

"What Do You Want?"
The Reverend Alison Hyder
January 18, 2001
The Unitarian Universalist Meeting House

Opening words: from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee:

Who?
Who am I?
Who am I to think?
Who am I to think I can?
Who am I to think I can change?
Who am I to think I can change the world?

Reading: by William Ellery Channing

To live content with small means;
To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;
To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;
To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;
To listen to stars and birds, to babies and sages, with open heart;
To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never;
To let the spiritual, unbidden, and unconscious, grow up through the common.
This is to be my symphony.

Sermon: "What Do You Want?" " - Rev. Alison Hyder

Every June several thousand Unitarian Universalists gather for a few days for our *General Assembly*. This is an opportunity for U Us to make friends across the country, to hear what's happening in other congregations, to learn from each other new approaches to running religious education programs, building closer congregations, reaching out to new members, and even making mistakes. We get to trade stories of our failures, learn from each other's blunders and oversights, as well as celebrate milestones and victories, the work of perseverance. It really is a wonderful thing to realize that we are not alone, that there are whole networks of congregations working for change, each making a difference in their communities. It is very exciting - and sometimes exhausting - to be with so many very thoughtful and very verbal people. They say that when most people die, they choose to go to heaven. Unitarians choose a discussion about heaven. Well, *General Assembly*, for some people, comes very *close* to that!!

Part of what happens at *GA* is that people from congregations across the continent debate and decide on various social justice issues. Every year congregations are asked to study and discuss some important problems and choose which ones they think that U Us as a denomination should try to focus on and address. The issues are on the table for a couple of years, and then one or two are voted on for special attention. This vote lets the folks at the Unitarian Universalist Association - our

President and Moderator, and the people who help design curricula and staff our political lobbying office in DC - know exactly what is important to us, and how to shape policy for us as an institution. And it also helps to unify us as a denomination. After all, each UU congregation is self-contained and self-governing. All that really keeps us together are our shared values and principles - an insistence on the search for truth and meaning in each of our lives. But focusing our attention on some common concerns increases our ability to address the problems with creativity and wisdom.

Last June, Dianne Kopser journeyed to Nashville to serve as our delegate to General Assembly. I've asked her to tell you a bit about the experience. She will also introduce the UUA's Study/Action Issue 1999-2001:

Responsible Consumption as a Moral Imperative

***Issue:** Irresponsible consumption endangers our future as it wastes raw materials and precious resources, depriving people in other countries as well as our own future generations. Can Unitarian Universalists and their congregations influence people to become more responsible in our consumption of resources?*

***Background and Reasons for Study:** The United States and Canada, although technologically advanced countries, are among the most materially wasteful societies in the world. We are caught up in a consumption treadmill that is morally questionable and that is not sustainable; yielding to the blandishments of the marketplace, we buy, build, and consume more than we require--frequently many times what we need. Many studies note the high per-capita consumption in the United States and Canada. The United States, for instance, is home to just five percent of the world's population, but it is responsible for 40 percent of the total consumption of global resources. In the last fifty years, the United States has consumed more resources than the rest of the world did in all previous history. Per-capita energy use in the United States is now as high as it was in 1973, the year before the "energy crisis". Landfills and waste management are among the top environmental concerns for local communities. Some economists have joined ecologists in suggesting that by the end of the twenty-first century, given our present rates of population growth and consumption, the entire world will be short of food, water, and housing for its inhabitants. Unitarian Universalists should take the lead in alerting consumers, business persons, and political leaders to the consequences that flow from aggressive and irresponsible personal consumption.*

*Here are some **Possible Study Questions** that we might consider: How might Unitarian Universalist congregations promote the current movement for voluntary simplicity? How can we harness our individual and collective purchasing power to encourage the sale of ecologically friendly and energy efficient services? How can businesses be encouraged to be better stewards of their products and to monitor the process from the extraction of raw materials to the disposal of the finished product? Can the Unitarian Universalist commitment to equity and justice for all be achieved by carefully challenging the level of our own consumption? How do government policies including zoning and land use decisions exacerbate injustices by locating disposal facilities near low-income neighborhoods? Why does the government subsidize new suburban housing developments with road and sewer construction that destroy farmland and open spaces when inner city neighborhoods need to be rebuilt?*

*These are some of the **Possible Actions** various congregations proposed: As consumers we could use our buying power to redirect the economy toward producing goods of greater quality and longer life span, as well as toward new technologies that allow us to conserve the resources of the world and ensure their fair distribution at home and abroad. Whenever we consider buying a new item, we could pause to reflect whether we need it. At home, we could turn off many of our electric gadgets. Once a month, we could practice a "day of simplicity" during which we minimize our consumption of electricity. Once a week, we could take public transportation to school or work. When buying a new vehicle, we could reject fuel-inefficient Sport Utility Vehicles and purchase more fuel-efficient models. Our adult and children's Religious Education curricula, sermons, music, and liturgy could be used to challenge the morality of materialism and instead promote responsible ways of life.*

Of course, the irony is that this question was being proposed in a huge air-conditioned convention hall, by people who drove and flew hundreds of miles to attend 5 days of discussions, parties and worship, to see old friends and buy books and chalice pins and bumper stickers. Many went home much the better for it - excited, attuned, and recommitted to our Unitarian Universalist movement. *GA* feeds the soul and unites us a denomination. And despite some discussion of the prohibitive cost of attending, and all the money and resources it takes, *General Assembly* is an annual UU tradition. This June it is in Cleveland, next year in Quebec City. Which just goes to prove how difficult it is to decide what is a luxury, and what is necessary in our current culture.

For most people in the United States, an SUV is a luxury, a status symbol, something that makes them feel young and adventurous. This is *not* your mother's station wagon. And yet there are plenty of people here in Truro and Wellfleet and Provincetown whose homes are barely accessible without 4-wheel drive. The research that drove microchips for computer games and cell-phones is also supporting new styles of pace-makers and hearing aids. In other words, for every frivolous new gadget there is usually a serious application. But often it's the money spent developing the techno-toy for consumers that comes first, that drives the advancements. If we all hadn't wanted color TVs and cordless phones in our homes, we probably wouldn't now have MRIs and laser surgery. Even artists have benefited by new technologies, whether it's acrylic paints or sculpey or digital documentation of our work. The world may be going to hell in a hand-basket, but it sure is an exciting ride.

Of course, there is very little that we need. People survive on so little - shelter, food, something to drink, a few things to wear. But mere survival is hardly what we are after. We want our lives to have meaning - and not just after we die, but now, every day. We want to *feel* fulfilled, feel worthwhile.

And what if your fulfillment comes from the excitement of learning how to drive a racing car ever faster and more precisely, or from expanding the limits of human knowledge, challenging yourself day after day while developing an atom bomb? Or just writing a very witty but really totally unnecessary romance novel? The world doesn't need any of these things. They waste time and energy that should be spent on more useful and affirming things, things that save lives, feed the poor, or at least don't endanger us further. But people create, people work because it is stimulating, because we learn something about ourselves in the process. We feel useful and good. We rarely think about the long-term consequences.

It sounds like I am trying to justify our culture of excessive consumption. Well, I don't know that I can. It is extreme and thoughtless and totally arbitrary. But condemnation is not so easy either, not for me. I am not ready to stop buying plastic storage containers or videos or the occasional new coat. I like my breadmaker.

The challenge for all of us is learning how to be more aware of the process. How are our running shoes made, and by whom? What corporations are subsidized by our tax dollars? How is our food grown and handled? We need to educate ourselves before we buy, and bring our values and compassion to the marketplace. We have to use whatever power we have as consumers to build lives, and nurture community.

This is a task that we can share, each bringing information and resources from the internet, from magazines and our favorite causes and agencies. Over the next few months, we will be examining these issues, in sermons and discussion groups. We hope you will join us. Eleanor Roosevelt said: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world...Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere."

Closing Words: From Martin Luther King, Jr.

...Everyone passionately seeks to be well-adjusted... but there are some things in our world to which [those] of goodwill must be maladjusted. I confess that I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive [people] of work and food, ad to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effect of physical violence. Human salvation lies in the hands of the creativity maladjusted.

