

PRACTICING OUR HUMANITY

A Sermon by George Collins
President of the Congregation

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For the past month, as I leave my apartment each morning and return home at night, I've see the same poster on the wall of the Fourth Universalist Church at 76th Street and Central Park West. I realize that the words on the poster truly resonate with me. It contains a simple statement that defines a "church as a place where we get to practice what it means to be human." This sentence, from James Luther Adams, describes what All Souls is for me – a place where I get to practice over and over what it means to be human. James Luther Adams was a theologian that some consider to have been the leading UU voice of the 20th century. He spent a life-time as a minister known for struggling against racism, anti-Semitism, and poverty. Adams believed that our world demands the type of social and ethical outreach that is at the core of this church.

Practicing being human is what we do well at All Souls, and we are going to have to do it in a larger context as we grow and change. The growing part is for sure and the changing part is one that, if we manage it well it will mean that we will be even better at what we already do well. It is time for us to bring our energies to bear on transforming All Souls into a larger and even more vibrant church than it is today. It will be larger both in its role in our lives as well as larger in its ability to fulfill our future expectations.

This year we are in the process of looking within ourselves to find and articulate the mutually agreed upon future that we envision for All Souls. In order to manage our growth and to bring only those changes that we the congregation of All Souls collectively want, the Ministers and this Board of Trustees have taken the step of engaging the Alban Institute to manage the process of Discernment. This is a religious phrase for a blend of strategic planning and self-examination. We will be asked to be interviewed and asked to provide opinions concerning our views of how our lives together can

be enriched. Out of this process should emerge the actual changes that will help us manage our inevitable growth. The large number of new members that were celebrated at our recent New Member Service is just one reflection of our growth. We are among the four largest UU congregations in the U.S. and I'd like to think, the leading UU congregation for the ideas that are expressed from this pulpit and for the outreach efforts that we are involved in. I believe our growth is a reflection of the fact that we are good at being together in this sacred space.

Standing before you today, I'd like to describe some of the changes that I'd like this Unitarian Universalist Society embrace.

Perhaps a little personal history will set the stage. Marilyn and I found this church after we adopted our daughter Dana in 1994. We had been on a search to find a house of worship that shared our values. The congregation that we sought needed to be inclusive and diverse in its membership. We wanted a place where the members were trying to make a better world both in this city and for all mankind. We also wanted a place where our daughter's Chinese heritage would be respected.

Marilyn was raised Catholic but I resisted being associated with that religion (which was the one practiced by my family and relatives) until I found myself in the Marine Corps. There, facing the possibility of eminently meeting my maker, I thought it was a good idea to put a formal face on whoever runs whatever faces us for all eternity, and I called myself a Catholic. That identification lasted only so long as I was in uniform. Already my membership in this church has lasted far longer. It only took two sermons and a meeting with Forrest to convince us to become members. At that meeting Forrest gave us the name of another parent, Janine Veto, who had also adopted a daughter from China. We were sold. Janine has become a good friend. Later we learned that there were many more families with adopted children from China, South America and the US, with whom we could share our adoption experiences.

It has taken me the better part of a decade to get to a place where I am comfortable in speaking to you of my love for All Souls. The changes that I'd like to see at All Souls mostly involve us having a great deal more of the same things that we have now.

I'd like to see the time that it takes for a new member to truly become involved in this congregation and to share our many offerings

be much shorter. The path is known and is familiar ground to many of you. In our case, my family's path was in many ways the typical one at All Souls. As Forrest has often said, we are many small churches within one great church and the best way become involved is to join a few of the many groups that are the life of All Souls. In our case, my wife and I started out as Ushers, then Religious Education Teachers and now I share the honor of co-chairing Monday Night Hospitality with KerriAnn Flynn.

One way that we can compress the time that it takes new members to be part of the All Souls family is to convince everyone to join at least one group or attend one function on a regular basis. The jazz and poetry that comprise the Sunday All Souls at Sundown services are beautiful and an easy way to increase one's participation. Musica Viva is another way to be with us and to be entertained magnificently. Stories with Soul is another venue that entertains. Other activities such as our Friday Soup Kitchen, Monday Night Hospitality, the Girl Scouts and the Navigators, Religious Education, Heart & Soul, the UUSC, the Peace Task Force, the New Orleans Initiative, etc. ask for a greater commitment but return that commitment many times over. I know that I left out Interweave, the Women's Alliance and the Young Adults and as well as many other groups. It is almost impossible not to find a group that appeals to you but if you can't find one, start one. If each member of the congregation participates in one or more groups it will be easy to convince new members to join also.

For example, we now have a new group that is looking to make this church a "green church". This is another change that I'd like to see happen. We should be as green as we can – leading the way on recycling, energy use and reducing our carbon footprint. If this interests you, find out about this group and join them.

I'd like to have all our programs outgrow this space. I'd like to see the growth that has occurred in religious education doubled, such that we need to have more classrooms. This is my dream, my request. As an RE teacher give me 25 children in third grade to teach instead of 10 or 12. We are the ones that can make this happen by spreading the word among our friends, by having our children invite their friends to come with them on Sunday and by supporting this work at All Souls. After all, these children are our future. I can attest that the program works. It develops strong and confident UUs. Some become ministers like Alison Miller, but most go on in life to take the ethical

teachings that we impart into the secular world. They may or may not even remain practicing UUs but they will retain our heritage of being open to all religious views. Our children will take with them a respect for tolerance and religious diversity. My daughter, who is now in the high school Coming of Age program, recently commented that this UU faith is the religion of the future since it rejects violence and enables people keep their spiritual beliefs while they join with us in making the world a better place.

I'd like to see far greater diversity in our congregation. I'd like to look around and see more of the New York that I love reflected in our congregation. That means more African Americans, more Indians, more Asians and more Hispanics. This goal needs to be taken on by you, this congregation. A few far sighted members have spent time and energy on this subject and I encourage them to redouble their efforts. I ask all of you to be more inviting. I want to see every new face, regardless of the color of their skin or their heritage, welcomed by each and every one of us at coffee hour and in all of the other activities of this congregation.

This past week at Monday Night Hospitality, the children of the Religious Education program made a special effort to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr's Day with our guests. The Children's Choir entertained and the high school students provided thoughtful insights into the importance of the day by reciting excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches. The high school students then stayed to serve dinner. It was a heartwarming evening – a commitment to have our children understand that we value this Holiday and stand in awe of what one man did to make a dream of a better world more of a possibility than it was when he spoke those words. There will never be a doubt that this church values his work. If our children can welcome our Monday Night guests so eloquently, we can do the same for all our guests at Sunday services and other church events. Everyone needs to feel welcome.

I find it easy to get excited about changes that help the members of this congregation – all of us - to start to walk-the-walk and talk-the-talk. Perhaps it has taken me too long, but I now proudly wear a chalice pin on my jacket and talk to friends, clients and strangers about our church and why for me, it is a truly transformational experience. I want those pins sold at the book table (this is something that I can make happen). I want us to wear our faith and sell it – yes tell people why we come here and invite them to

join us. On Monday Night Hospitality we now have over 60 volunteers each week (it is worth coming just to see that many people serving and nurturing those in need). We talk openly with these volunteers about this church and invite them to services. Many attend and some have joined this congregation.

When the need for help rebuilding New Orleans became apparent, members of this congregation joined together to find ways to make a difference for that city. Right now there are All Souls members in New Orleans, a part of the latest contingent that has gone to help in the restoration effort. There are many other projects in need of our help and injustices that need correcting both here in New York City and around the world. I want to see more new groups formed and supported by this church. I want us to help with housing and medical issues for those in need. I want the elderly comforted by this congregation. I want to see the older children in our Religious Education program building a bridge with senior residents in a local nursing home – and making that bridge a permanent part of their education process.

I'd like us to have an All Souls Book Club and an All Souls Art Club – that supports the artists who exhibited in our first Heart and Soul Art show. I'd like to find a way that they can share their talents with our youth and interested adults. Perhaps with a different art class or instructor every month. Wally opened the choir loft to the piano students in our congregation. The event opened the eyes of these students to the ability of our pipe organ to take any piano score and fill this space with its music. I'd like to see even more music programs for our congregation – our two Steinways should get no rest.

I'd leave you with three requests – first that you think about the changes that you'd like to see. Examples might include greater diversity, more retreats, a church library, a book club, more intergenerational events, other ways to help our neighbors in need, a green church and missions that we can send our high school and college youth on. Think about an experience where our older youth could go and change something for the better, in another part of this country or the world. It is possible. We are at a moment in time where changes can and will be based on your desire to make this church even greater. The second request is that you participate in the

Discernment process. Every voice does count. Look to each month's Bulletin for the latest progress of this important effort.

The third request is to help our congregation grow. Bring friends on Sunday and take them to coffee hour and introduce them to other members. Find an Adult Education topic that will be of interest to a friend and invite them to join you. Or take them to a Sunday All Souls at Sundown event. I have started doing this and found the bonds of friendship have only grown stronger.

It has taken me almost a decade and a half to begin to understand how much this church and this faith have helped me to find myself. I encourage you to be active in our All Souls community and am certain that you can improve on my slow progress substantially. I love you, and now please join me in singing our final hymn, "What is our Church" which you will find in the Order of Service.