

“Life on the Edge,”  
a sermon preached by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist  
on Sunday, January 6, 2008

*On Friday I went to hear Barack Obama speak in Portsmouth. And he said something that really struck me. He said, “If you know who you are, then you can reach out to others; you can try to find some common ground.” Put another way, If you know who you are, you can hear someone speak from their own context, and you can hear the truth of what they are saying, even if they are using words that you yourself wouldn’t use. One of our jobs as religious liberals is to become able to translate and interpret in order to make meaning. So in that spirit I share with you a reading that has moved me. I hope it will move you. For some of you the God language will be a barrier—I encourage you to interpret in ways that let you hear the message in this reading. These are the words of the Methodist minister Ted Loder, a prayer called “Pry Me Off Dead Center”:*

O persistent God,  
deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle.  
Pressure me that I may grow more human,  
    not through the lessening of my struggles,  
    but through an expansion of them  
    that will undamn me  
    and unbury my gifts.  
Deepen my hurt  
    until I learn to share it  
    and myself  
    openly,  
    and my needs honestly.  
Sharpen my fears  
    until I name them  
    and release the power I have locked in them  
    and they in me.  
Accentuate my confusion  
    until I shed those grandiose expectations  
    that divert me from the small, glad gifts  
    of the now and the here and the me.  
Expose my shame where it shivers,  
crouched behind the curtains of propriety,  
until I can laugh at last  
    through my common frailties and failures,  
    laugh my way toward becoming whole.  
Deliver me  
    from just going through the motions  
    and wasting everything I have

which is today,  
a chance,  
a choice,  
my creativity,  
your call.

O persistent God,  
let how much it all matters  
pry me off dead center  
so if I am moved inside  
to tears  
or sighs  
or screams  
or smiles  
or dreams,  
they will be real  
and I will be in touch with who I am  
and who you are  
and who my sisters and brothers are.

Every month our church Board of Trustees meets on the third Tuesday. The agenda is often full; the meetings are often long. Each month Rev. Lee, Gail, and I make a report to the board. It's a chance to let the leadership know what we've been working on, what we're concerned about, how we think things are going. In November I began my report by saying, "We're in an interesting time at North Parish, and it will likely get even more interesting in the coming months!" I said I had expected this fall would have been a time of great joy and feelings of accomplishment with the completion of our renovation project and move back into our beautiful church building. But it hasn't felt that way-- there has been a sense of unrest, at least among some of you, about a number of different issues.

A vital part of our tradition is the fact that you, the members of the congregation, get to decide about the big things—who you call to serve as your ministers, what we spend our money on, the rules by which we operate. It's your church. Today I want us to consider what I see as both a spiritual and an organizational question—how do we stay in community with those we disagree with and with those we are different from? How do we act when things don't go our way? My sense is this is an area in which we need to grow. And I have an idea of how we can do that.

My working title for this sermon was “To the Margins.” But my wife told me that was too directive—and she’s usually right. But if one of you just happened to ask me, “How might we grow as a community? In which direction should we be heading?” I would have an answer. And it would be, “To the margins.”

I believe that to the extent we are able to do this—to acknowledge and embrace the places where we ourselves are in the minority, we will be able to connect with others and be together as a community, even when we disagree.

But for many of us this isn’t easy, because we tend to see the margins as bad and the center as good. If you doubt this, let’s think about language for a minute. If I tell you something “is marginal,” do you hear that as a good thing? When I typed the word “marginality” into the thesaurus of my word processing software, it said that marginality can mean eccentricity, and has synonyms like oddness, weirdness, and peculiarity. And do you know what it says the antonym of marginality is? Normality. There is certainly a linguistic bias against marginality.

I read a book several years ago called *Marginality* that changed my perspective and helped me to begin to see the margins not as something to be avoided, but rather as a place of creativity and energy. Listen to what its author, a Korean-American named Jung Young Lee, says about the tension between the center and the margins:

“The inclination to be at the center seems to be an intrinsic human drive. In the history of civilization, the center attracted humanity more than any other thing in the world, for the center has been understood as the locus of power, wealth and honor. This inclination has been and is a powerful drive in building civilizations, while it remains a destructive power in creating injustice. Many religious founders, such as Jesus, Lao-tzu, and Buddha, attempted to provide a means of freeing humanity from the idol of centrality, but the inclination to be at the center persists.”

It’s in our nature to seek the center. But it’s in our interest to move the other way, toward the margins. That’s what the great religious traditions all tell us to do, and warn us that we lose our way when we forget that, and put ourselves at the center. Do you know that

the Buddha was not born as an enlightened being? He was a Prince, named Siddhartha, who lived a privileged and protected life. His long journey toward enlightenment began when only he left the sheltered walls of his family's palace and for the first time was exposed to the reality of illness, death and suffering.

In the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible, Moses says to the people of Israel that God is one who “. . . executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.” Then Moses says, “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:17-19). In that patriarchal society, the orphan and the widow represented those who were the most vulnerable. The Hebrew scriptures say God is partial to those at the margins, and therefore people of faith are called to care for them too.

And Jesus certainly carried on this tradition in his ministry, which was oriented not toward those with religious or political power, but rather toward the poor and the outcast, to those he called, “the least of these.”<sup>1</sup> We are called to be allies, to use our privilege to help those at the margins.

You've probably heard the old adage about the three most important factors in real estate: “location, location, location.” Today I ask you to consider a different kind of location—the place from which you live your life. The assumptions you make, the ways you act based on where you were born, and to whom, what color your skin is, what gender and class you are, what your sexual orientation, and educational level, and physical abilities are. I'm talking about what's called social location—which is just the cumulative facts of one's identity based on those things I just named.

In seminary we talked a lot about social location, and we were challenged to identify whether we were in the privileged or the marginalized place in a number of categories. Gender, for example: men still have it easier than women in our culture. It's a fact that men get paid more than women for the same work. Even though there are more women in the UU ministry now than men, I suspect that men don't have to face some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

challenges and subtle discrimination women do. I am someone who belongs to all of the major oppressor groups. I'm white, male, heterosexual and married, financially secure. I'm able-bodied and middle-aged--at least for now.

And yet I know a little something about being at the margins. As a UU student in an Episcopal seminary, I was in a small minority there. As a UU who talks about God and Jesus, who attended a liberal Christian seminary, I find myself at the theological margins of our tradition. Because of this, there are some churches that would not consider me when searching for a minister. I know some of you are uncomfortable, unhappy even, with my theology. There is an opportunity here—for dialogue, for sharing of experience, for growth—but I have to say there is also, for me, a sense of vulnerability.

Though I am not marginalized in any of the major categories, I do know something about suffering, loss and heartache. We all experience places where we are marginalized, to some degree or another. Might we see these experiences of being vulnerable as gifts in disguise? As ones that open us up to our humanness, and to one another?

I want to encourage you to identify your own social location, the places where you are privileged, and the places you aren't. This is not about being a victim, it is about being clear about who you are and where you stand, about being able to name and claim your whole self. Because if you know who you are, you can reach out to others.

This is work best done with others, and the anti-racism/anti-oppression work our Social Action Committee is planning for this year will be a great opportunity to do this. In my experience, it is liberating, empowering, and life-changing work.

At my seminary there was a focus on feminist liberation theology. In brief, this is a way of reading scripture and doing theology that listens more closely to the voices that have historically been repressed or underrepresented. It says that those who have been marginalized actually have a better view of the situation than those at the center. For example, if we were going to have a conversation about race, then those of us who are

white ought to acknowledge at the outset that we can learn from the experiences of people of color, and we should listen to what they have to say, even when it makes us uncomfortable. Likewise, if we were going to have a conversation about the equal marriage issue, then we should listen to the stories of gay and lesbian folks, and acknowledge that they know more about this than straight folks do.

We're just starting up some new small groups here. What makes these groups work is that everyone gets equal time to speak—those who find it easy to speak up are not permitted to dominate the group, and those who are shy are given the time and space to share their experiences. I wonder if we might try to bring this awareness to all our meetings; to pay attention to who is speaking and who isn't, to make sure there is room at the table for everyone.

A chance conversation I had with one of you this week reminded me of the power of religious community. This person said that his experience of being welcomed for who he is, knowing he is loved and accepted here, helps him to get through tough situations he sometimes faces as a gay man, because he knows that this is a place where he will always be welcome, a place where his spirit will be renewed.

I encourage you to see the margins not as a place to be avoided, but rather as that interesting place on the edge. At the coastline it is what's called the inter-tidal zone—the place that is under water about half the time and exposed to light and air the other half. On a farm the margins are the edge of the cultivated field, where the plow and harvester don't reach. In nature the margins are often the places of diversity, the places where growth and change happen. We are located here in the Olde Center of North Andover, but I say to you that we are called to leave the center, in body and in spirit, and journey to the margins. We are called to life on the edge.

I'll end by saying to you what I said to the Board in November--that this is a critical year in the life of this congregation. This year the North Parish will make some decisions about whether it intends to continue on the course it set for itself in the 2002 Strategic Plan, or whether it's time to change course. It is a critical year for both **listening** and **leadership**. It is important that we provide opportunities for listening to each other in

order to discern the will of the congregation at this time. And it is important that the leaders of this congregation articulate our vision for the future. What I've found disheartening about some of the criticism lately is that it seems to be saying, "The church is not meeting my needs, and so I want things to change."

Of course the church exists to serve its members **to some degree**. But if that is the only reason we exist, then we are nothing better than a social club in a pretty building. **The church exists to call people to serve causes larger than themselves**, and to provide ways for people to answer that call. We need to remember that we are a church, and we need to act like it.

This means speaking the truth to each other in love, rather than spreading inaccurate information or encouraging factionalism. It means putting our money where our mouth is. It means voting with our feet; making choices about how we want to participate in this community, and showing up regularly, and inviting our friends to come too.

It's our nature to seek the center. But we are called to life on the edge.

"O persistent God, let how much it all matters pry me off dead center  
so if I am moved inside to tears or sighs or screams or smiles or dreams  
they will be real  
and I will be in touch with who I am  
and who you are  
and who my sisters and brothers are."

Amen.