

**A Hardware Theology  
Hampton Falls August 13,2006  
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**Many of you know that years ago, before entering the ministry, and following my graduation from Theological school, I was employed as the tool department manager at Rounds Hardware in Stoneham, MA while waiting to hear from the fellowshiping committee at the UUA. Recently I returned to Rounds on Tuesdays and Fridays as a part time employee, working once again on the sales floor that had become for me a new way to look at the world and my place in it. Many of those old memories returned as I clipped on my shop worn tape measure and attached my name tag onto my crisp new official Rounds t-shirt, one more time. Again I traded my self regulated life style for a time card, scheduled breaks, and that endless stream of boxes to empty, price and get out onto the floor. I once had this fantasy that there was nothing that could possibly happen in a hardware store that I could reflect upon with the profundity expected of a minister at a Sunday service. Hardware with its endless aisles of nuts and bolts, paint cans, bargains of the month end caps, the constant paging and official musak, emanating from a myriad of speakers, was a far cry from the solitude of quiet study, with ethereal music gently playing in the background, a world so far away from the one I had come to enjoy.**

**On portals of my theological school, Manchester College in Oxford England were these words deeply engraved into the stone; Reason, Tolerance and Freedom; words not meant just for fledgling ministers or to impress tourists. Those words are the universal, theological glue that not only cement all Unitarian Universalist societies together as physical structures of wood and stone, but also provide for us the root of our most sacred principles.**

**They became for me the common denominator I was looking for that that placed the retail hardware business and Unitarian Universalism in the same ballpark!**

**First in an academic sense we think of reason as the backbone of our faith, the basic premise among all of our greatest thinkers and theologians when examining the truth or falsehoods of religious thinking. In the hardware store, however I was not invited or employed to expound on or to argue chapter verse and text as we know it, rather my hallowed vision of reason was not something to be spoken or heard from a podium but it was something to be applied in the context of daily survival. Folks come into the store everyday with some of the most amazing requests and needs, which required answers and more often than not it is a process of selling not only our product but being ready to look for alternatives when common solutions won't work.**

**I will guess that Unitarian Universalists are not "by the book" salespeople, my training and upbringing of looking carefully at the issues and seeing more than one side or option has served me well. One day a man came in**

totally exasperated that his car key had broken off in his car door. No one seemed to know how to remove that key. There was nothing in the manuals, the key was not magnetic, nor could it be coaxed out with WD 40 and a penknife. It dawned on me that a coping saw blade with the end snipped off just might be small enough to slip into to the lock above the teeth, catch the key and pull it out. Sure enough it worked. As silly as it might sound, I went home that day feeling very good about the outcome, about being a UU, who had been trained to look for what is reasonable in not only my theology but in dealing with the little catastrophes of everyday life. Then there was the woman shopping for ant traps. She was curious about the ingredients, what was in it would it hurt children or pets. I hardware land one always learns to read the package faster than the customer, so we appear to know what we are talking about even when we don't. Then she wanted to know what flavor they were.

I resisted the temptation to say "well this one is strawberry, and this one is chocolate" and resorted to, "Mam, do you want to throw a party for the ants or do you you want them out of your house?"

"Your right, that's reasonable, I guess flavor doesn't matter, I'll take um!"

There are times when we have to carefully weigh requests and applications of products that can do the job but may have consequences later. One day a man came in looking for superglue. I asked him what he was using it for. He wanted to superglue his broken false teeth right to his palate. I refused to sell him the glue, as to remove them would require acetone which is a poison and I strongly suggested he call his dentist. This customer left the store angry and even though it was his prerogative to purchase the glue and was a sale lost, I didn't want the outcome on my conscience.

In a hardware store as in our faith, the reasonable application of any product or instruction must have positive tangible results in the here and now. One could not say to a customer," No sir, this drill doesn't work, but it would look great on your bench," would have put the store out of business a long time ago!

Secondly, in the hardware world tolerance means patience for those who cannot express themselves clearly.

Tolerance for those who continually ask to have the prices and contents of their purchases read to them off the packages, apologizing each time for forgetting their glasses. In time I understood that they were covering up for the fact that they couldn't read. Then there are those who insist we carry that "thing" they advertise on TV, and can offer no more clues as to what they are talking about; or the customer who rants and raves that the item he saw in the add in local paper is not in stock, whose flyer, when finally produced highlighting the missing item, belongs to the competitor down the street!

Tolerance became so much more to me than just a word on a covenant meaning to respect the worth and dignity of every human person, from a safe distance. It is an 'in your face' testing of any philosophy on tolerance, Coming from a profession of so much self managed freedom, it is always a

wake up call to once again punch a time clock and be confined to 1500 square feet of sales space. To follow orders that at times don't make sense, but to do it anyway and to be willing to take my place at the bottom of a well earned hierarchy and to start over as the new kid on the block. Rick Maston, a UU minister who was very popular in the 1960s once defined freedom as the "right to choose ones own cage." He is so right as within the confines of the store and the annoyance of other peoples rules, I am freed by the enjoyment that I experience in helping customers find what they need, customers, who no longer ask for the advise of a Man the way they once used to, who seem to respect what I know and appreciate it greatly when I can come up with a less expensive solution to an expensive project. No matter what we do or where we are in our trek through this life, freedom in this country has little to do with where we are, it is the blessing to being free to use our gifts and our talents to assist those who need them that really counts.

The plumbing department also offers an interesting insight on the more ordinary and personal aspects of the human condition. My orientation to plumbing included an introduction to the most subversive of departments and products, items named the "male ends" and the "female ends" and of course "diaphragms" and fittings that are named after other body parts. I learned that the day after Thanksgiving it is always the busiest department in the store, with Drain-O power plungers, snakes and augers flying off the shelves, with comments such as, "I just can't have 20 people for dinner, anymore, my plumbing can't take it!"

Amazingly enough, Rounds Hardware is also a place where change happens, where one can see a very personal evolution of an individual.

Just travel down to the paint aisle, and listen to the customers speak about why they are selecting new colors for their kitchens and living rooms, or looking for advise and instruction on carefully stripping off years of memories from an old table and putting on a brand new finish.

Taking off each layer of paint or varnish, to begin anew, to start over, when a loved is lost, or a relationship has ended or a new one begun, or when an illness has given one a renewed sense of mission and purpose in the hope that this is the first step in regaining a sense of control. I heard one woman say to a staff member, "Thank God you're here, I could never have gotten this kind of help at the huge hardware supply chain down the street."

The world of hardware sales is an amazing place, where people come to fix and build and create, to learn how to do it for themselves, to have the personal attention that lends credence not only to the finished product but to be understood as to why they are doing it in the first place. There is a life story and a lesson to be learned behind the needs of every customer, which has put every aspect of my beliefs and my faith to a test. It is what faith and religious truth are all about, where theories are made real, beliefs that can come alive or fail, in how we interact with others and apply our basic principles to those who make it very difficult at times, to honor their worth and dignity.

**Reason, Tolerance, Freedom. The words come to life in a hardware store as one is tested and challenged everyday, to practice what she preaches and to deeply appreciate the gifts of the ordinary.**

**So be it**

**Amen**

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