The lead article of the latest edition of the Quest, the newsletter of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, is entitled The Seven Deadly Sins of Unitarian Universalism. Written by the Rev. John Gibb Millsapough, of the Tapestry congregation in Mission Viejo, California, the article outlines seven trends within Unitarian Universalism, and liberal religion in general, that he calls sins. If we are to take sin at its original meaning of “missing the mark,” then these seven trends are those which miss the mark of the purpose of liberal religion - to be voice in the world and in our lives where we may freely express who we are and who we wish to be, as we seek answers to the questions posed by all religions - why are we here and what are we supposed to be doing with lives.

The article is not just another in a long line of articles telling us what’s wrong with Unitarian Universalism, there is no shortage of those. It seems we are better at telling ourselves what we are not good at doing, rather than saying what we have to offer the world. Instead, the article seeks to help us avoid some of the pitfalls to which we have become prone. As Rev. Millsapough says “we are a good and blessed people with a good and blessed faith”, yet we are not immune from missing the mark, from sinning.

To be sure the seven deadly sins of Unitarian Universalism are not the same seven deadly sins of Catholicism, which are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Rather they speak to our own particularities. And his deadly sins will not spell a death that results in our souls being forever condemned to fiery pits of hell. No, these deadly sins, are deadly to our lives and our souls in another way, they bring us not to wholeness but to living fractured and thereby unfulfilled lives.

So what are the seven deadly sins of Unitarian Universalism? Millsapough has come up with an acronym, not surprising in this age of acronyms, to denote them – he called it WHISPER. The seven deadly sins are Wanderlust, Hypocrisy, Intellectualism, Stinginess, Pollyannaism (not to be confused with Polyamorism), Egotism and Relevance (or rather the lack thereof).

Wanderlust, Hypocrisy, Intellectualism, Stinginess, Pollyannaism, Egotism and Relevance. WHISPER.

I think he holds the mirror to us at just the right angle. These are trends within our faith community that I see and that we must exercise caution to avoid. We do tend towards wanderlust. All religions are guilty of hypocrisy -- what we say we should do and what we actually do are not always in synch. As for intellectualism we are often champions of the mind at the expense of the soul and the heart. Stinginess - we may be generous to ourselves by pledging with our pocketbooks but are we not so generous to the world, we can be stingy with sharing our faith. Pollyannaism - well the world isn’t always a great place to live yet we still keep thinking that humanity is on an onward and upward course and shy away from speaking of human evils.
While our first principle may affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, it does not mean that every person is earning it. We often speak of the beauty in the world, but in reality the world isn’t always so beautiful. Egotism - oh yes indeed we are. Maybe everyone thinks their religion is the best one, and maybe we need to think that way, but we like to think that if people were just smart enough they’d be Unitarian Universalists. We love the fact that our kids score highest on the SATs. And as for the last sin of the lack of relevance, until we commit ourselves fully to eradicating the some of the six preceding sins from our community we will never reach a level of critical mass where we can become relevant. Our efforts are small because we are small and we are small because we are stingy with our faith, we are egotistical about our faith and we are hypocritical in living our faith. When we overcome our sinfulness we will lengthen cords of our tent and become a welcoming community for a lot more people and then and only then will we truly be relevant.

So of these seven deadly sins which one is the most deadly of them all? Well, that’s a hard question, but I think that for our own sake and for the world’s sake our wanderlust is deadliest of them. Our wanderlust takes two forms, one particular to Unitarian Universalism and one of which many liberal religious communities are guilty. The first form of our wanderlust which is particular to Unitarian Universalism is deadly to ourselves and the second is deadly to the world.

The first form of wanderlust is a spiritual one. We wander from one spiritual belief to another, never settling down with any coherent, articulated faith statement by which we live our lives and confront both the joys and the sorrows we encounter. One week we are enamored of the Christian message of love, another week are fascinated with the paths to enlightenment of Buddhism, a few days later we extol the virtues of Sufism. We love being seekers but we never seem to find anything. We are always looking for the next thing to shape our belief systems. We are more in love with asking questions it seems than in finding answers.

I don’t mean that we should come to a conclusion and cut ourselves off from anything that doesn’t fit our established belief system. What I mean is that we need to establish a belief system and then start testing it against the wisdom of other belief systems and of our own experiences. It will, by the necessities of time and wisdom, evolve and grow; what you believe today will not necessarily be what you believe ten years from now. But then the life you live ten years from now will not be the life you are living today. Yet at each moment of your life, wherever you are on your journey, be it just at the beginning or nearing the end you need to have an established set of beliefs and principles to guide your life.

There will come a time in your life when it will be essential that you have found some answers. Maybe that is what brought you here in the first place. Or maybe that day has not arrived, but when it comes and it surely will come you need to have a faith that you can hold on to, that will get you through the dark, cold nights of your despair. That moment will not be the time to begin the work of finding answers, it will be the time that tests the answers you have found. And if you have done your work well, if you have asked and answers some of life’s most essential questions then when that moment comes you will be able to face life’s vicissitudes, if not with confidence, then with an inner strength that will bring you through the hard times until you walk again in the warmth of life’s beauty.
One of the beauties of Unitarian Universalism is that it does not presuppose to know what your answers are, it opens the door for your exploration. Each of us will come up with different answer, that is the way of human beings. Here the answers may be as diverse as the number of people in this sanctuary. The point is not that we come up with one answer or catch word that describes all of our collective beliefs, but rather that we each do the work of finding our answers. This is one if not the primary reason to be a part of a religious community -- to find answers. We come to Unitarian Universalism not to be given answers but to be given the freedom and the tools to develop our own answers. We fail as religious people when we take that freedom and squander it by never doing the work of developing the answers that shape our lives, in the everyday and in those times when we are most in need. Wanderlust of the first form is deadly to our souls.

The wanderlust of the second form is not unique to Unitarian Universalism, it is our propensity for wandering from cause to cause to cause to cause. We are so concerned with all the problems of the world, that we commit ourselves fully to none of them. To be sure, there are enough causes in the world that need our attention. But we cannot solve them all at once. And we will solve none of them if we do not devote to any one of them the time and resources necessary to seriously address the problem. Just as we cannot save ourselves if we jump from belief to belief so too we cannot save the world if we jump from cause to cause. We must choose the way in which we will seek to repair the broken world, just as we choose to the way to repair our wounded souls.

Each of us goes to our mailboxes and gets tons of requests from different charities and non-profits. In one week I received over twenty of them. And if we have the resources we choose the ones to whom we will give our money. We might choose a particular charity because we know someone who would benefit from the work that non-profit does. Or we might choose one because we have been personally affected with the problems the charity was formed to address. Or maybe it is because that non-profit is doing work that we feel is essential to making the world a better place. There are a ton of reasons and a ton of non-profits in fact there are over a million such organizations today. So we must make a choice.

We cannot possibly give our money to each of them, and even if we could very few of us could give to each of them any amount that would be substantial enough to make a real difference. And none of us would be willing to give something to each of them because some of them are diametrically opposed to one another and to support them all would be to say that we believed in nothing and stood for nothing. So just as we cannot afford a wanderlust of the spirit in our personal lives, the world cannot afford our wanderlust of our commitments to social change. Somewhere we must take a stand on what we believe and take a stand on what we are committed to changing in the world.

There is, however, I think a important distinction that must be made in how we take those different stands. When it comes to the spirit each of us must find our own way to our own answers but when it comes to where and how we will devote our lives to repairing the world, I believe to be at all effective we must do this collectively. One person alone cannot make the differences that are needed, but one person in a gathering of many can change the world. The most deadly part of our wanderlust isn’t just that we move from cause to cause but that we don’t commit collectively.
We react to the latest headlines in the New York Times or whatever other newspaper we read. Then a small group of people, or an individual, rallies a few others to commit to problem for as long as it remains a headline in the papers. When it falls to page twenty six then we lose interest, our wanderlust kicks in, and we move onto to our next great endeavor. Had we collectively committed to solving a single problem we could never do that. By collectively committing to being a part of the solution, we would put ourselves on the line for staying in the struggle until the struggle was over.

So what shall we as a congregation commit ourselves to doing to help repair one little part of the world? I can’t say for sure, but I can make a suggestion. You had to know I was going to make a suggestion. And many of you might already have guessed what that suggestion is. It is my suggestion, and it’s only a suggestion, that we commit ourselves to the rebuilding of New Orleans.

I suggest it for many reasons. Our commitment to New Orleans, says that we are committed to addressing the issues of class and race inequality in this country. Because if there was any instance more stark in its revelation of how far we have yet to go to addressing the issues of the class and race inequities I can’t think of it. Our commitment says that while our President can deliver a State of the Union Address and not mention New Orleans once, we will not forget the people of that great city. And I suggest it because it is an American problem and we cannot take a moral stand in what goes on in the rest of the world while we turn our backs on what is happening in our own backyard. Finally, I suggest it because I have seen with my own eyes that once great city laying in ruins and the look of despair in a people who have been abandoned by their own country. It broke my heart.

But what of the rest of the world you may ask. Does this mean that we ignore the atrocities in Darfur? No, it does not. Nor does it mean that we give up the struggle for peace in Iraq or the end of human trafficking, or the end of the death penalty, or any of the other causes that we must address. What it does mean is that we will commit ourselves to saying that we shall not rest until the work of this project is done. It means we will not abandon them for the latest greatest cause du jour, because our wanderlust has surfaced when the work becomes hard. It means that when history asks “what did you do for these people” we will answer “we stood with them, we committed ourselves to them and we stayed with them until they could stand again on their own.”

This is my suggestion, I have put it on the table for your consideration. You may think there are other things more important that we ought to be doing, then put them on the table for us to consider. Whatever it may be, let it be something we as a group will say this is what we shall be known for in the world. Let us not let the sin of our wanderlust be what we are known for most.

There is another definition of sin, other than missing the mark, it is forgetfulness. Forgetting that we are each a holder of the divine spark of life, forgetting that we are made in the image of the holy. We are truly a good and blessed people and this is truly a good and blessed faith, let us be ever on our guard against the sin of wanderlust lest we forget that the people of the world, the people of New Orleans, are crying out for our hands and our hearts to join them in their struggle for hope and justice. Amen and blessed be.