

From You I Receive, To You I Give - Volunteer Appreciation Sunday
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, April 29, 2012
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

From you I receive, to you I give, together we share and from this we live. That is a powerful statement of mutuality, the heart of relationship, the foundation of human family, of human community, of human society. And, of course, the foundation of church.

Alexis de Tocqueville was a French nobleman who visited this continent in the 1830's on the pretext of studying our prison system. Apparently he just needed some time away from all that French cooking, so he traveled around this country for nearly a year, from cities to wilderness and back again, and visited many places, from prisons to the seats of government, in the process. He actually came through Buffalo in August 1831, just about the time the Unitarians and Universalists here were starting the churches that evolved into this one, though he just spent one night here. He did not, as far as I know, go to church, and this was just a stopover on his way to see that famous water feature just to our north – you know, the one that Nik Wallenda plans to walk over this summer.

DeTocqueville's American tour is famous, not for his writing about our prison system, nor for his visit to Niagara Falls, though he did fulfill his obligation to write a book about how prisons are organized in this country. It is his writing on the political system of democracy in this country, and how it expresses itself through all facets of life here, for which he is most remembered. I wonder what he would say about our politics these days, but that is a different sermon.

One of DeTocqueville's best-known statements is "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition, are forever forming associations. . . In democratic countries knowledge of *how to combine* is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others." We associate, we combine, giving and receiving from each other, and on that foundation of mutuality in relationship depend all the other forms of knowledge and action in a free society.

Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams, whose influential writings were done about a hundred years after DeTocqueville's visit to this continent, built on many of those ideas about religion as a system of free association. We associate in religious community for purposes to which we have a shared commitment, purposes which we work together to express and to achieve. "Humanity," Adams says, "is essentially associational, and human history is the history of associations." Adams elaborates on his description of liberal religion as a system of free association, using the biblical story of David slaying Goliath with his slingshot. Adams says, "David brought down the giant Goliath with five smooth stones, but we use our five smooth stones to build a more just, loving, and free world.

Our first stone is continuous revelation, reminding us that the roots of our living tradition have been developed over centuries, but new ideas and understandings are still being revealed. Our second stone reminds us that we freely choose to enter into relationship and community with one another. Our third stone reminds us that we have a moral obligation to work toward establishing a just and loving community. Our fourth stone reminds us that good things happen as a result of human effort. Our fifth stone reminds us that the divine and human capacities for achieving meaningful change are reason for optimism. We are part of this living tradition. Through it, we become whole, and through us, our faith tradition becomes whole."

The development of the voluntary “gathered” church was a feature of the society that grew up on this continent as Europeans built their colonies here, and those principles of voluntary association laid the foundation for our democratic system and for the separation of church and state in this nation. Adam comments in his essay on voluntary association that our commitment to a church, bringing our time, talent and treasure to create the church and support its work, is a statement that “this is our voluntary independent enterprise, and we who believe in it will support it. We do not for its support appeal to the coercive power of the state.” Churches under our system choose to rely on their own resources, on the commitment and dedication of their members, to act on their larger purpose in the world.

All of which brings me, of course, to our angels: all those people, angels of all ages and types and levels of involvement, that we recognize and celebrate today. I look out and see all the halos and I am reminded how many loving hearts and hands and voices it really does take to make a church.

I don’t really think of angels as supernatural creatures with big soft wings who fly around solving human problems or protecting us from harm. For me, the angelic principle is that impulse of generosity that comes from within each person to connect with others, to help others, and to work with others to create something larger and more positive than any of us could create or sustain on our own. It is an impulse of altruism, what I think of as “enlightened self-interest” in which we recognize that our own benefit is created or discovered when we create something larger, something that benefits us all in community, and that provides a benefit to the wider world. Our happiness, our success, our progress toward what we might be, is embedded in the happiness, success and progress of all. We associate, and we act in angelic ways to support our associations, even when we might not see what we get out of it directly, because we know that is the way the benefit works. As Adams says, “divine and human capacities for achieving meaningful change are reason for optimism” – perhaps the only reliable reason for optimism in a troubled world.

So today we celebrate our angels, and the angelic principle in our lives together. Our celebration includes a gala reception in the Parish Hall after today’s service, to which all are welcome, no matter what kind of angel you happen to be. Even if you find yourself to be a reluctant angel, you are angelic nonetheless, and whether you choose to wear your halo on your head or carry it in your hand, your very presence merits that recognition of your angelic nature.

I would like to recognize one more angel today – Doris Poodry was the inspired angel who created this morning’s volunteer appreciation Sunday, designed and led the creation of 250 halos, organized us all to put this morning’s service together, and made sure there would be a lovely reception after the service to crown this morning’s recognition.

We close today with the hymn that I chose to center our theme for today’s celebration of our angelic nature, From You I Receive, To You I Give. It is number 402 in your gray hymnal, and Maestra Barb Wagner and some of her angels from the choir will teach it, and lead you in singing it today.

Sources:

Alexis de Tocqueville, retrieved 4/27/12 from <http://www.tocqueville.org/>

James Luther Adams, Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion (from Being Human Religiously) retrieved 4/27/12 from <http://sowhatfaith.com/2011/05/13/5-smooth-stones-of-liberal-religion/>

Five Smooth Stones responsive reading, retrieved 4/27/12 from <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop1/workshopplan/handouts/167555.shtml>

James Luther Adams (1976), *On Being Human Religiously*. Boston: UUA.