"OUR UNCOMFORTABLE SEATS AT THE HEAD OF THE CLASS"

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CALL TO WORSHIP

The husband of one of my former congregants graduated from Harvard in the late 1940s. He took a job at one of Boston's leading financial houses as an office boy, for the princely sum of $3 a week. He soon learned that some of the other office boys were being paid $4 a week. He asked his boss to explain this discrepancy. The boss replied, "That's to take the Harvard out of you."

A clever comeback, but what would it require, <u>really</u>, to take the Harvard out of somebody? Or the U. Va.? Or the William & Mary? At least the part that translates into deep divisions of social and economic class? Must such divisions persist, even in Unitarian Universalism and in our own Williamsburg church? Come, let us look this question in the eye. Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

In Boston in 1840, churchgoers always sat in the same pew from week to week. Why? Because they had bought and paid for them. And the price varied depending on the view. There were a few free seats – way up in the back of the balcony. As the old saying goes, where you stood depended on where you sat.

Of all the churches in Boston, the Unitarian ones had the priciest pews. In one such church that year, a radical minister named George Ripley proposed an open seating plan. His proposal was resoundingly rejected, and shortly thereafter, he left. A century would pass before the last of the Unitarian churches in Boston abandoned the system of purchasing pews.

This quaint practice is a telling chapter in the story of how identity is formed in religious communities. What is the price of admission in our churches <u>today</u>? And what is at stake in how we set that price?

A short walk from Reverend Ripley's church, an even older institution is still selling seats today: Harvard University. And where you sit continues to reveal where you really stand. The median income of Harvard families is over $150,000 per year. And Harvard is no fluke. At the selective private universities, more doctors are parents of freshmen than are hourly wage-earners, teachers, ministers, farmers, and soldiers -- combined.

These disturbing new realities in higher education reflect stark changes in the class structure of America. The richest 20% of the country now receive over half the income. The

disparity in income between rich and poor is now greater in the United States than in any major industrialized Western country.

College presidents are worried that they are reinforcing economic and social advantage. High incomes of parents translate into huge educational advantages for children. Those educational advantages in turn translate into high incomes. The repetition of this cycle is creating a new hereditary aristocracy in America.

Where are Unitarian Universalists in this class structure? In the leading study of religious demography in America, we are described as "a group with a long history of high status in this society." How long and how high? Well, those Unitarians sitting in the pricey pews in Boston were very busy over at Harvard. They gained control of the board of overseers of the college in 1805. For the next half-century all the university presidents were Unitarian. Harvard Divinity School was considered a Unitarian academy.

Conrad Wright, a leading Unitarian historian, says that our Unitarian ancestors "considered the school as sacred an institution as the church." The Universalists had the same passion. They planted schools from Massachusetts all the way to the Pacific, where they started up a little school called Throop Polytechnic, which later became known as the California Institute of Technology.

And how high a status? In terms of education, we're Number One among American religious denominations. The people whose children have the highest SAT scores by a big margin? Unitarian Universalists. In terms of income, we're Number Two. In terms of composite social standing based employment, income, education, and home ownership, we're Number One.

In our church we say all are worthy, all are welcome; and we say it sincerely. But in class terms, Unitarian Universalism is very far from mirroring American society as a whole. We don't require anybody to buy a pew any more, or to have a college degree to join our church. But are there intangible "prices of admission" that make our church look "unaffordable" to some – that signal who belongs and who doesn't?

Here too, our history may give some clues – particularly in how the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our family tree got grafted together. Frankly, some of the Unitarians tended to look down their noses at the Universalists. Despite much theological kinship, it took nearly a hundred years of talking before the Unitarians and Universalists could get together. When the subject came up for the umpteenth time in 1949, a plain-spoken Universalist leader said "I feel that I ought to put on my company manners when I go into a Unitarian church."

Belonging is a subtle thing. In its recent report on theological unity, the Unitarian Universalist Association asked, "If we say to anyone or everyone 'you belong,' what is it that they are invited to belong TO?" For anyone to have a real feeling of belonging in our church, he must feel invited to something beyond Sunday morning worship – something like learning, conversation, volunteer work, socializing, eating, sharing experiences -- in short, the culture of our community. How much is our church culture inflected by social and economic class? What

do we talk about with each other -- during coffee hour, after committee meetings, at potlucks and social events?

These questions are not just about welcoming newcomers. Our high social status represents averages. Although they may be few, there are people in UU churches now who sometimes feel like outsiders based on social status.

At stake for you and me in the issue of social and economic class is a basic spiritual value: identity, the religious answer to the question "who am I?" And because identity is formed in community, the real meaning of that question is "what do I belong to?" Whom do we mean when we say we? And whom don't we mean?

In religious terms, identity has two layers -- a transient one, and an essential one. The transient one includes cultural elements like education, what we eat, the work we do, and leisure pursuits. These are the kinds of feathers that cause certain birds to flock together.

The trouble comes when we treat this transient layer of identity as if it were the essential layer that lies beneath all those transient feathers. The essential layer is what's left after we have grasped that we are not our hobbies or interests, we are not the vacations we take, not our jobs, not our diplomas, not even the way we talk and think. At our essence, we are beings who, literally, are beyond compare, who have inherent worth and dignity no matter what our transient characteristics.

This radically egalitarian conception of human identity is the first principle of our religion. Why, then, would we ever treat the transient layer of our identity as if it were the essential one? I say, it's because of fear. Everyone wants to belong. But belonging to a community organized on the basis of equal and inherent worth is hard, because connecting with that essential self, that essential identity, requires peeling back all those transient characteristics that add up to social status. Unconsciously, we fear that although our first principle sounds wonderful, maybe that inherent worth and dignity doesn't really exist. So without realizing it, we place our faith in the transient layer instead.

If we become afraid that we're nothing more than the sum of those transient characteristics, then they take on an exaggerated importance. If being highly educated and highly paid start to feel essential to our identity, then we will reinforce that identity by associating with other highly educated and highly paid people. This way of reinforcing identity absolutely depends on there being other people who are excluded from the group.

When we relate to others as if they were nothing more than their transient characteristics, we negate not only THEIR inherent worth and dignity, but also our own. Either worth and dignity are inherent in human nature, or they're not. If we treat worth and dignity as varying from individual to individual, we nullify our cherished belief that it is inherent -- an incalculable loss.

This loss is compounded by the missed opportunity to receive wisdom from people whose experiences are different from our own. Those who are not affluent learn things about life that people of privilege don't know. Those whose income is not so high feel the lies of public policy in their own bodies. We need that body wisdom planted among us. We need to share a

community with people for whom the minimum wage is not just an important social issue, but rather, a pivotal factor in daily calculations about soap versus soup.

The damaging effects of social status are everywhere in the world. But the one place where some sanctuary from this damage should always be available is church. The message that should fill our ears every time we walk into church, shouted by the way we do EVERYTHING here, is "this is not a social club." Not even a very liberal, enlightened social club. All are worthy, and all must be welcome -- welcome not just to sit here and be merely tolerated, but to commune here, to reveal a wounded self, to open a heart, to trust and be trusted. To smash the conventions of social status by saying, "take me as I am. Love me exactly as I am." With no conditions placed on admission, no tuition, no price paid for a pew -- not even the subtle and invisible ones of class-driven culture.

It is the mission of the church to distinguish the transient from the essential, so that all who walk through its doors may feel as never before a powerful sense of connection to their own essential selves and the essential selves of others. This connectedness is transformative -- something that our everyday secular lives make it hard even to imagine.

In his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul urged his followers to be such a church. He chided the well-to-do congregants for bringing their fancy food to communion, which was a real meal back then, rather than a symbol, and eating it in the presence of those who had little or nothing – without sharing. Paul was talking about a church of humility, the humility without which wisdom is out of reach – the wisdom to recognize our universal equality in the presence of the infinite and the holy.

Paul's radically egalitarian church is a church of hard work. It demands that we always stay conscious of who's included and who's excluded. At first this hard work might feel like walking on eggs, being hypercareful in conversation, in the planning of every activity; and who would want to do that? We would only take on this hard work if we hoped for an extraordinary reward – something transformative. Paul offered his followers that. He declared that the way to reach out for it was to abandon the transient consolations of social status and embrace radical egalitarianism.

Two thousand years later, in a thoroughly secular society, can we name and share and then transcend the fears and self-doubts that keep us clinging to the transience of social and economic class? Are our imaginations strong enough to energize us for the work of creating Paul's egalitarian church?

That certainly is the church I need in order to walk my spiritual path. Until not so many years ago, I devoted most of my energy to constructing an identity out of the transient but seductive raw material society is constantly serving up. As if that underlying layer of essential self were a dubious proposition. And being a fairly persuasive guy, I started to believe that was who I really was.

To what do I belong? Whom do I mean when I say "we"? I expect to be living in these questions for quite awhile, probably the rest of my life. I know I have to do this if I am serious

about continuing to uncover who I am -- essentially, rather than just transiently; and continuing to uncover the same truth about others.

CONCLUSION

A popular name for Unitarian Universalist churches is “All Souls.” This is what all our churches must be -- churches of all souls. Not all souls in the top twenty percent of society in terms of income and education. Not all souls of high social status. Not all souls who read the New York Times or listen to NPR. All souls.

We have all the love we need to build the Church Universal. We have all the tools for taking down the invisible fences of social status. May our loving embrace be open to the widest possible community -- one worthy of our Universalist name.

AMEN.