

The Examined Life
UUA Association Sunday
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
October 25, 2009

The composer Felix Mendelssohn might have been a natural Unitarian. For the first seven years of his life he was raised outside religious tradition. Partly it was the times. His parents were Jewish. In Germany in 1809, the year Felix was born, the year this Meeting House was founded, there were not many options for anyone whose religious or ethnic heritage affronted the ruling hierarchy.

In Germany in the first years of the 19th century, religious “toleration” meant allowing Jews to convert to Christianity. Ten percent of the Jewish population renounced Judaism, as did Felix Mendelssohn’s parents, Abraham² and Leah. They went for a time without religious affiliation. But when Felix was seven years old they moved the family to Berlin and joined a Lutheran church. In 1809 Felix Mendelssohn’s parents couldn’t simply walk off the street and into a Unitarian Meeting House (as they could today) and find that, not only were they welcome to bring their beliefs with them, but also that a Jewish congregation shared the worship space and they would be invited to participate in both religious groups.

In the 200 years since Felix Mendelssohn was born and this Meeting House was founded there have been many changes. Our forebears struggled, first and foremost, for the freedom to practice religion as they individually saw fit. Two hundred years ago they struggled to found houses of worship that would allow them the freedom to celebrate the religious heritage of their birth while also asking questions and seeking answers not in the doctrine of any religious tradition.

In America 200 years later, we have a degree of religious freedom that Felix Mendelssohn and his family would have considered impossible. Felix was a musical prodigy, writing 12 symphonies between the ages of 12 and 14, and creating a new musical form, Octet for Strings in E flat major, at the age of 16. Some of his greatest works were Christian in theme.³ These are wonderful pieces of music. But what might he have written if his work was not constrained to the dominant religious tradition of his time? Perhaps the tension of his religious life inspired his creativity. Perhaps it limited him. We will never know. He could have only imagined.

Times have changed. Though the kind of religious freedom we experience today is far from universal, in the here and now of this time and this country we have something precious. We are not alone. We are not simply one Unitarian church on an island 26 miles from the mainland...though sometimes it feels that way. We are part of a denomination, an association of

¹ Minister, Second Congregational Meeting House Society, Unitarian Universalist, Nantucket, MA. *This sermon is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives-Noncommercial License 3.0. For more information, go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.*

² Abraham’s father was the Jewish philosopher Rabbi Moses Mendelssohn. We can only imagine the social and family pressures that Abraham experienced in the course of his decision to renounce Judaism and then to become a Lutheran Christian, at least outwardly.

³ Symphony No. 5 (“Reformation,” celebrating the 300th anniversary of the Lutheran Church) (1830); St. Paul (1836). He was working on the oratorio “Christus” at the time of his death in 1847; the completed portion is the recitative, trio, and chorus, “There Shall a Star Come out of Jacob.” The tune commonly used for the Christmas carol “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” is Mendelssohn’s, though he did not originally intend it as sacred music.

more than 1,000 American congregations that pledge together to support values for living and to set aside doctrinal and theological disagreement.

Today we celebrate “Association Sunday,” when we recall that we are part of a larger community of Unitarian Universalists, and consider what that means for us and for our denomination. It’s an opportunity to examine our life as a congregation in association with other congregations. In past years I’ve talked about the Association’s role in publishing the Pentagon Papers and the civil rights movement. This year, the 200th anniversary of the founding of this congregation, the 200th year since Felix Mendelssohn’s birth, as we examine the life of our “Unitarian Church,” I find myself with one compelling thought: times have changed. How should we?

During the 47 years of Felix Mendelssohn’s brief life, he composed amazing music. In a way this Meeting House is so like Mendelssohn. Just 27 years after its founding, the congregation adopted a covenant that made it formally Unitarian and officially open to a broader range of believers. It was an amazing contribution to the religious life of Nantucket. Two weeks from today, on Nov. 8, Rev. Ted Anderson will preach about those early years, and give us his insights into the remarkable time that culminated in those changes. But for today, let’s focus on where we are in 2009, and what it means for us and for our Association.

My premise is simple. We no longer have to struggle to express our unique and individual religious beliefs. Whatever longing we may have for a religious community that is open to each of us as our authentic selves, that longing can be satisfied here.

But is that where we stop?

Two hundred years ago the founders of this congregation longed for a religious community that would give them broader scope for free religious inquiry. They probably could not have imagined how far we would take that simple quest. For them even the first step toward the religious freedom we have today was a public struggle, symbolized by the building of an entirely new Meeting House. It required and resulted in social and political change. The change that made this congregation Unitarian was a public badge of religious courage.

What is our badge today?

This is an important question. Two hundred years ago the struggle for what they called “free faith” was visible and highly public. In today’s world, where pluralism and secularism are largely accepted, where 15 percent of Americans⁴ are unconnected to a religious community, is that all we are about? Is our only public meaning that we are a place where there isn’t a creed?

I think there are two things happening in America today, both for us here on Nantucket and for our Association across the land.

⁴ American Religious Identification Survey 2008 (“ARIS”), published by the Program on Public Values of Trinity College, Hartford, CT; Principal Investigators: Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. The ARIS survey places “Unitarian-Universalism” in the category “New Religious Movements and Other Religions” along with Scientology and Rastafarians. (I will write the authors a letter.) The survey is available online at www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org.

The first is that many people don't know that we are different from other religious groups. Even here on this small island, many people I encounter assume that we "do" religion exactly as most Protestant congregations "do" religion. They are surprised at the absence of a creed. They are startled by the inclusivity of the readings we use in our services. They say to me, when I suggest that we are a bit ... different: "Yes, but you talk about Jesus every Sunday, don't you?"

I have to admit that in the balance of things I might talk about Jesus a bit more than I do. But I'm thrilled with the freedom I have to talk about many things. I am not bound by a lectionary that governs my choice of topic. I am not tied to a single holy book, or holy books in general. I can hold up for consideration spiritual leaders and inspirational messages from all the world's religious traditions—and its *non*-religious traditions. It is a great joy to preach unbounded, to draw my messages from the Book of Life itself.

So. Why don't people know what we do here on Sunday mornings?

Which brings me to the second thing that's happening here on Nantucket and, I suspect, in many of our Unitarian congregations across America.

We have become a private church.

For whatever reasons, and I'm still thinking about them, the story of our struggle for free faith has been lost. Our voice for religious freedom is muted. But in many ways that particular voice isn't needed, here and now. Elsewhere, yes, in struggles in other countries, a voice crying out for religious freedom is deeply, desperately, needed. But here and now, in our time, in our place, the need is for something quite different. And if the only need we meet as a church is our own need for religious community, then we are not a public church, we are a private church.

Don't get me wrong. I place a high value on religious community. I talked about it last week in connection with our "Ingathering." Religious community is what we do here for our children, for our elders, for every person who enters our doors in search of open minds and warm hearts. Community is essential and on Nantucket we offer a community of free faith in a way that no other congregation can.

But if that is *all* we do, we are a private church, a community for ourselves and for anyone we invite in, or who happens to stop by. Invitation and happenstance: that is not reaching out and reaching out.⁵ That is not public. A public church finds ways, within its local community, "to create a more just and more humane world."⁶

I am in my seventh year of affiliation with this congregation. I can say with absolute certainty that most members of this congregation not only want a more just and more humane world, but are actively involved in efforts to make it so. In any endeavor to serve the public good on Nantucket, our members are there.

⁵ A reference to the opening words, from Marge Piercy's poem "The Seven of Pentacles," available online at www.panhala.net/Archive/Seven_of_Pentacles.html; excerpt printed as "Connections," No. 568 in the UU hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition* (UUA 1993) ("Reach out, keep reaching out, and keep drawing in").

⁶ Michael Durrall, *The Almost Church Revitalized* (Commonwealth 2009); excerpt published in *UU World*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 14-15.

When I was recruited, I was told (emphatically) that part of my job was to serve the local community. It's in my contract, but I do so willingly and with joy. I chair the Food Pantry's Board, I'm a member of the Board of Habitat for Humanity Nantucket, and I'm on the Board of the Nantucket Rental Assistance program, which helps local families maintain stability in housing. Approximately one-sixth of my time goes to humanitarian efforts and justice-seeking. We should find a way to show the value of this commitment in our budget, because it is not simply my commitment, it is a congregational commitment. It is one of the ways that we, collectively, make this church a public church.

But being a public church in the sense I mean is more than unleashing your Minister upon the local community. It is more than the ready and dedicated involvement of individual members in important local causes. It requires the intentional choice of this congregation to be active as a congregation in the public sphere of action for a more just and more humane society.

Some of you may be sitting there in the pews thinking, "Yes, but how?" and others may be thinking, "With what budget?"

First let me say that I'm sure we *can* take this step and that I believe we are *more than ready* to take this step; but I alone cannot envision exactly how and what we might do. If we engage our collective creativity over the next few months, then perhaps by the time of the next annual meeting (on January 31) we can come up with some ideas. Next let me suggest that there are some things we can do that require no money, only leadership by the Board of Trustees and perhaps a vote of this congregation.

The first thing on *my* list is congregational participation in Habitat for Humanity Nantucket. Habitat is a great example of a real contribution to the Nantucket community. Participation wouldn't cost us anything and would build on what members of this congregation already do. Nancy Rappaport and I are both on the Habitat Board. Chris Lohmann is a past president. Craig Sperry has been on the Habitat Board and is now construction supervisor for the Habitat house currently under construction. Many of our members have devoted hours, even days, to building Habitat houses.

This congregation is ready to make an intentional, visible commitment.

Habitat Nantucket is creating a new "congregational program." It will invite Nantucket's faith community to commit to a few simple things: One congregational workday per year. One non-construction administrative support task that needs only two people, each of whom commits less than one hour per week. A youth project, of whatever design the congregation chooses, in support of Habitat. A visible emblem of congregational involvement in Habitat Nantucket somewhere on church premises. And a congregational vote to become involved.⁷

Now that's simple. A no-brainer for us. But if Habitat's "Congregational Program" is where we start, it should not be where we stop. Nantucket's year-round community has many needs. We could make a list of humanitarian and justice-seeking projects, and ask each member of the congregation to pledge some time (even if it's only a few hours each year) to one of them.

⁷ The Board of Habitat Nantucket adopted the "Congregational Program" on Oct. 20, 2009.

Our Peace & Justice Committee has already made a commitment to raising funds for PlayPumps International to fund PlayPumps that bring clean water to remote villages. Our Board has already decided that four times a year we will dedicate a Sunday morning service to a good cause, and donate the collection. Let's add these actions to the list of steps toward making us a "public church," and make a congregational commitment to these efforts.

Our "public church" list need not be limited to the many good projects that already exist on this island. There are other needs here, needs that are not being met, and there is an amazing amount of grant funding available for social justice programs created by UU congregations.⁸ Even one person with an idea and the willingness to invest some personal energy could get us started.

The difference between how we act in the local community when we are mostly a private church, and how we act when we are mostly a public church, may not at first be very great. The difference won't be in the individual actions of our members or our Minister. The difference will be in the *intention* we bring to the effort; in making a congregational commitment; in including a summary of each year's efforts in our annual report; and in finding a way to reflect these efforts in our budget.

The difference is in our recognition that with religious freedom—which we now have—comes a responsibility to take up the reins of action.

As we begin, the difference will not be so much what we *do* as what we *envision*. To become a public church, with a congregational commitment to making our community more humane and more just, we must have a vision of what we can be. Once we create that vision, we will find ways to act on it.

Because of that vision, and through our actions, this iconic Meeting House will become the symbol of who we are, a public church. Its image (on those little lapel pins) will become our badge of courage, saying without words that we work for hope in difficult times.

Two hundred years ago our forebears had a vision, and they built this Meeting House. Now we have this Meeting House, and we must build a vision. If we do, no one on Nantucket will ever again ask me what it means to be a Unitarian.

⁸ Each year grants from the UU Funding Program supports UU congregations in local justice work. Information is available on the program's website, www.uua.org/giving/fundingprogram