

**“Top 9 Religious Stories of 2009 (And one local story to carry us into 2010)”**

I was reminded on New Year’s Day,  
 While reading the final column of retiring Globe columnist Ellen Goodman,  
 Whom I love,  
 That January is named for the Roman god of beginnings and endings,  
 A god who could look backward and forward at the same time.  
*“It’s hard to recognize that life isn’t a holding action, but a process”* wrote Ellen on Friday,  
 Invoking this spirit of looking backward and forward.  
*We don’t leave the best parts of ourselves behind us in the past.  
 Rather, we own what we learned back there,  
 And the experiences and the growth are grafted onto our lives.  
 And when we move onto something new, we can take ourselves along –  
 Quite gracefully.’*  
 Her words speak to me on this first Sunday morning of a new year,  
 of a new decade (after a hard decade),  
 of sabbatical farewells,  
 And of using this sermon time to look together at the past year’s top religious headlines.  
 What will become in this new year?  
 Will religion, on balance, heal more than hurt?  
 Can we, as Wendell Berry asks in our reading,  
 by something everyday that doesn’t compute?  
 I believe we only look forward with these questions unless we also look back.  
 Here then, are my choices for the top 9 religions stories of 2009,  
 With one local story to carry us into 2010.  
 Please note that the captain has just turned on our seatbelt sign.  
 It was a sometimes turbulent year.

**10) :** *Remember the inauguration of Barack Obama all the way back in January?*

*The speech and spectacle were pretty good t.v., but just as noteworthy  
 To me were the prayers before and after.*

To take us back: We’ve all heard about the bumper sticker that asks ‘What would we Jesus do?’  
 Leading up to the ceremony, the question on many people’s minds was:  
 ‘Who will the new president choose to lead us in prayer?’  
 For the pre-ceremony prayer, sort of the pre-prayer prayer, Obama

Invited by the gay Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson, whose sexual identity  
 Has sparked a battle royal between the progressives and conservative movements  
 In the global Anglican church. “*O God of our many understandings,*” is how Robinson began,  
 and with U2 in the background and Obama and family before him,  
 Robinson began the kind of prayer I wished I had written. It was lovely.  
 And then, for the premiere invocation slot, Obama shifted gears and shifted party bases by  
 inviting megachurch pastor Rick Warren, an evangelical Christian and  
 vocal opponent of gay marriage who also leads a broad coalition of religious  
 conservatives and progressives to address issues like global warming and the devastation in  
 Africa from AIDS, making him hard to peg.  
 All along I kept wondering:  
 did Rick Warren and Gene Robinson hang out at all before the ceremony? And if so, what did  
 they say?

And then, for the benediction, a different direction all-together when the African-American  
 Civil rights pastor Joseph Lowery who ended saying “*O God of our weary years, and our silent  
 tears, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get back, when  
 brown can stick around -- (laughter) -- when yellow will be mellow -- (laughter) -- when the red  
 man can get ahead, man -- (laughter) -- and when white will embrace what is right.*”  
 And while the theology in these prayers and of these pastors doesn’t completely fit my own,  
 And while I resist and refute Warren’s views on gay marriage,  
 And while I wish Gene Robinson had gotten a bigger stage  
 (though he did get to share the stage with U2)  
 I was impressed that day how these different religious voices revealed our country’s religious  
 pluralism and dynamic religious diversity.  
 Indeed, for the first time ever even those who don’t claim a religion, or who call themselves  
 atheists, were acknowledged in the President’s speech.  
 Watching it all I found myself reminded of our UU motto,  
 coined from Francis David back in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century,  
 That we need not think alike or pray alike to love alike.  
 When we’re at our best, I believe it’s a sentiment our country shares, too.

9): *America goes church shopping.*

As covered by Time Magazine in the spring,  
 an April report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 44% of  
 adults in the U.S. have changed faiths at least once.

Some converted from one religion or denomination to another;  
 Others grew up with no tradition only to adopt one as an adult;  
 Others left their childhood faith and found themselves with no religious home.

Says Time: *'more than anything, the findings confirm that a stubborn, insistent strain of religiosity continues to linger in America.'*

Even the secular fundamentalists like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens  
 Display an almost religious zeal in their anti-religion rhetoric.

Knowing that I am about to travel to the United Kingdom,  
 Where like the rest of the world religion is often as assigned heritage  
 Rather than a chosen preference,

I appreciate the uniquely American spirit that encourages us to seek  
 Out and choose our spiritual home rather than simply inherit it from  
 Our families or culture around us.

It means that when I see you come here on Sundays I know you are here not out of  
 Obligation or guilt – that you come because you are choosing this faith  
 And choosing this congregation.

It also means that while we should never strive to be all things to all people,  
 We as a movement and a church do need to remember that folks come to us  
 Seeking spiritual nourishment, and if we don't feed them they will go somewhere else.

#### 8) *Abortion – the issue that keeps on keeping on.*

Ever since Roe V. Wade, the issue of abortion has sent fault-lines across  
 Our national landscape, creating cracks in almost everything we talk about,  
 With few examples of healthy dialogue or compromise.

In 2009 this was especially true:

Earlier this year President Obama receives an honorary degree and gives the commencement  
 speech, provoking fierce debates at the Catholic university over Obama's views on abortion.

Around the same time, Dr. George Tiller, regarded as the country's leading abortion doctor,  
 is gunned down on a Sunday morning while serving as an usher at his Wichita Lutheran Church.

This fall the Catholic Bishop of Rhode Island, Thomas Tobin, asks U.S. Rep Patrick Kennedy to  
 refrain from taking communion because of his position supporting a woman's right to choose.

Meanwhile, the health-care reform moving its way through Congress is repeatedly stalled and  
 held virtually hostage to the question of abortion funding.

I'm wondering: Is this our fate? Are we doomed to argument and opposition and even violence  
 on this issue? Is the best we can do?

I don't make many resolutions, but one promise I am making to myself is to engage some of my colleagues in ministry, including the Catholic priests and sisters that I know,

In at least one open conversation on the issue.

It won't be much, but I really don't know where else to start.

I'll let us know how it goes.

### *7) Secularism named the new bully on the playground*

This is mainly a European story, but I found myself getting so worked by it

That I needed to vent by putting this at #7.

In Strasbourg, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the crucifix

Hanging on the walls of many Italian schools is a violation of educational freedom – Fair enough, we're all thinking. But wait.

In France the same sentiments toward

Secularism lead President Nicholas Sarkozy to urge members of Parliament

To consider banning the Muslim Burqa in public,

saying that 'France has no place for the Burqa.'

Then the European Parliament voted to widen anti-discrimination laws,

which if enacted will require all churches, schools, and social services to open their membership to those who do not share their beliefs

(I'm thinking: so Jewish synagogues need to talk about Jesus? And Christians can't? And Muslims can't wear their preferred clothes? This is silly.)

And finally, in November, the Swiss vote to prevent the building of mosques with minarets, deeming them 'symbols of Islamic nationalism.'

What's going on here? I say, Doth protest too much.

I say, it seems like Secularism is covering for anti-Muslim rules.

I say, Rather than strip everyone down to their least common denominator,

Why not say the beauty of diversity is seen when you actually notice

And learn from one another's differences.

I say: Lighten up, Europe! And let a little religion back in.

### *6) The Recession's silver lining*

10% unemployment. 25 million Americans seeking food assistance from the government.

Home foreclosures. Retirement savings nearly wiped out.

Silver lining? Am I serious?

You don't need me to tell us about the pain this recession has caused.

Those stories everywhere in our midst.

Less known are the stories that tell us how volunteerism has increased  
 Over the last year, with both the employed and unemployed rediscovering  
 The spirit of service to others.  
 One third of congregations across all denominations have experienced a decline in giving,  
 But what's even more remarkable is that two-thirds have reporting no decline,  
 And some even an increase.  
 And a Gallup poll of 145 nations reported in December that those who attended  
 A religious service of any kind in a given week had higher rates of generosity  
 This year than those who did not (Take that, Europe!).  
 During an unprecedented time of difficulty, the silver lining for religion  
 This past year is that our participation in faith communities helps us ask  
 Questions of sacrifice and service, they empower us with calls toward generosity,  
 And they provoke us toward considering 'the least of these.'  
 While a dangerous and religiously radical few make their headlines,  
 The quiet majority have used this recession to discover opportunities to live  
 Out the healing, helping message of our religious faith.

Now for some turbulence.

### 5) *Religious Conservatives Unite!*

A Time magazine article I read framed this story this way:

"Nearly five centuries after Henry VIII left the Roman Catholic Church  
 And took his country with him, Pope Benedict announces that he is creating  
 A way for disaffected Anglicans – many of whom oppose the ordination  
 Of gay and lesbian priests – to come back into the fold while maintaining  
 Some of their unique religious identity.

Many critics charge that the move was simply a way to encourage full-fledged  
 Schism within the Anglican Communion's 80 million members.

"*I don't want to be Catholic,*" said one American Anglican Bishop.

"*There was a Reformation, remember.*"

I am bothered by the Pope's move for this reason: Communities of Faith  
 are called communities because they call us to be in community with people  
 not of our own choosing.

Clubs are what we join when we want to be together with people we like.

But communities are what we join when we respond to the call to care about

People we may not particularly care for.

The Pope's offer to the conservative Anglicans lures them from doing the difficult, Messy work that communities, communions, and denominations require.

Not that they would listen to me, but I hope the Anglicans will say, '*thanks, But no thanks.*'

#### 4) *Health-Care Reform.*

Death-panels. Senator Ben Nelson from Nebraska. Senator Joseph Lieberman.

The immortal words shouted at the President while talking about his proposal: "You Lie!"

Abortion funding. Medicare donut-holes. Threats of rationed care.

1a.m. votes on the Congress floor. Filibuster.

Sigh.

We call could be forgiven for tuning this whole debate out,

For paying more attention to the release of the Avatar film than to the Senate,

For forgetting that this health care reform matters to actual people with actual lives.

My favorite moment during the whole debate:

When a mail senator complaining about federal funding neonatal care

Asked: *what does that have to do with me?*

To which a female senator responded: "*Let's go ask your mother.*"

The Census Bureau estimates that 45.7 million Americans are uninsured,

And the jury is still out whether this proposed reform will make health care affordable to them.

Every time I have felt myself inclined to skip the health care coverage and go right to the comics,

I think of that number. I think of names and faces. I think of the calls I get from folks having to decide between paying rent or paying to go see the doctor.

Remember them next time someone tries to tell you health care isn't a

A religious issue.

3 and 2) *Two stories related: Islamic-terrorists and would-be terrorists*

*Mount a resurgence in America,*

*While earlier in the year, in June, President Obama pledges a new beginning*

*In Muslim-U.S. relations and reaches out to the world's Muslims*

*In a major speech at Cairo University.*

First, the turbulence:

In October, a Sudbury, Mass. native, in a professed effort to further Jihad

is arrested on federal terrorism charges after planning terrorist attacks inside and outside the United States.

On November 5<sup>th</sup> Major Nidal Hassan, an American soldier and a devout Muslim,  
Kills 12 at Fort Hood in Texas, shouting ‘God is Great’ in Arabic before being  
Stopped by Fort Hood police.

And then on Christmas Day a 23-year-old son of a wealthy Nigerian banker,  
After receiving training from Al Qaeda in Yemen, attempts  
To bomb a Northwest flight from Amsterdam to Detroit before fumbling  
The material and being tacked by fellow passengers.

This is all so scary, which, of course, is the point.

Some open questions I have:

We may be in Afghanistan hoping to stop the spread of terrorism,  
But how do we protect against our own citizens? What’s next: surge on Sudbury?  
Also: we’re all hearing the radical voices employing Islam to inspire these actions.  
But where are the progressive Muslim voices shouting them down?  
Where are the Muslim marches for peace and tolerance and non-violence?  
I’m not saying they’re not there, but I am saying they are not being heard.  
The result is that role of Islam in terrorism is again coming under review,  
With many fearing backlash.

In this vacuum, and several months before these particular terrorist attempts,

The President invoked the Qur’an, the Talmud, and the Bible  
To claim that America is not at war with Islam.

Citing the seven areas of tension in U.S.-Muslim relations,  
From violent extremism, to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,  
To women’s rights and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,

Obama nonetheless noted that ‘*the interests we share as human beings  
Are for more powerful than those that drive us apart.*

*And just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, he said*

*America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire.”*

*"The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. ... We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: E pluribus unum: 'Out of many, one.'"*

Critics were quick to say that all this was simply pretty language,

But in battle for hearts and minds – in both the US and the Muslim world –

I believe language and words and talking can go a long way.

A challenge for us in 2010 (and I include myself in this): to explore a few things

About Islam, to perhaps open a discussion with a Muslim person,

And ask them about their faith and how it nourishes them and shapes them.

It's only a start, but it's a start.

And finally, for our number #1 story, which isn't a national story at all,

But rather a local story,

And it comes in the form of some news I have for us about our congregation.

Maybe you've been wondering all morning about that video recording.

Maybe you've been wondering: is Nathan recording this so he watch it every

Sunday morning during his sabbatical, to keep him connected?

No, but that's not a bad idea.

Right before Christmas I got a great email, followed up a phone call

From the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Here, in part, is what it said:

*"Dear Nathan,*

*Greetings. I have good news for you and the congregation you serve.*

*Each year, the UUA's Growth Team selects four congregations from across the United States that have shown significant and sustained numerical growth and have successfully navigated the oftentimes difficult challenges of being a prophetic UU congregation. We then provide each of these four congregations an opportunity to share their stories of success during a session often attended by 3,000-4,000 congregational leaders at our Annual General Assembly.*

*Nathan, it is my honor to tell you that the Area Church in Sherborn has been chosen as one of these four Breakthrough Congregations for 2010!*

*Some of the reasons that the congregation you serve was selected as a Breakthrough congregation include:*

- *42% growth in adult membership in the last five years*
- *180% increase in religious education registration in the last five years*
- *Internalizing an identity as an "area church" with responsibilities to the larger community*
- *willingness to hire a part-time membership and communications person to further enhance the already effective work of your staff*
- *successfully installing a ramp to make your building more accessible.*

The letter then goes on to say that among our tasks is the creation of a 12 minute video highlighting our story, hence the video this morning and much more during the spring.

Nothing says *Congratulations!* more than assigning us more tasks to do. 😊

Folks, I hope you will join me in celebrating this significant honor.

It's a reminder to me that in the midst of all the news and stories and headlines,

Often the most important religious work is happening on the ground,

below the radar, in faith communities like ours that strive to nourish the spirit and help heal the world.

I will miss you much and often over these next months,

But I will also be savoring our good work together,

and planning with Maureen Gormley

And others our presentation at General Assembly in June.

Two requests: if you are asked to help in any way this with this project,

Or if you think you have something to offer (particularly on the technical side)

Please say yes.

And second: when the camera pans your ways – smile.

Happy New Year. Amen.