

“Growing In Spirit”

A sermon given on Association Sunday, 2008, by Rev. Joy Atkinson

Reading before the sermon: The sources of our inspiration, from the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*
- *Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*
- *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*
- *Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*
- *Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Growing In Spirit

In a sermon I gave here a couple of weeks ago, I quoted the Rev, William Sloan Coffin, the late Presbyterian minister and well-known peace activist, who characterized us Unitarian Universalists by saying that we are thick on ethics, an aspect of us he certainly admired, but we're a bit thin on theology.

It is true that in the larger world, we are known for being committed social activists, working in various visible ways for justice, peace and equality. And we are sometimes also known out there as those rationalistic folks who have given up on religion or theological study and reflection, but who just can't seem to break the habit of going to church. As one old wag put it: "Unitarian Universalism is a methadone program for people coming down off religion."

Our radical freedom as a religious movement, our well-known "creedlessness," confuses some people. You may have had this experience when trying to explain our faith to someone outside of it. People sometimes conclude that because we have no creed that holds us together, we believe in nothing, or that beliefs are just not that important to us.

On the contrary, one could say that personal beliefs are so important to each of us that we don't want any organized religion or institution to decide for us what is true—not even our own.

Among us, there is a great array of beliefs and spiritual paths. Historically, our religious forebears have been very thoughtful about theology. In fact, the very words of our denomination—Unitarian and Universalist—originally referred to two specific and well-considered theological positions: Unitarian referring to those during the Protestant Reformation who rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of the trinity in favor of a unified concept of God—God as one being without the three distinct “persons” of father, son and holy spirit, and Universalist being a word used to describe another so-called religious heresy—the perhaps even more radical belief that all people, even the most depraved and immoral of sinners, will ultimately be saved by a supremely loving God. As the early Universalists would say of their theology, they believed that even the last, worst sinner would be dragged, kicking and cursing, into heaven.

As our two religious traditions continued to evolve, separately and together, they both adopted a free and open approach—one that did not require subscription to any creed or belief—not even the ones they began with. In the 20th century, a wave of secular humanism swept through intellectual circles in America and deeply affected Unitarianism and Universalism, and for some in our fold this meant moving away from theological speculation, and rejecting notions of God, spirit or soul, belief of an afterlife and the like. But we sometimes forget that even the humanism that swept through Unitarian Universalism in the last century and is still held to by many Unitarian Universalists—this humanism is a theological stance, a belief system, often well thought out by those who subscribe to this world-view.

Personally, I find the theological diversity among us—the fact that on Sunday mornings our seats are filled with humanists, theists, liberal Christians and Jews, those who practice Zen Buddhism or a Hindu form of meditation, who celebrate pagan festivals or study the Tao Te Ching—I find this diversity enriching and exciting. This is what the “sources” statement from the Unitarian Universalist Association’s bylaws, that Catherine and I read earlier, is about. As Unitarian Universalists we are each free to draw upon many and varied sources, both sacred and secular, for our inspiration.

I would like to recount, briefly, the story of the adoption of this sources statement, along with the adoption of our Seven Principles. I remember it as if it were yesterday, although this process began over 25 years ago. It began in the late 1970s, when a group of UU feminists looked over the old principles statement, which was crafted around 1961 during the merger of the Universalist Church of America with the American Unitarian Association. These women looking over the bylaws statement found that it still contained sexist language and what they felt were sexist assumptions, even though there had been some changes voted in by delegates at an earlier General Assembly. The changes had updated archaic language, such as changing words like “mankind” to the more inclusive “humankind.” The women’s objections to some of the still-intact language eventually led to a five-year process that set about the task of completely revising the statement.

There were many discussions about a new purposes and principles statement in congregations, at district meetings, among ministers and other religious leaders, and at General Assemblies. A flurry of sermons issued forth and position papers were passed around at conferences. For a time, the discussions about what should or shouldn’t be included in such a statement defining who we are became somewhat heated. Some of the UU Christians expressed concern that if the bylaws contained no reference to the God of the Jewish and Christian

traditions, they would not feel themselves to be included. Some of them even hinted that the Christian wing of our movement might be better off leaving the UUA to form its own denomination. Some with a Jewish background had objected to the original wording, which referred to the “Judeo-Christian” God, saying that the traditional Jewish God is not the same as the Christians’ conception, and therefore it misrepresents Judaism and shouldn’t be in the new statement. Some humanists were concerned that keeping a reference to God in the statement excluded their perspective, some feminists worried that reference to a traditional God was too patriarchal, and so on. Finally, after hearing from so many points of view, a committee crafted the present wording of the “sources” section, along with the present wording of the “principles” section. The genius of this wording about the sources of our inspiration, as I see it, is that it came out as a descriptive, not a prescriptive, statement of the many sources that inspire us, and it was very inclusive, although later another source was added: the sixth one, concerning earth-based traditions.

The upshot of all the years of give and take and all the revisions was that at the General Assembly in 1984, the statement was passed as presented, and then in 1985, it was officially adopted by the General Assembly delegates. I remember that General Assembly in 1985, when the time for the final vote on the current statement came. After so much debate and concern about who would be left in or out, the vote of the thousands of Unitarian Universalists present was unanimous! Many of us present leapt to our feet and participated in a long, standing ovation. We were relieved. A process that could have led to a schism among us turned into one that in the end united us in our diverse theologies! But we Unitarian Universalists are a restless lot after all. As mandated in our bylaws, we are now looking again at the section of the bylaws containing our principles and sources. The UUA’s Commission of Appraisal has a proposed revised statement that is available online. Feedback is due to the Commission by October 16th—this Thursday, in case you would like to add your opinion to this new revision.

What our current sources statement says—and I personally hope that whatever new statement we come up with preserves the expansiveness of the existing one—is that we Unitarian Universalists clearly do not believe in nothing. On the contrary, we believe, in a sense, in everything—that is, all sources of wisdom from many cultures and times, have something to teach us.

So we don’t believe in nothing. But I would say that there is something to the milder charge that collectively, we Unitarian Universalists have been, as the Rev. William Sloan Coffin said, a bit thin on theology. Many of us have become, you might say, “spiritually lazy,” unreflective about our theology. We may take for granted our religious eclecticism, without really going deeply into any of the traditions or sources we say we derive inspiration from. And we especially neglect to take the time to plumb the depths of our own personal religious lives, or to pursue a religious or spiritual discipline. We are, all of us, ministers and laity alike, very busy conducting our lives, working in the world on issues of social justice, and keeping our UU institutions alive and thriving. But because we spend relatively little time on our theologies, we are subject to the charge of sometimes being “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

Many people, including us sometimes, carry around the assumption that basically all religions at their core are saying the same thing, although with different cultural clothing placed upon these supposed universal truths (the “many paths to one mountaintop” idea). There certainly are some important points of resonance among the major religious traditions, such as

the Golden Rule that we heard in story and song today. But it is too facile, too simplistic and reductionistic to say that all religions are, at bottom, one. They are not—not when you look more closely. And the differences can be as interesting, and as important, as the similarities.

Years ago, UU minister the Rev. Christopher Raible lampooned our tendency to make this easy, unreflective assumption, in a fractured hymn to the tune of our *Forward Through the Ages*, the words of which are in turn set to the tune of the old traditional hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers*. I simply can't resist singing you one verse and the chorus of this fractured hymn:

*Forward through the pages, never read a line;
Honor all the scriptures, think them all just fine.
Books of differing sizes, spread across our shelves;
We will never study them, we think for ourselves.*

Chorus:

*Forward through the pages,
Never read a line;
Honor all the scriptures,
Think them all just fine.*

The comparative religious scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith says that we live in a world of cultural and religious pluralism, and what we need to do is to accept the diversity and live in creative tension with it, learning and growing as our understanding of other faiths deepens, sharpening and refining our own ideas by bringing them into dialogue with different ideas and beliefs. The world of religions is more like a rich, spicy stew than a mushy melting pot, so that when people of different viewpoints reach out across those differences, their dialogues with one another can be all the more meaningful because they are conducted in the context of real diversity. That is the hope of a religiously pluralistic world, and it requires of all of us that we understand, more than superficially, what other religious perspectives are about, as well as what we personally believe and how it both resonates with, and diverges from, those of other beliefs. We especially, we Unitarian Universalists who claim that we are inspired by and draw from the great wealth of the world's religious, philosophical and cultural traditions, we are in a unique position to affirm human unity beneath the colorful and rich religious diversity of humankind. This is what we, at our best, have been doing, at least among ourselves, for centuries. But truly understanding other traditions takes effort, openness, and a willing to learn, and to deepen both our theological knowledge and our religious self-understanding.

This year's appeal for funds on this Association Sunday is one effort to help us "thicken up" our theology, deepen our thoughts and understanding about things of the spirit. Last year's appeal, on the first Association Sunday, was aimed largely at outreach—letting people know who we are. This year's is for theological education—for our seminary students, for our lay members, and for the continuing education of our ministers. I believe that this effort to deepen our theology will greatly enrich our free faith. Please be as generous as you can. There is an insert and envelope for you to use to make your contribution today.

As for our legendary eclecticism, I for one am an unapologetic eclectic myself. I do have a particular theological stance and worldview, as we all do, but I find much resonance for my personal theology within many other traditions of the world, and I derive much that nurtures my mind, spirit and psyche when I study and learn more about other traditions—their resonating similarities AND their fascinating differences.

When I was the minister in n San Mateo, I proposed a sermon series, and called it “The You in UU.” In this series, I asked people to volunteer to share the pulpit with me, to speak from their individual faith perspectives, while I supplied the context—how these traditions fit historically into Unitarian Universalism. I had several takers for that series, who spoke from various points of view—liberal Christian, Jewish, pagan, existentialist, agnostic. When it came around to offering my own perspective, I titled my sermon “Reflections of a Mystical, Humanistically Inclined Agnostic Theist with Pagan Tendencies and a Love for Jesus.”

What about you? What would you title a talk about your own beliefs or spirituality? What is the you in your UU? Where do you find yourself on the theological spectrum? If you would like a chance to share the pulpit with me some Sunday to speak about your own beliefs, let me know.

I close my remarks this morning with another little UU joke: A Unitarian Universalist died, and to his surprise discovered that there was indeed an afterlife. The angel in charge of these things told him, "Because you were an unbeliever and a doubter and a skeptic, you will be sent to Hell for all eternity—which, in your case, consists of a place where no one will disagree with you ever again!"

Benediction:

Hell would be a small universe that we could explore thoroughly and fully comprehend.

–Timothy Ferris, Astronomer