

Sabbath, Slow Food, Peace and other Counter-cultural Movements©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing
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There is a tension in this movement we call Unitarian Universalism. On the one hand, we are very "secular" I'm very proud of our worldly, secular humanist side. I think there are a lot of atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists who have no idea this church exists and might be a comfortable home for them. I long to introduce those people to our way of religion. We're very in this world and in some ways, you might say mainstream.

And we're a religion. Like people of all religions, we tend to think of ourselves set apart -- a little bit out there, difficult perhaps, or just different. We like to think of ourselves as radical and not so mainstream. Certainly, in the world of Western religion, to make room for atheism as an acceptable religious viewpoint, is a different perspective, heretical even.

And, however, sometimes when we are so in the world, so secular, we can forget what about our religion is religious. If we accept that a belief in God is welcome but not required, then- what makes this church a religion and not a social club? I think the answer lies in the reading by William Doherty, where he says, "welcome to the strange new world where being home for dinner is a radical act."

Though our religion may not obviously distinguish us from the marketplace or the rest of the world. Though we may not wear special undergarments like Mormons or yarmulke like Jews or hijab like Muslims, we nevertheless like to think of ourselves as set apart from the rest of the world. Some of us may associate it with our religion, but many may just think we're different and radical and this is a church where I can be like I am and be accepted - it's not because of our religion that we're different, but we choose this church because we're already feeling different.

I don't think it matters much one way or the other, my point is that I think the church should help us with those radical acts, such as the family dinner. Or voting. or reading. Church should be a counter-cultural institution. Challenging our most deeply entrenched and un-thought out ways. Religion should help us overcome oppression. Sometimes that mean it should help you develop the individual strength for a single courageous act, and other it times that means working with others to help change the conditions that make up that oppression - whether its our own or that which affects another.

This morning, I want to talk a little about three specific radical acts, counter-cultural movements, three ways I think we can help change the world. Sabbath, Slow Food, and Peace.

I'm starting with what I suspect is the hardest sell for the average Unitarian Universalist. Keeping the Sabbath. Keeping a Sabbath. Perhaps I am projecting that it's the hardest for you because it seems quite hard for me, even though you and I have great freedom in determining what those terms might mean to us.... keeping the Sabbath.

First of all, there are those for whom the day of the week that you keep Sabbath matters. I don't think that's the case for most of us. I think what is interesting about the concept of the Sabbath is the idea of "no work" - and depending upon your religious tradition, that can extend from no writing down anything on a piece of paper to not running a lawn mower or a car. Reading, however, has always been a welcome Sabbath activity. Scripture, of course, is preferred, but then in our tradition, scripture can refer to quite a broad spectrum of reading materials. Not talking on the telephone can be a Sabbath requirement, and not doing email certainly.

Often we see the traditional Sabbath as a list of things you are not to do, but I like the traditions that say you're supposed to enjoy yourself on the sabbath, cooking and sharing a meal, playing simple games with the family, or having sex with your partner. (really, it is a mandate in some religious traditions that if you are married you must have sex on the Sabbath)

I love the meditation about the snow day because I think many of us function that way. We won't give ourselves permission to take time out, to stop our busyness, but if Nature forces it on us, if it snows, we're so very grateful. I know several workers for the state of Michigan who feared a long-term government shut-down in October, but were terribly disappointed when the shutdown didn't even last long enough to stop their commute into work Monday morning.

There's no doubt that it's harder to keep Sabbath when your religious community doesn't require it of you and when secular society no longer expects it. You have to be very strong to keep the Sabbath without the support of those around you. It's a radical act. It's counter-cultural. I think we should both find the courage to take a Sabbath whenever we can, and we should work with others in the Take Back Your Time movement - seeking to restore balance to the American overwork ethic.

The second countercultural movement I want to talk about is Slow Food. I know I've mentioned it quite often during this year, when local activists have helped me change my shopping and cooking habits so that I am eating apples from Michigan and not Washington, pouring through heirloom seed catalogs this winter as I eat up all the canned food I prepared last fall. So what I want to talk about this morning, is not about how to buy foods grown a 100 mile radius from your home, or to cook everything from scratch. Rather, I want to make the point articulated by the Italian Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini, "what we are fighting for is the right to determine our own tempos."¹

As a society, we are out of balance. According to William Doherty,
"we work more hours than medieval peasants did. Interestingly, two disparate groups in the population are hit the hardest: managers who are forced to be married to their job, and the working poor who often have to work two or more jobs to make ends meet. The Microsoft effect and the Wal-Mart effect, if you will. In between are the millions of workers who are forced to work overtime hours they did not choose to contribute to their employer."²

The Microsoft effect and the Wal-Mart effect leaves no time for friends, family and food, the simple pleasures of life that take time. Instead, we grab what we can to eat to keep on working, and we feel trapped. We can get to a place where we neither enjoy our food nor enjoy our work, because of the time pressures upon us.

When I took the Localvore Challenge this summer, and my family tried to buy foods grown locally, we also decided to try to eat dinner together every night of the week. I think that was the challenge which had the greatest effect on our family. It may sound simple, but we regularly ate in shifts three nights a week - twice because I was had meetings at church and once because my husband had night commitments. I won't say we've succeeded in eating together every night of the week, but we have increased the number of times we eat together in a week. We sit down together, we enjoy our food, and we talk more. We've all grown in our palates. I eat beets now, a food I thought I despised since childhood, and have discovered are really quite - well, I won't go as far to say delicious to describe them, but they are tasty in a satisfying kind of way, especially when fresh and cooked right. Eating locally should have a positive effect on the planet, but eating together has had a very positive effect on our family. Let me tell you, just having decided that we were going to eat together provided us some freedom. I really would never have even considered asking my family to wait until 9:30 at night to eat with me until we talked it over this summer. And we did eat that late a couple of times. Now that we choose not to eat that late together, it really feels like a choice, and not a burden. I know that if I wanted, I could ask my family to wait until my meeting at church were over - and since I have that freedom and luxury, I don't need to.

"What we are fighting for is the right to determine our own tempos" says Carlo Petrini.

Peace is the last of the counter-cultural movements I think the church should advocate. It is quite counter to our culture to suggest non-violent means to our conflicts. Though we are not here in a war zone and personal violence is not commonly a daily experience for most of us in this room, it is for some, and it is certainly a factor in our larger community and world.

And I agree with Thomas Merton that activism and overwork is a pervasive form of contemporary violence. He says that "it destroys our inner capacity for peace because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

I always return to the fact that some of our greatest non-violent activists, Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, were scholars, very religious, and deep thinkers. You don't get that way overworking and overdoing - you get that way spending time in contemplation.

I think Merton's words are really quite radical. I think most of us don't think that committing ourselves to too many projects as violence, or wanting to help everyone and everything as violence, but let me read his words to you - you have them printed on the front of your order. He writes,

"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence, and that is activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

As a religious people, I think it is up to us to counter the pressures of our culture and determine our own tempos. We should go fast because we want to go fast, not because we have no choice. And we should slow down occasionally for rest and contemplation and connection, not because we're too sick to keep going.

What day is your Sabbath? When do you practice setting aside work and make time for rest and contemplation?

Which meal of the day do you enjoy the most? and why? Is it the food itself or the company you keep? Do you have a special meal in the week you look forward to and enjoy more than other meals? Why?

And how do you create peace in your life? Do you practice meditation? Do you have a mind-body practice that helps soothe you when inevitable conflict arises? Do you practice non-violent communication as best you understand it?

Peace, Slow Food, and the Sabbath: Three things that could change the world. In the meantime, while we're learning to practice them, if Nature could help us out, I wish for you all a snow day this week.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.

¹ September/October 2004 · www.uuworld.org *Savor life by slowing down at the table* by Sonja L. Cohen

² September/October 2004 · www.uuworld.org *Let's Take Back our Time* by William J. Doherty