

## **THE EXPEDITER**

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Across the street from the United Nations headquarters in midtown Manhattan, in the midst of all the bustle of diplomats' cars, foreign languages, and urgent official business stands a tall building called the Church Center. This building houses offices for dozens of religious groups. Each of these offices is the official voice of its faith to the United Nations. The Methodists have an office, the Presbyterians have an office, American Baptists have an office. And amazingly enough, Unitarian Universalists have our own office there as well. It's called the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office or UU-UNO for short. Our very own Marilyn Mehr, a member here at All Souls, is the President of the Board.

Through the UU-UNO, our tiny little denomination actually has a voice in international affairs. It's incredible when you think about it. And this little group is ambitious to say the least. They're currently fighting the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda, working to educate and protect African children affected by AIDs, wrestling problems of gender-based violence in Sudan, and (as if that weren't enough) the big new initiative right now is combating climate change. Jan Dash is the head of this initiative and he actually went to Copenhagen with a document put together by the UU-UNO and other groups advising governments on how to reduce global warming. He was able to get this document into the hands of several important players at the Copenhagen conference. Like I said, they're ambitious. They are "the little engine that could" and they represent us, Unitarian Universalists.

But to me, the most important work of the UU-UNO does not lie in any of the specific projects they take on. The true power of their work lies in the fact of boldly asserting liberal religious values in the public sphere. When the UU-UNO takes public action, it is

effectively saying to the world: We are acting directly out of our religious convictions as Unitarian Universalists. It's not a coincidence – we don't just happen to be Unitarian Universalists who also happen to care about these issues. In our world, this is still pretty rare. Public liberals still tend to distance themselves from religion. Religious liberals tend to distance themselves from politics. The term “faith-based” still implies conservative.

We are accustomed to hearing conservative religious values asserted in the public sphere. It is conservative religious values that tell us that same-sex couples should be excluded from legal marriage. It is conservative religious values that tell us that women should be forced to carry unwanted or unsafe pregnancies to term. Conservative religious values sometimes even tell us that the earthquake in Haiti was caused by a pact that the Haitians made with the devil. Conservative religious values remain conspicuously silent as to our own role in the poverty and poor infrastructure that exacerbated the damage so tragically. These faith-based perspectives are in the public sphere to stay. They are loud, they are clear and they are not going away.

Liberal religious people are often wary of mixing religion and politics, fearing that the separation of church and state is threatened already with this onslaught from the religious right. And I certainly agree that in the Constitutional sense, church and state, religious and political institutions should remain separate. Money should not flow from one to the other. Religious groups should not have any official influence in public policy.

But whatever the law may be, the fact will remain that religious groups *do* have a special influence. They represent the conscience of the nation and the hearts and deepest aspirations of the people. And so when people speak *as* religious people, their words have a special gravitas and power. When liberal religious people refuse that power on the grounds that the source of our beliefs should be kept private, we miss out on a tremendous opportunity to affect change in our world. And we gain nothing in return. Because as Rabbi Michael Lerner once said, “If you try to keep religious values out of the public sphere, all you succeed in doing is keeping your own religious values out of the public sphere.”

Religion is political and I believe that all the business decisions and political decisions we make as a society are theological at their root. What I mean by this is that all decisions are ultimately based on our deepest sense of how the universe works, what ends justify what means, and why we are here on this planet. Whether or not we consciously think about theology and values in making business and political decisions is irrelevant; they inform our actions anyway. You can't extract values from the public sphere. Our values and the worldly expression of those values *constitute* the public sphere. We may like to think that the work that we do is somehow value neutral, but I don't believe that it ever is.

I was at a party over the holidays and I was chatting with this guy who was sitting next to me at dinner. He asked me what I did for a living and I told him and he was very interested in that and we talked for a little while about what it's like to be a minister. And then I asked him what he does for a living.

He said, "I'm an expediter."

"What exactly *is* an expediter?" I asked.

"I help companies do their business. I mostly handle violations."

"What do you mean violations?"

"Well," he said, "I hate waiting in line. So I usually don't get permits for stuff. My client just does their thing and if they get a violation for it I'll try to buy them more time or get it waived or whatever they need."

"So" I said, "it's better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission?"

"It's better to not get caught," he said.

"Do you enjoy your work?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's pretty good," he said. "I get to do all kinds of violations – environmental, health, a broken elevator. Whatever it is."

I was appalled! I had always assumed that expediters actually make things more efficient and solve problems, not enable companies to avoid fixing broken elevators. I wanted to say to him, "So in other words, you help broken things stay broken." But he was so matter of fact, so un-ashamed about the whole thing, I said nothing. It was just

what he did for a living. No different, in principle, from what I did for a living. Value-neutral. This is business in our world. It's just playing the game. You hire this guy to grease the wheels and un snag you from any snags your business encounters. Whatever they may be. Doesn't matter. Keep the flow of goods and services moving expeditiously no matter what.

Although it may not seem like it at first, this business model is based on a fearful, fire-and-brimstone theology. Not necessarily fearful of the next life, but fearful of *this* one. It teaches that the world is a dangerous place. It's dog-eat-dog out there. If you let yourself get sentimental about people's feelings or the fuzzy polar bears or some starry-eyed idea of justice, you will be trampled. Allow yourself to get slowed down by ethical concerns, and you will get left in the dust by everyone else who isn't slowing down for anything. You've got to look out for #1. It's a matter of survival.

I believe that liberal religion, especially Unitarian Universalism at its best, presents an alternative theology and an alternative set of values. Our Universalist faith teaches that we are all saved and no one is going to hell. That in a deep, fundamental sense, we are not in danger. There is an abundance of grace, not a scarcity. One does not have to succeed at the expense of another. There is enough food, there is enough water, there is enough heaven to go around if we but share it.

Our Unitarian faith teaches of a fundamental oneness of the universe – that we are all truly interconnected parts of a single living body. When one part of the body is in need, the whole body is impoverished. A tragedy for Haiti is a tragedy for all of us. It would never be acceptable to maintain a trade embargo for political purposes, as the U.S. did in the 90's, if innocent people were suffering as a result. And it would never make sense to leave an elevator broken for one's immediate financial gain because our brothers and sisters ride that elevator.

Many liberal religious institutions are content teaching their visions of oneness and justice in church and hoping that there will be a trickle-down effect into politics and business. And in fact, there *is* some trickle-down effect – there are businesses and

politicians who are ethical and who think about the long-term impact of their actions on the natural and human world. But sadly, these more idealistic companies and politicians are in the minority. You need only look at the destruction of our environment, the collapse of our economy, and the extreme poverty of countries like Haiti to know that this is true.

I believe that our liberal religious organizations need a much stronger voice in the public arena if real change is going to happen. We need to be loud and clear about our values, just as religious conservatives are about theirs. We need organizations that offer alternative faith-based voices. The UN-UNO is one such organization that, *on religious grounds*, fights for gay people in Uganda and women in the Sudan. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, *on religious grounds*, provides birth control and sex education to teens. The Jewish group J-Street, *on religious grounds*, challenges Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

These are voices that say that expediency is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is a healthy planet earth and peace and justice for everyone. This will not always be in the immediate best interest of Americans. It's not politically expedient, it's not financially expedient. It involves protecting people who have no political influence. It involves protecting our environment, even though businesses will lose money in the short run.

There are a thousand ways to join these religious voices for change – getting involved with the UU-UNO is a great way. Find something that suits your skills and your passions. But however you do it, I urge you to do it.

If you feel moved to help out in Haiti, I hope you will, and I hope you made a contribution during our offering earlier. There will be lots to do over the coming weeks and months and I encourage you all to get involved. But even once this crisis has passed, once the wreckage has been cleared away, the wounded have been tended, and the dead have been buried, the elevator will still be broken. Haiti will still be a country in which 80% of people live in abject poverty, where babies routinely die at birth, and children remain malnourished. It will still be a country in which only half the people can read

and most people can expect to die around age 52. It will still be a country that doesn't have the infrastructure to weather a future earthquake any better than it did this one.

As religious liberals, we believe that not God nor Satan nor the Haitians themselves caused this suffering. And there is good evidence that our own country's policies have played a role. And so it is our job, not only to respond to this crisis, but to say, "We are *not* the Expediter and we will not enable broken things to remain broken." It is up to us to look at the root causes of suffering in the world through the lens of our theologies that tell us that things can and should be fundamentally different.

Dr. MLK famously said that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." This is the great hope of liberal religion – that in the long run, goodness will prevail here on earth. It is our work as humans to expedite that day. The proper trajectory of the universe is toward wholeness and healing. And when we build and heal in accord with our highest ideals we participate in this trajectory of the universe. If we are right, and the Expediter is wrong, then in the end justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We will all finally know that there is more than enough heaven to go around.