

WHERE THERE IS NO VISION....
UJFP March 11, 2012

February 8, 2004 was the first time I attended a service at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Paris. To make sure we had the right place and time Donna, my wife, and I arrived early at the Foyer de l'Ame on rue du Pasteur Wagner, took a stroll through a nearby market, then managed to slip in and out of the service unnoticed. How many of you did that the first time? *Reconnaissance!* Five years passed. In October 2009 I could not slip in unnoticed; I was preaching. By then you had moved to the Temple de Pentemont, and had been here since 2008. Eight months later, in June 2010, I returned.

That time I was on the way to the 100th anniversary of the school I had attended in Switzerland, the *Ecole d'Humanite*. Leaving Paris I stopped in Basel to deliver a book reading for Centrepont, an ex-pat network. Moments before the reading was to begin, Lara Fuchs handed me an envelope. I slipped it into my pocket. Much later, having arrived at my friend's house and crawling into bed, I opened the envelope. It was a letter and this is what it said.

"Dear Mark,

The first part was about her visit with her mother, who is my colleague, Charlotte Cowtan. Then came the following: "...Basel has, throughout time, been a hub for integration, liberal thinking, philosophy, science, religion... What I can't figure out, is why there is no UU presence here. It would fit so well. This community practically cries out for the opportunity to have a more liberal religious option. I have spoke to so many people who are not being served by any church, but who crave the kind of spiritual community that UUism offers...

With your ...gift of understanding the challenges of not quite belonging... you are in a wonderful position to help to create and establish a Unitarian Universalist fellowship, here, in the heart of Europe... Would you consider doing a mission here? People are used to the cultural idea of a church, but so many have none to call their own. Would you help them? Help us?

With warm regards,

Lara Fuchs"

Her request moved me. I emailed her the next day: "It is a great and timely idea but I have to stew over it for a while." Stew I did and wrestle and fret and three weeks later I sent her a detailed plan. She would do some ground-work, networking, a feasibility study and I would come the following spring and speak with the group to explore going forward with a New Start. But then, in mid-August, before Lara had even responded, Dorcy Erlandson wrote to me. UJFP had heard from a young man, an ex-Anglican priest, who was interested in starting a congregation in Basel.

I felt joy, then panic. It was a good sign that independently two people felt Basel was a good place to start a congregation, but not a good idea to have two different efforts being launched at the same time. I wrote to the Mark Bowen, the former Anglican and discovered that he already had a website, rented space, and announced a worship service for September. I wrote Lara. She was away.

But, finally, they got together. They talked. September came. They organized a service. There were eight in attendance and lots of energy. So much for planning and feasibility studies: they were in the thick of it preparing for the next service and right afterward Lara headed off to the fall EUU Retreat.

Sometime events overtake you and you just have to cope. That what the Paris fellowship leadership discovered last fall when they were told your lease might not be renewed by your host congregation.

Of course, there was no wind of this when I preached here in March 2011. The workshop about ritual on Saturday and the worship service on Sunday were well attended, your pledge campaign was already 97% subscribed, the atmosphere was good. Afterward I again traveled from here to Basel.

Basel had progressed with miraculous speed. Instead of an exploratory meeting the Unitarian Universalist of Basel was already incorporated. Instead of an exploratory gathering we had a planning meeting with the leadership. The day before there were about 25 in attendance at a lecture I gave, and on Sunday there were 20 at the service. It began with lighting the chalice – a chalice lent to Basel by Paris; a chalice that had been given to you by the EUU in 1986; a chalice that is emblematic of your relationship to Basel: the heads-up from UUFP to me about Mark Bowen, the support and advice, the shared network, organizational documents and most importantly your shared values. A chalice that symbolizes passing on the flame of liberal religion. A chalice that bespeaks a vision.

“Where there is no vision the people perish.” I am sure you have heard this line from the Book of Proverbs before. It is not an accident that it is used so often. People are drawn to the theme of visions and dreaming because they are essential to our being, becoming and well-being. What are we without our dreams? We are lost; that can leave us feeling confused and angry, divided and despairing. But where there is a vision there is hope, and where there is hope we find the strength to continue.

On December 11, 2011 UUB held its Charter Sunday; there were 26 in attendance and 12 people joined. It was breathtaking to think that in a mere 18 months we had moved from a dream in an envelope to a correspondence to a conversation to a meeting to a worship service to a legal entity to a spiritual community. Twenty-six years earlier, in 1985, this fellowship had its first worship service. There were about 25 in attendance. By the time you moved into the *Foyer de l'Âme* in 1992 your average attendance was over 50 and by 2008 when you came here it was up to 80; not dramatic nonetheless steady growth. Meanwhile your attendance has grown sometimes to over 100, and David Usher has committed to come three times a year. But by January, it had become clear that from the perspective of the Temple de Pentemont the theological issues were insurmountable. UUFP would have to go.

Last May a book entitled *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism* was published. I edited it. It is the history of African Americans who were UUs. As I go around promoting that book I usually begin with a reading from the filmmaker, Henry Hampton. He wrote: “I am given to talking about dreams because dreaming separates us from other animals, other life forms. I have a favorite line from a play I read years ago, a Chaucerian drama. The line goes: “In dreams begins responsibility.” And indeed it's true. When you dream of something, you can begin to take it upon yourself, make it yours, change it. But you have to dream it first. And

Unitarian Universalists don't dream... You have to think of the world as you would really have it. I don't mean wish it, I mean *dream* it. And sometimes I think Unitarian Universalists wish more than they dream." Afterward I ask people what do they think the difference is between dreaming and wishing? People mention action, work and heart, vision, commitment and perseverance. Then I tell them that in every case in which UUs did not reach out to the African Americans who walked in our doors or were unwilling to help assist in founding African American liberal religious churches in Alabama and Oklahoma, Washington D.C, and New Bedford, Chicago and Cincinnati I can trace it to a failure to dream and a lack of vision. The UUA struggles today because of an opportunity missed over 150 years ago and many others missed since. They could not imagine that liberal religion had anything to say to black folks; much less that African Americans might contribute to it.

What that has to do with you is this: "Where there is no vision the people perish." If you cannot dream, if you cannot envision our faith making a difference in the lives of the people that come to this place, if you do not believe your presences in Paris is important, and if **we** do not believe the world needs the values that we uphold and give our lives to as Unitarian Universalism, then we should go home right now. Because without such conviction I have to ask: What are we doing here? Why bother looking for a new home?

Why? Because I believe the world needs a religion like ours, needs a faith that welcomes and celebrates diversity, that isn't afraid of difference, and remains steadfast in its affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person. A religious community that realizes freedom and tolerance must go hand in hand, that relies upon the democratic process to regulate our life together, and which realizes and loudly proclaims that we are all part of the interdependent web of all existence. Why find a new home? In order to reach all those individuals who seek a religious community where the creed that matters most is the one each of us creates in our hearts and lives with our lives. A place for those who say they are spiritual but not religious, so we can say you can be both when among us.

In those days when you first learned you had been rejected, and anger and anxiety reared up, David Usher came and preached 'We All Have Dreams.' He knew, at that moment, it was important for you to dream. Karen Kyker Frey, in response to his sermon wrote: "The idea I recall was that dreams are rarely realized in full, but it is not the fulfillment of the dream that makes life worth living, but the working toward it, often in community. And that if we have a dream that means something to us -- in this case, the dream of our UUFP community continuing and growing and perhaps having a home of our own -- then we cannot retire and wish for it, but we can and must step up and keep working to make it a reality."

"Where there is no vision the people perish." That is all I have come to say today, merely echoing David Usher and Karen Kyker Frey. You need a vision if you are to thrive. A vision makes being evicted from Temple de Pentemont an inconvenience rather than a crisis, an inconvenience that could perhaps turn into an opportunity, an inconvenience to look back upon some day and see as a turning point, a time of decision.

You know in your heart and mind the ideals and hopes that brought you into this religious fellowship. The dreams are yours to have, dreams that will evolve further as you live out your lives together in community. For in the end my dream is just my dream unless it is mixed with your dreams, merges with your hopes and yours and yours and yours and is reshaped in that process until who came up

with which idea fades from memory; until you are all ready to take the risk of doing something different – you have no choice.

Know this: ultimately our vision, the dream, is not a product – it is a process; it is the commitment we make to one another and to the future. So be it.

You need to know that you are not the first to have that vision. In the fall of 1962, when the Unitarian Universalist Association was just over a year old, Dana McLean Greeley, its president, and George Marshall, the minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) came to Paris and met with CLF members. In August 1963 John Kielty, secretary of the British Unitarian Association, met with nine members of a fellowship that had gathered in Paris. They had 70 contacts; had circulated a questionnaire and were meeting midweek at the *Foyer de l'Ame*. His article in the *Inquirer* asked it readers to submit the names and address of people living in Paris. Greeley visited the UUPF again in May 1965. At some point this first Paris fellowship died, but perhaps not completely. I understand that there was a group of Unitarian women that met informally at the Temple de Pentemont before the formation of UUFP.

When this congregation was formed in 1986 you were not the first to have this vision. You are the second incarnation of Unitarian Universalism in Paris. You gathered here are the stewards of both of those efforts. That is your 50-year-old legacy; the future, however, is in your hands. “The way is never easy, the path never clear” but that does not matter if you dream rather than wish, commit rather than simply desire – commit to the ideals and hopes that drew you into this religious fellowship.

“Where there is no vision the people perish.” You need to dream, and those dreams will evolve as you live out your lives together in community. A dream is just a wistful thinking unless spoken about and acted upon, but it builds strength as it is shared and one dream mixes with another, and merges with your hopes and yours and yours and is reshaped in that process until who came up with which idea fades from memory as did the existence of the first Paris fellowship. Ultimately the vision, the dream, is not a product – it is a process – your engagement with life. It is the commitment you make to one another, to our principles and to the future in nurturing and sustaining liberal religion in Paris.

Mark D. Morrison-Reed
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