

Removing Barriers

Bill Sinkford

THE 2003 ESSEX HALL LECTURE

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Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, LONDON, WC2R 3HY

Tel: (020) 7240 2384 Fax: (020) 7240 3089
E-mail: ga@unitarian.org.uk



www.unitarian.org.uk/docs

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Thank you all for the acts of kindness that so many of you have offered me while I have been here with you. It is somewhat intimidating to try to continue a legacy of so many well delivered addresses in the Essex Hall series, but I will try to live up to the billing that has been offered.

This is the second General Assembly I will have attended this year. The first was in Tokyo where I had the chance to address some 6,000 of our liberal Buddhist partners of the *Rissho Kosei-Kai* at their annual gathering celebrating their 65th year of existence at their Great Hall in the centre of Tokyo. Now I have the chance to address the British General Assembly, and in just a few short weeks I will have the opportunity to address the annual gathering of the clan of American Unitarian Universalists in Boston, Massachusetts. Boston is about as close to Mecca as American Unitarian Universalists will ever get and we are expecting quite a crowd, perhaps as many as seven or eight thousand, approximately twice the size of a typical gathering. One of the last times the General Assembly of the UUA was held in Boston was in 1969. The attendance at that time was about 1,500. We now will use the Hall that was used at that gathering for one of our small meetings.

1969 was also the year when issues of race in Unitarian Universalism became dominant once again, and the Association withdrew its commitments in many ways to racial justice. It was the year when I began to find I could no longer be a Unitarian Universalist; the year that ultimately led to my leaving the faith. So as an African American living in America I have some personal experience of barriers that are very personal to me and to this movement that I love.

I want to bring you greetings from the Unitarian Universalist Association, your close cousins in the United States, and tell you that

today Unitarian Universalism is vital and healthy. We have been growing in numbers in each of the last 20 years, a fact that makes many of our close cousins in the Protestant world in the US quite green with envy. They are not having quite as good a time as we are. But far more important than our growth in numbers is a growing willingness on the part of Unitarian Universalists in the United States to claim our good news. We are beginning to believe that what we have found in our congregational life is of real value in a world which would divide us with barriers and walls and not honour the reality that we are one human family on this small blue planet.

The religious landscape in the United States has become extremely pluralistic. By one count there are now more Muslims than Jews in the United States. There are 2m Buddhists, 1m Hindus. There are Jews and Zoroastrians, Bahai's and Mormons. A phenomenally pluralistic religious culture has developed, a reality, not a vision for the future, and Unitarian Universalism in the United States values religious pluralism. Our affirmation of the personal search for truth and meaning has an almost inevitable derivative — the fact that in our congregations it is quite typical for there to be Unitarians who are theists, devout humanists, Buddhists and pagans all coming together each and every Sunday morning to worship and to religiously educate our children. We have some information, some knowledge, some lived experience that differences need not divide, that diversity need not be divisive, that our differences can be blessings to us and not curses. In this world, in these days, I believe that is powerful good news that needs to be heard. The religious task that we face in the United States, and I believe increasingly in the world, is to find ways to live together, given our differences. To find ways to live together and not demonise each other. To find ways to live together and know one another better so that we can appreciate the real lived human experience which is at the heart of our religious life. We need to find ways to remove the barriers we are told day in and day out must divide us.

Taking down barriers is a complicated task as I do not need to tell anyone here, because the barriers, whether created consciously or subconsciously, are put in place to protect us, to give us a sense of safety and security. And giving up these barriers is often a difficult and dangerous task.

I know you all know the story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho. You will remember that the people who were to become Israelites were in a leadership change, as perhaps some of your congregations are, and Joshua became their leader as he approached the river, across which lay the land of milk and honey. But when Joshua got to the river he saw not an open plain, unpopulated, but the large walled city of Jericho. And so Joshua did what all of the leaders of the people who were to become Israelites did when they were faced with a dilemma: he went up the mountain and he prayed. And God delivered up a plan to him. A plan which in this case didn't involve any spears or guns or aeroplanes or bombs. It was a simple plan. The Israelite people were to march across the river and march around the city on each of seven days, and on the seventh day march around the city seven times and blow the *shofar*, and sing out. And God promised that the walls of the city would come tumbling down. Now in the story in the book of Joshua this is exactly what happened.

There is another story about how the Israelites occupied the land contained in the books which follow — the books of Kings and Judges — because actually it was a generations-long struggle for the people, who would become Israelites, to appropriate the land from the people who were already living there — then called the Canaanites, now called the Palestinians. But in the story of Joshua the Israelites did exactly as their God had commanded them. They went out and they marched around and — son-of-a-gun — the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Now usually this story is told as a triumphal story of the God of those people, but there actually was a town of Jericho right across the river and biblical archaeology tells us that, in point of fact, around the time of the

story, the walls of Jericho did come tumbling down. Now we don't know whether it was the result of some natural event like an earthquake, unlikely in that particular part of the world, or whether it was the result of human hands or the act of a faithful God, but the walls did come tumbling down. The interesting thing for me is that the people of Jericho had huddled their homes and shops up against the inside walls, these barriers that they had put up for safety. They huddled them right up against the walls and when the walls came tumbling down it was the walls, the barriers, that they had put up that killed the people of Jericho. There is some meaning in there for us as we think about the walls and the barriers that we have put up for our own safety and security.

It has been a hard winter, I think, for all of us and in many ways a hard year. We are facing the winding down of the war in Iraq, almost literally as we sit here. In the United States there has been no unanimity about the wisdom of that war. I doubt that there is unanimity in this auditorium here tonight about its wisdom. What I did on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association was take a very strong stance that the United States should not engage in unilateral war and that the appropriate way for us to engage with Iraq was through the United Nations. That was based on numerous resolutions passed by our General Assembly in support of the United Nations as the appropriate international venue for the resolution of international conflict.

But I have to tell you that personally I am troubled for the United States. I find the doctrine of pre-emptive war dangerous in the extreme, even if we did mount what my President calls a coalition of the willing, including the UK, which also lost soldiers in the past weeks. It seems to me that what the United States is doing is putting up barriers around itself. Barriers to protect its privilege, barriers which say to the world we have the might and therefore the right to take the actions that we deem to be appropriate and we actually do not need to be accountable to the rest of the international community as we take these actions. I have a fear that this will be the approach that my country takes in the coming

months and years. And you know it is not just the war in Iraq that troubles me. There seems to be a pattern in my country, a pattern of our willingness to go it alone. It was true in our refusal to sign the Kyoto accords on the environment. It was true in terms of our relationship to the World Conference Against Racism in Durban two years ago where we first sent a low level delegation. Then when the conversation turned in directions we did not like, we withdrew completely from the conference. It was true in terms of the International Criminal Court, which Unitarian Universalists in the United States had worked long and hard to put in place. I was in New York celebrating the opening of the court while my nation was doing everything that it could to undermine the International Criminal Court so that no American would be brought before it. I fear for my nation in these times.

I had the opportunity to go to Japan earlier this year and when there to the Hiroshima Peace Park – some of you may have made that pilgrimage. It is a very powerful and moving experience. I also spent some time at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine. This is the Shinto faith's second oldest shrine in Japan. The Shinto faith there undergirds the entire religious landscape of the Japanese. There I was able to be cleansed personally in a ritual they call Misogi, standing under an ice cold waterfall in the middle of the winter. It is a cleansing experience *in extremis*. I was then feted by the Gugi, the head Priest, of the Grand Shrine. At that dinner we were joined by Mr Foruda who serves on their board. Mr Foruda is a former nuclear physicist, now retired. While we were at the dinner I finally realised what I needed to ask the Japanese who were being such gracious and willing hosts, so open to the Americans who were with me. I realised that what I needed to ask was how they could possibly have forgiven us for dropping the atomic bombs in World War II. How was forgiveness possible? Mr Foruda said that he wanted to consider the question but it was a hard one and he wanted to take a few minutes. So we continued the conversation. He finally said, "I want to thank you because no one has ever asked us that question before and it's the right question. I think I have found my

answer to it." He said, "You see we have found a blessing in losing the war, despite the death and destruction that led up to it. We have found a silver lining and I will tell you what it is." He said, "If we hadn't lost the war, the military government would still be in power and no doubt they would still be invading countries to acquire raw materials to fuel our economic engine. We would be out colonising and taking for ourselves." He said, "If we hadn't lost the war the kind of arrogance that was part of that time in Japanese life would still be with us, a kind of arrogance that said that might is right." He said, "If we hadn't lost the war we would have become you."

Domestically, in the United States, there is another war going on. It is not being fought with guns and planes. It is being fought on Capitol Hill in Washington and in State legislatures, zoning boards and school boards. It is a war for the soul of America. Its battleground is a woman's right to choose. Its battleground is a welfare plan which requires more hours of work by poor women while at the same time stripping them of childcare hours. A war that the *New York Times* called the 'war on women'. It's a war that is fought in terms of affirmative action for racial and cultural minorities. It is a war which tries to define family in a narrow and mean-spirited frame that excludes so many of the people I know and love. It is a war which asks not whether there should be tax cuts for the rich but how large they should be. It is a very dangerous time in our country. A very dangerous time indeed.

This is Holy Week in the Christian liturgical calendar. It is a time to try to find hope and I wanted to share with you one bit of hope that I have found in these days. As the preparations for war were beginning in the United States there were coalitions that sprung up almost spontaneously. The National Council of Churches, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, the National Organisation for Women, organizations of doctors and business people came together in ways that we never have before. Somehow the preparations for war allowed us to take down the barriers that have separated us, to take

down the barriers that have separated progressive people in the United States. They allowed us to see that there is only one destiny on this planet, that we need to work together, that we cannot allow our separate agendas to prevent us from seeing the larger whole. At the end of the month I'll be in Chicago meeting with that coalition to try to imagine how we can move forward together rather than allowing ourselves to be separated again by barriers.

I want now to honour the request for me to have something to say about disabilities. I see connective tissue here in terms of our need to find ways to take down barriers. There are certainly barriers in our relationship, one to another, especially for those of us who have disabilities with which they must live.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has done some work, but I do not stand here tonight telling you that we have this figured out because we have far more work to do. But I can tell you a couple of things. If you came to our General Assembly in Boston you would see at my right-hand someone signing each and every one of the major events. You would see in the lobby the place where people who have physical disabilities register for, and can pick up their 'ponies'. These are the motorised trucks which many people with physical disabilities need to use. So we have some things that we can be proud of. But we have far more work to do. I don't know, but I bet that you might have some work to do too, because you too face old buildings with daunting amounts of money required to put in elevators and ramps. You face the issues of 'whether we will buy the Braille hymn books'. You face all of those issues. They seem just insurmountable. But there is a blessing here, a silver lining; there is a spiritual discipline that I try to practice that may be helpful to you. In the words of Victor Carpenter, one of our ministers who has served on the UUA disability committee: 'The miracle is inclusivity. The miracle begins when we answer the question, "Who is welcome here?" with the simple affirmation, "You are." And then we must move beyond the word to the deed by actively including

persons with disabilities. More than the ramp, the sign language interpreter, the Braille hymn book, the wheelchair, the accessible bathroom. We need to move out of our personal ablist comfort zones to include others.'

Now by some counts there are as many as 50 million persons in the United States with disabilities of one kind or another. The definition that we use goes like this: "a physical, sensory or mental condition, that substantially limits one or more of a person's life activities". It is a broad definition which includes dyslexia, diabetes, HIV virus, hearing loss, post polio syndrome. The fact that the population in the United States is aging means that there will be more people that will have disabilities as a part of their life as America continues to grey. It's a lot of people, and I could build a case based on the numbers that the religious community needs to pay attention to a population of that size. But I don't think the case should be based on numbers. This is a religious community and we need to find some theological, more spiritual grounding before we approach this work. I am going to read you two brief paragraphs developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association called a "Theological Context for Accessibility":

' "We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

"We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part." These are our first and last principles.'

The UUA operates with seven principles. These statements then frame the other principles. They affirm our belief that every person is valuable and has something to offer us and our community. They also affirm that what affects others affects us as well.

"Right now (it goes on) what is affecting many people in our neighbourhoods and communities is exclusion from our worship service,

our communities and our congregational social gatherings. These people are people with disabilities, excluded because our buildings and our attitudes are not flexible enough to admit persons with disabilities into the lives of our religious communities. They are excluded because there are steps to the sanctuary, because we do not take the time to slow down committee meetings in order to speak distinctly and one at a time. The members of the congregation cannot see beyond the crutches, the wheelchair, the Braille, the person with abilities who may need some assistance to use our facilities."

Persons with disabilities are not in UU communities because so often congregations have failed to remove the barriers that keep them out, barriers of architecture, attitude and communication. One consequence of these barriers is that our communities are missing the contributions and relationships these people have to offer. So it begins with theology but then it needs to get personal to be real. I would like to share a relatively short story about how I encountered issues of disabilities in my work at the Unitarian Universalist Association.

How many people have been to Boston and actually seen 25 Beacon Street? Quite a number – good. So you know what that area looks like. It is an area of uneven brick sidewalks and steep hills, with old buildings which were not designed for accessibility issues. It was not on their mind. My early work at the Association involved supervision of what we call our field staff. These are the district executives and program consultants who serve our congregations out in the field. One of these district executives who had been hired just before I joined the staff is Helen Bishop. I bet a couple of the people here have had a chance to meet Helen, a PhD in organizational development, a long time religious educator — one of the best trainers I have ever seen operate. Helen has very limited use of her legs. With braces and crutches she can swing them a bit if the surface is even. Stairs are out of the question for her. Helen had to come to Boston to meet with the rest of the field staff and with me. She managed it for several years until one year we had one of

these weeks, and you probably have them in your church, when whatever could go wrong did go wrong. Have you ever experienced that? Well we had one of those weeks. So the field staff stayed in guest houses that we own, called Pickett and Eliot Houses. Access for Helen was by a chair ramp outside up to the main floor. Well Boston delivered up snow and ice that completely covered the chair lift. To top it off we were meeting inside the main building at 25 Beacon Street and the elevator inside the building went out and we had to get up to the second floor. So a couple of us put Helen in a chair and chaired her up to the second floor. It was a perilous kind of trip but we made it and eventually got back down. Then we went over to have dinner and, of course, we had to get another chair and lift her up. That night, it was just one of those things – the fire alarm went off. Of course, Helen could not get out of the building. Luckily there was no fire. The next morning Helen wanted a few minutes to talk with the group and said she simply couldn't do it any more. It would be the last time she would come to one of these meetings at 25 Beacon Street. The field staff, then 27 people, decided that they wouldn't either. Many would stand in solidarity with Helen until we could get the accessibility issues solved in our buildings in Boston. For the next four years we went to a hotel on the outskirts of Boston that had reasonable accessibility. It cost a huge amount of money but I supported it because we value the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person.

If you take that seriously there are some decisions that you have to make. Some of this work on disabilities will test your soul if you take it seriously. It has tested mine. Part of it had to do with understanding that merely to accommodate Helen was not the same thing as providing for real access. Real access meant that the access had to be as easy for her as it was for me, and I had to learn that lesson. Some of it is about language. So I have learned to put the person first, to talk about a 'person with disability' rather than a 'handicapped person'. Because the person is most important.

We have done some work at our association that goes beyond resolutions at our General Assembly. There is an audit, a basic brochure that lists a variety of resources. There is a piece about language and what we can learn from it. These may be helpful to you as you take on this piece of work. We have also created a staff structure at the UUA which is new. It is called the Staff for Identity-Based Ministries. This is a staff group that tries to pay attention to people in historically marginalized groups. If you do a lot of this work you will find yourself using some long language. We haven't figured out short language that doesn't hurt people. We are talking here about bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender persons. We are talking about people of colour and Latino/a folks. We are talking about persons with disabilities. And if I have any luck we will be talking about people who are not quite as affluent as most of us sitting here. The group tries to pay attention to the ministry needs of those folks.

So we have done some work, but we truly do not have this figured out. The question, of course, is how we live out our values. It is not more complicated than that. What does it mean to ask yourself the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' Can you ask that authentically and not engage in some of this work?

I want to close with a short story told by a father whose son had a disability. He lived very near where I lived in Brooklyn, NY, so I'm very proud of the story and he is a member of our church. He writes:

'After extolling the school and its dedicated staff the father cried out, "Where is the perfection in my son, Shire? Everything God does is done with perfection, but my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?"

The audience was shocked by the questions, by the father's anguish, and stilled by the piercing query. I believe the father answered that when

God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child.

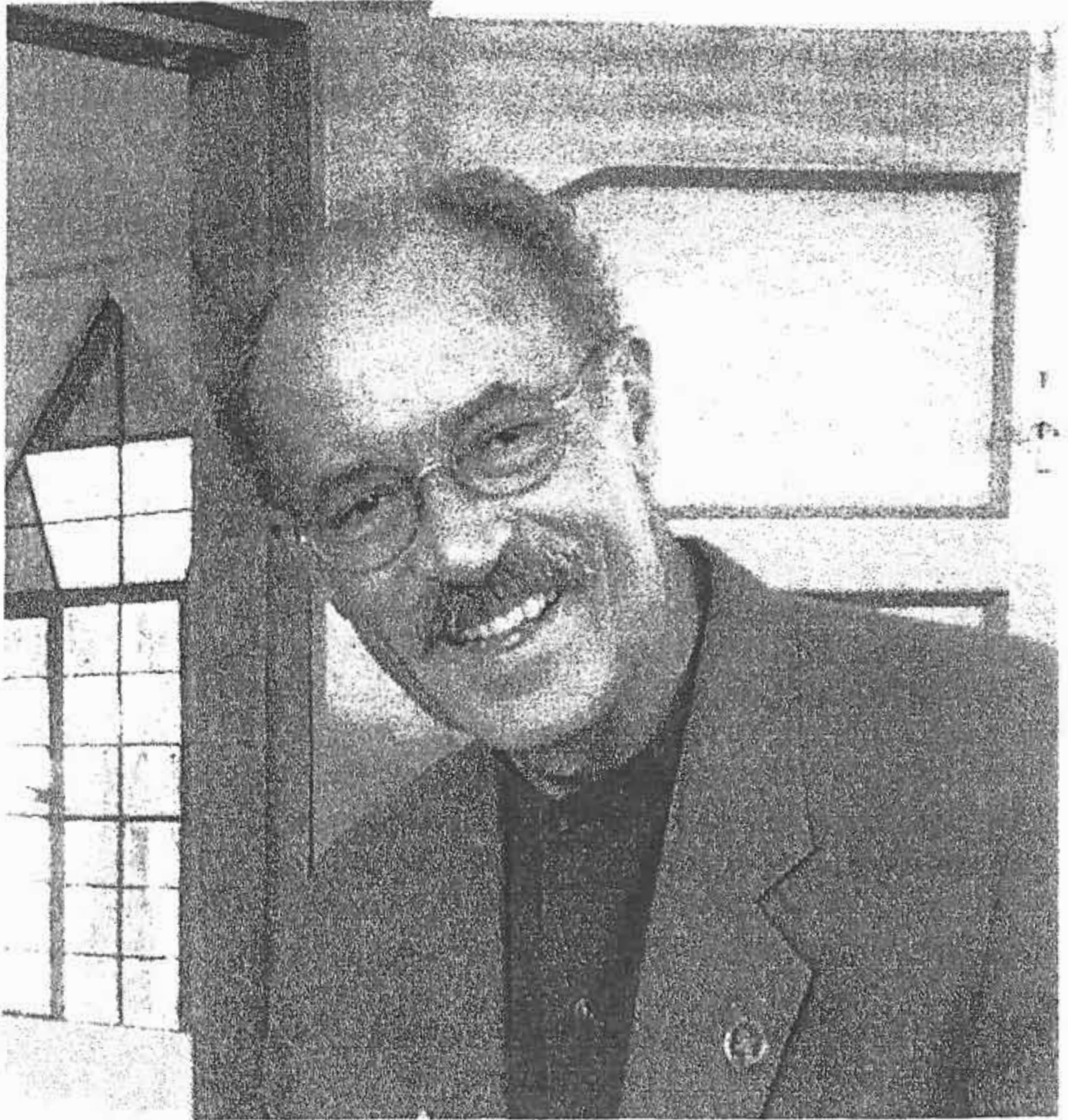
He then told the following story about his son.

One afternoon Shire and his father walked past a park where some boys Shire knew were playing baseball. Shire asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" His father knew that Shire was not at all athletic and most boys would not want him on their team. Shire's father understood that if his son was chosen to play it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging. The boy's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shire could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his team mates. Getting none he took matters into his own hands and said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be in our team and we will try to put him in the ninth inning," figuring he had little to lose. Shire's father was ecstatic as Shire smiled broadly. Shire was told to put on a glove and go out to play short centre field. At the bottom of the eighth inning Shire's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning Shire's team scored again and now with two outs and the bases loaded with the potential for winning, Shire was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shire bat and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly Shire was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Shire didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shire stepped to the plate, the pitcher stepped a few steps closer to lob the ball in softly so Shire could at least have a chance to make contact. The first pitch came in and Shire swung clumsily and missed. One of Shire's team mates came up and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shire. As the pitch came in, Shire and his team mate swung at the bat and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the

first baseman. Shire would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field far beyond the reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling at Shire: "Run to first, run to first." Never in his life had Shire run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag Shire who was still running. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second". Shire ran for second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home. As Shire reached second base the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third." As Shire rounded third the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shire run home." Shire ran home, stepped on home plate and all eighteen boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero as if he had just hit a grand slam and won the game for his team. "That day," said the father, with tears now rolling down his face, "eighteen boys reached their level of God's perfection."

Our work on oppression at the Unitarian Universalist Association we call the Journey Toward Wholeness and it is holy work that we try to do. I pray every day that we may find the will and the way to live out our faith in these times.



Bill Sinkford is President of the Unitarian Universalist Association.