

## Duuwey, Duuing, Duu A Call for *Acts of Social Witness*

By  
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January 17, 2010

Although the title of today's message refers to John Dewey, it is not so much about him as it the philosophy of pragmatism his name is associated with. Dewey himself referred to his philosophy as "instrumentalism," and the term "pragmatism," was actually coined by one of his contemporaries, Charles Sanders Pierce, who, along with Dewey and William James, are considered its originators.

And though I am not knowledgeable enough about his life and writings to offer a fair-minded critique of his work, or know if I'm even in great agreement with him, the little I do know does make me feel some degree of kinship with Dewey. Firstly, he was from this country, born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1859. He died at age 93, in 1952, after helping to contribute the only branch of philosophy that is considered distinctly American. Secondly, though he was not a Unitarian Universalist, he inspires many UU's to this day. Just this past Fall, Professor Michael Hogue, of Meadville Lombard Theological School, one of our two UU seminaries, taught a Theology class on *Pragmatism* in which Dewey was required reading; a course he's offering again this year. And recently I picked up a used copy of his book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, which, it turns out, was published by the UUA's Beacon Press. And Dewey's memorial service was held in a Unitarian church, during which, as he had requested, his friend, the famous Unitarian Humanist, Max Otto gave the eulogy, saying, "John Dewey's impact upon affairs, upon public education, the sciences, philosophy, religion, the enterprises of politics, of business, of labor, has been so pervasive and penetrating that men and women in the most various walks and ways will continue to think and act, unknowingly when not knowingly, under the persisting influence of his initiating genius."<sup>1</sup>

This brings me to a third point of connection, and, perhaps, the most important one; Dewey was a liberal who strived to live out his values. As Max Otto put it:

John Dewey lived his philosophy. His stature as a crusader, who poured his incredible gifts and energies into the struggle to improve the lot of mankind, equaled his stature as a philosophic thinker and educational pioneer. A progressive in every sense of the word, he took his place at the front with the most daring of those who

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/dewey.html>

sought to build a new political party for the people of America. He gave his vigorous support to social movements designed to provide more hope and greater opportunity and dignity for the underprivileged of our country and the world beyond our shores.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever else we might think of Dewey, and whatever else he might have accomplished, he ought to be admired as a man of action who lived out his convictions, something that should rightly be expected of anyone who preaches pragmatism. "Democracy," he said, "and the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity are to my mind synonymous."<sup>3</sup> And he exemplified his devotion to Democracy as a member of the International League for Academic Freedom, as an original organizer of the NAACP, once Chairing the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and marching on behalf of women's rights, among his involvement in many other worthy causes. So it seems appropriate for us, especially as Unitarian Universalists, to lift up Dewey a part of that source of inspiration we define as the, "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love."

Unitarian Universalists, indeed, are pragmatists at heart, which is why we continue to publish John Dewey's books and teach seminary courses about him and his philosophy. Our faith inspires us to action, to live out our values and principles, believing that a "faith without works is dead," that a religion too heavily emphasizing heavenly matters is no earthly good. Our religion is not about the afterlife, but about this life! It's about the here and now, about living what we believe, and practicing what we preach. And if, in the barest terms, *pragmatism* is the philosophy that an idea is only true if it works, then ours is a pragmatic religion that is never content to accept ideas that have proven useless, or worse, harmful in the world.

Nevertheless, as basic as this notion ought to seem regarding religion in general, Unitarian Universalism stands out from so many other faiths precisely because we are defined by our *pragma*, and not our *dogma*. How many of us have been left not knowing how to respond when asked by others, "So, what do Unitarians believe?" Our world is accustomed to defining faith in terms of belief, not practice. Who among us have ever been asked, "So, what do Unitarians do?" Likewise, the differences between various religions, like Christians and Muslims, or Hindus and Buddhists, or Catholics and Protestants, are delineated in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Early Works*, 1:128 (Southern Illinois University Press) op cited in Douglas R. Anderson, AAR, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1993), p. 383

terms of their beliefs, not what they do. And when it comes to these faiths and many others, there's much to be said. But UU's are often left speechless and befuddled by this question because it is so difficult for us to describe ourselves in any kind of dogmatic terms. Yet how do we begin to define our faith in terms of *pragma* without a complete paradigm shift regarding the typical understanding of what religion is?

This paradigm shift from idealism to pragmatism, from *dogma* to *pragma*, is precisely what Dewey seems to have devoted much of his energies too. He was a reconstructionist who hoped to help all of humanity come to realize there must be a link between what we think and how we behave. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, he complained that in the past, "It became the work of philosophy to justify on rational grounds the spirit, though not the form, of accepted beliefs and traditional customs."<sup>4</sup> In short, he saw philosophy as a method of rationalizing the status quo, and was, thus, in need of reform. This happened, he thought, because philosophers themselves were impractical. Especially in ancient times, philosophy was left to members of the elite leisure class who had the luxury of time to sit around and ponder the meaning of existence. Those who did not, the working class, were looked down upon as too simple and too busy to come up with anything meaningful. Yet Dewey argued that it was actually these workers, involved in the ordinary practice of life, who were truly innovative and were the true inventors of practical technologies. "[Yet] Since the industrial craftsman was only just above the slave in social rank," he wrote, "his type of knowledge and the method upon which it depended lacked prestige and authority."<sup>5</sup>

It was out of his appreciation for the practical accomplishments of the working class that Dewey came to see that philosophy needed to shift from rationalizing and justifying tradition, to becoming a progressive vision that's, in his words, "chief function is to free [our] minds from bias and prejudice and to enlarge [our] perceptions of the world about [us]."<sup>6</sup> And this is to be accomplished, he suggested, by grappling with the real world, the natural world, the here and now. Like many Unitarian Universalists, he did not care much for traditional religion, once complaining that humans, "...have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing."<sup>7</sup> The solution for Dewey, once again, was to come

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<sup>4</sup> Dewey, John, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1920, 1957, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, John, *A Common Faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934, p. 46.

down to Earth by using science, in particular, as a reality check. “Left to himself,” he said, “the individual can do little or nothing; he is likely to become involved in his own self-spun web of misconceptions.”<sup>8</sup> Science, along with its use of critical thinking, helps prevent such delusion by forcing us to deal with objective facts—it keeps us honest, or, as we say in UU’s say, “warns us against adulteries of the mind and spirit.” As a result, he went on to proclaim, “It is no longer enough for a principle to be elevated, noble, universal and hallowed by time. It must present a birth certificate, it must show under just what conditions of human experience it was generated, and it must justify itself by its works, present and potential.”<sup>9</sup>

So, as you can see from all of this, Unitarian Universalism has a lot in common with Dewey, and pragmatism in particular. We have a progressive orientation that is willing to let go of worn out useless ideas, no matter how much tradition wants to rationalize and justify them; We are pragmatic, not dogmatic: Unlike so many other religions, we embrace science and reason as one of our greatest paths to truth and understanding; and, above all, we are committed to changing our world for the better through action, that is, by living out our highest principles.

But this message is not merely about tooting our own horns, but to challenge us to take our faith to the next level by committing to more fully live it out at a time when our world is in particular peril. Ever since the Unitarian Universalist Association formed in 1961, it has been our annual habit to write and adopt Social Justice Statements espousing our position on a variety of issues, from the Vietnam War, to Civil Rights, to choice, to GBLT rights, to ethical eating, to the environment, etc., etc. Today these statements would be combined in a document that’s more than 400 pages long. If you’re interested, you can go online and have a look for yourself at some of them. And we should in no way diminish this important part of our own tradition, for we can all feel proud to be part of a faith that’s willing to take such clear and controversial stands on so many hotly debated matters.

Yet, I also feel obligated to insist that the stands we take, that is, the principles we stand for, must also be justified, as Dewey noted, by their works. While all our statements help us draw lines in the sand, they must be followed through by our congregations, and by us as individuals, through *Acts of Social Witness*. For *action*, as we all know, speak much louder than words. And it is herein, I fear, we too often fall short. Today, what we refer to as our “Social Witness Process,” refers only to the way in which our individual congregations can become democratically involved

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

in selecting the issues our denomination will then spend four years studying before offering us a statement to vote on. Of course, we do much more than this, as evidenced most recently by our Service Committee's incredible response to the Haiti earthquake, which has already raised nearly half a million dollars for relief efforts. Yet, as much as I hate to admit it, and though our membership numbers have slowly increased the past three decades, after a harsh decline during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have become a marginalized religion, and like most marginalized peoples, we are mostly unheard and un-thought of by mainstream society.

This is so, in part, I believe, because we have not been expressing our radical faith in radical ways—converting our radical dogma into radical pragma, if you will. In his book, *The Devotional Heart: The Renewal of American Unitarian Universalism*, John C. Morgan suggested Universalism, in particular, became one of the largest denominations in our country because it “was strongly opposed; the more opposition, the larger the movement grew in response to the opposition.”<sup>10</sup> We are a radical faith, and our success is tied in to our having a radical presence in the world, not content to live quietly on the margins, huddled amongst ourselves in cloistered General Assemblies debating our positions about statements that even most of us won't read, rather than making our presence known in the world through radical, pragmatic action and response to the ills facing us all.

Our faith, once renowned by all as the faith of Presidents like John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and William Taft, philosophers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Bertrand Russell, and great social reformers, like Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Margaret Fuller, Albert Schweitzer, and James Reeb, to name but a few... now lies on the fringes of a society that knows so little about us that it must pointlessly ask, “So, what do UU's believe?” If I were to ask any of you, or anyone in the country for that matter, to name an individual widely known to represent the views of the religious right, you can probably recall several household names instantly (i.e., Pat Robertson, Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, John Hagee, Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, Fred Phelps), but if I ask you to name someone equally as well known who represents religious liberalism, you would be sore pressed to name just one. And yet we know they exist because they are among us, filling our pulpits and pews. For there are none more suited to represent progressive values in our nation and world than us UU's. But the reality is most people don't even know we exist anymore, and those who do are confused about what we stand for, despite our 400-plus pages of statements about what we believe!

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<sup>10</sup> Morgan, John C., *The Devotional Heart: The Renewal of American Unitarian Universalism*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1995, p. 93.

The world, fore the most part, doesn't know we're here, and that saddens me, because I know our faith is what is needed to transform our planet. As a marginalized faith, we have been silenced, and none of us should be satisfied with this. What we're doing isn't wholly working, and if what we're doing isn't working, what we're doing isn't practical! And if what we're doing isn't practical, we cannot justify our religion. We may continue, and should continue, to meet and gather and support one another in our congregations and larger assemblies, but given the state our world is in, with all its war, poverty, oppression, injustice, and, most pressingly, its environmental apocalypse, we must turn from our self-indulged obsession with maintaining healthy congregations, or writing statements we can all agree upon and feel proud and righteous about, and become a more meaningful, potent, and prophetic presence in the real world beyond our sanctuary walls. And, yes, I'm suggesting we must do this better on a denominational level, but, more importantly, these words are meant for you, and for every Unitarian Universalist who values *pragma* more than *dogma*. For you have it within you to be a voice crying out in the wilderness. I'm more than confident that in this very room this morning, sitting among you, perhaps resting in your very heart, are people the likes of Adams, and Emerson, and Anthony, and Fuller, and Schweitzer, and Reeb, and so many other inspiring examples who have been part of our faith. And *faith* for people like these, for people like us, is never a noun but always a verb. Our faith is what we do, not what we believe. Our faith is practical, and even if we can never explain it, it is something we must do!