedom in our tradition, believe that this is the end of the line – that having religious freedom is the end point. It is not... It is the beginning point. It is what we do with this freedom that matters."⁶ On the one hand, this freedom can free us from aspects of culture and tradition that bind and limit us, or inspire us to work for the freedom of others, as we'll get to shortly. But too often we allow this freedom to excuse ourselves from the responsibility to improve who we are, yet historically that idea is a foundation of our theology.

I refer to "salvation by character," one of the first distinctions between Unitarianism and Christianity made by William Ellery Channing about 200 years ago. Today, I see too often that some of us need 'salvation *from* character.' Ultimately the transformation of character is our version of salvation in this life: our need to be saved from ourselves. I mean from the rooted, reluctant, resistant part of us that we can sum up in the phrase False Self, a concept taught in Buddhism⁷ and psychoanalysis⁸, but I've been uplifted recently by the work of Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan who teaches about human experience and spiritual growth in both Catholic and modern psychological terms.⁹ Unitarian Universalists can use the wisdom and guidance he offers.

⁶ Fulbright, The Rev. Audette. "The Future of UUism." Sermon at UU Church of Roanoke, Feb 3, 2008. Accessed May 14, 2014 at: <http://uuroanoke.org/sermon/080203SS2UUHistory.htm>

⁷ <http://theplacesthatcareyou.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/thomas-merton-on-our-true-v-our-false-self/>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_self_and_false_self

⁹ Rohr, Fr. Richard. *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2011. p xix

Rohr interprets, for example, Paul's term "sins of the flesh" (e.g., Col. 2:11) – ooo, don't I hate that one! -- as having nothing to do with the body, but rather with 'False Self,' the masks we wear; the image of how we want to be perceived; our illusions about who we are.¹⁰ False Self springs more from superficial thinking, social norms and fear than from deeper thought and emotion. It loves to compete and compare, as well as to judge who and what is right or wrong, often without open-mindedly engaging new ideas. False Self talks and talks and rarely listens deeply. Modern society – think of politics, athletics and fundamentalism in particular – promotes False Self behaviours and few of us, certainly not I can consistently silence it.

Spiritual growth allows the emergence of True Self, assisted by exercising our capacity for honest self-reflection; blame and shame are barriers the False Self throws up to stop us. (*ibid*) True Self empathizes, not compares; it finds agreement through shared values and goals. True Self listens carefully past the words to shared feelings; it is more thoughtful about how and when to speak. True Self faces one's own and others' pain and grief directly and sensitively, eventually coming to see that much of what is most valuable in life is a result of tragic experience. Our desire becomes to root our strength for helping others in our own pain. I'm glad that we hear increasingly often in our culture about the True Self as more of us encounter these ideas.

Our proposed CUC Vision Statement also refers to our being "theologically alive" and in my mind it means that we live in and from our True Selves. Only by practicing that together can we build the Beloved Community of which we speak. Only from True Self, I submit, can we then consider and engage in truly effective work for the improvement of the world.

Social Justice

And this brings me to my third point: that attending to our spiritual lives, individually and together, is necessary for us to be wise, committed and effective in how we address the

¹⁰ Rohr, Fr. Richard. *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*. San Francisco: Wiley-Jossey-Bass, 2013. p43. Accessed online on Aug 20, 2014 at: <http://books.google.ca/books?id=udoMrMg71LsC&pg=PA43&lpg=PA43&dq=%22sins+of+the+Flesh%22+as+%22False+Self%22&source=bl&ots=LcnMq5ITH-&sig=OCaBuPIBAhLcjwdTcw65oC-oW-E&hl=en&sa=X&ei=tBn1U4PyH46vogTLroKYDw&ved=0CCQO6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22sins%20of%20the%20Flesh%22%20as%20%22False%20Self%22&f=false>

Further, some of what I say on this subject may have come from an online course I took in Jun-Jul 2014 based on Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water*. Those pages are no longer accessible online and I don't have a specific reference.

hurt and unfairness in the world. I begin with a story from the life of James Luther Adams, the most prominent Unitarian theologian of the last century.¹¹

Just before starting as Theology Professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School in 1935, Adams visits Germany to meet with liberal Christian theologians there; liberal religion originated in Germany about 100 years before. What he finds is that the largest part of the liberal Protestant church is colluding with Nazi party policies and actions. There are only a small number of “confessing churches” with Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a prominent leader of this social, religious resistance.

Thinking about this later, Adams asks, “What is it in my preaching and my political action that would stop this?” meaning something as dominant as Nazism. (Walter *ibid*) He concludes that “to be involved with other people so that it costs and so that one exposes the evils of society... requires something like conversion... a sense that there’s something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been.” Note: “That / must be different from the way I have been.” Not so much a religious as a behavioural conversion.

Adams uses another theologically and viscerally unsettling term we tend to avoid: the “evils of society” but let us not be timid in realizing that there is such a thing as human evil. He encounters Nazism, after all, and goes on to develop Unitarian meanings for traditional concepts like “guilt, sacrifice and discipline, conflict and tragedy.” (*ibid*) And, remember, he’s writing during a time when humanism is greatly changing the make-up of our congregations. The Rev. George Kimmich Beach observes that “Adams[']... liberalism must no longer be confused with lax, uncritical or mere broad-minded attitudes,”¹² but with nothing less than “radical [personal] change.”

Many of us believe that congregational renewal and vitality can arise solely from having a common external purpose focused on something greater than our personal interests, namely, a rejuvenated and bold program of social action. My smart-alec question is, “How’s that workin’ for us?” At the one and only meeting each year when we gather to consider the state of Canadian Unitarianism, we spend a significant portion of our deliberation considering detailed social justice resolutions that, in my mind, are ineffective. Please know that I’m not talking about the good people who are doing this work, or even the good resolutions themselves. I’m talking about our model for determining social action. I know many will not just disagree with me but be angry to hear what I think so I simply encourage you to look back at resolutions made over the

¹¹ Walton, Christopher L. “James Luther Adams’ Examined Faith,” in *UU World* online. Probably Winter 2005 issue. Accessed Aug. 10, 2014 at: <http://www.uuworld.org/2005/01/bookshelf.html>

¹² Beach, The Rev. Dr. George Kimmich. *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams*. Boston: Skinner, 2004 as quoted in Walton. See Ref 12.1

last several years to measure their impact. It's a hard truth to hear, but where in our process does the possibility of personal cost – that as individuals and congregations we *must be different* from who and what we are in order to work for change – when do we discuss that?

If we want to take flight, we need two wings, not just one: one is certainly public social action, but the other has to be greater depth, meaning and purpose, individually and collectively, and I don't see that coming anywhere but from a spiritual renewal. And without that, I fear we're left to the mundane decisions about this policy or that.

In order to deal with the true darkness of our current times, we must know and better master the darkness in ourselves. In our times, we face the rising tyrannies of all the fundamentalisms, not only the religious ones. For instance, we fight an economic fundamentalism that promotes mindless human dominance over nature, but may bring about the inevitable consequence: nature's imminent victory over us. We must also know and better master the darkness that can arise within our communities; we are not free of our own fundamentalisms, among them being the assumption that all of us should think the same way about every social issue and that not to do so renders other Unitarians stupid or contemptible. Holding onto these attitudes leads to recurrent conflicts that sap and divide us when what we need and what the world needs of us is greater unity of effort and spirit.

A profound critic of Unitarian Universalism The Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr offers an even more powerful challenge.¹³ He believes we need to become *more* religious. In particular, he sees a need for a “salvation story” – of course not a supernatural one because Loehr is one of our most prominent atheists. Rather he wishes we could create a this-world salvation story that would describe a more profound “understanding of the human condition, [and] its malaise... [that could offer a] sense of how and why living out of this story makes our lives more fulfilling and useful to the larger world.” (3) His questions include “What's worth believing?” and “Are there profound truths about life that make demands on people whether we like it or not?” (4) Further, Loehr lays down this gauntlet: “[We] still [have] the freedom to choose honest and profound religious paths... the freedom to adopt a moral code so demanding that... it insists that we always choose the [more difficult] right [thing to do.]” (10) Instead of expressing religious freedom individualistically, we would do better to allow our personal freedom to be impelled by common goals, drawn outside our own circle of interest towards the higher yearnings of our society.

¹³ Loehr, David (*sic*) “Why Unitarian Universalism is Dying” in *Journal of Liberal Religion: An Online Journal*, Vol 5. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Theological School. Winter 2005. Accessed Aug 20, 2014 at: <http://www.meadville.edu/uploads/files/101.pdf> .

Einstein is reported to have said, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” (Rohr 74) To become the force for growth and progress that we collectively yearn to be, our individual and collective consciousness must be elevated above our common understandings, views and practices. And when I say common, I don’t mean the sense of affinity that holds us together; I mean the most generalized and watered-down beliefs and language that offends the fewest of us: something I call the lowest common denomination. Who are we to step out into the world to say we have these Principles to help solve enormous problems when we struggle with our ‘level of consciousness... creat[ing]’ difficulties amongst ourselves?

Earlier I described part of my vision for us that drives me to speak today, but there is more: not just in ourselves but in our congregations, we will change our level of consciousness so that spiritual qualities such as patience and acceptance manifest in our disinterest in being right in favour of being more connected. We celebrate that there are *seven* Principles and *six* Sources; given that many of us hold up more than one of each, the math is beyond me to figure out how many configurations that makes in how we are individually sustained and able to sustain others; inspired and able to inspire; grounded and ready to lift up others. And each one has a place.

Further, building upon patience and acceptance, we can truly join our forces: our minds, hearts, hands and spirits towards honest, authentic and powerful acts of service in the world around us. The successful progress we hope to create depends on our getting our relationships right.

Clearly, I’m not the one to lay out a path towards our future social action; that’s not my calling. I’m simply suggesting we do our internal homework so we know what our motivations are; that we do this also in our groups and communities so that we can live in relationship with each other until we get our values, feelings and communications congruent and in harmony with our motives.

My dream is that each of us accepts the call to identify our baser self-interests so that we might transform them. When we do this, and we are accompanied in life by others doing so, we help to create life, light and wholeness. This is what our Vision Statement will mean in saying we’re spiritually grounded and theologically alive. This transformation is what we require of each other. This transformation is what the world requires of us.