

Empty the Way the Universe is Empty
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Only when the centre is truly empty can the full possibilities of deep spirituality enter among us. Rev. Ray Drennan

Reading *from the Tao Te Ching #25 Imagining Mystery*

There is something
that contains everything.
Before heaven and earth
it is.
Oh, it is still, unbodied,
all on its own, unchanging.

all-pervading,
ever-moving.
So it can act as the mother
of all things.
Not knowing its real name,
we can only call it the Way.

If it must be named,
let its name be Great.
Greatness means going on,
going on means going far,
and going far means turning back.

So they say: "The Way is great,
heaven is great,
earth is great,
and humankind is great;
four greatnesses in the world,
and humanity is one of them."

People follow earth,
earth follows heaven,

heaven follows the Way,
the Way follows what is.

Sermon Empty the Way the Universe is Empty

As a Unitarian Universalist at a Lutheran seminary,
I was a chalice lighter in a sea of wafer eaters.
I found myself continually explaining Unitarianism
I learned to dread the question – what is Unitarian Universalism anyway?

I usually gave a history lesson of the no-trinity Unitarians
and the God saves everyone Universalists re-directed through the twentieth century
“progress is great” humanism and we’re into social justice and we really like coffee
and some of us believe in God and some don’t and ...
I don’t really answer the question to anyone’s satisfaction. And as an almost minister I
think I had better be able to communicate what we are all about.

We do have a specific shape to our religious tradition, but we struggle with naming it
clearly. Today I want to explore this shape in relation to questions about God and the
universe.

In the TV show *The Simpsons*, there is an episode when it is the annual church picnic.
Reverend Lovejoy is staffing the ice cream booth. Lisa Simpson approaches the stand,
and notices that the different flavors of ice cream are not identified in the usual fashion
but have been given the names of religious denominations. She pauses, and then says,
“I’ll try the Unitarian.” Reverend Lovejoy hands her a bowl. Lisa looks at it and says,
“But there’s nothing in here.” Lovejoy responds, “That’s the point.”

I’ve heard this before. Perhaps you have too. Friends who came with us once said we
had removed God from the centre but kept the trappings. A kind of throwing out the
baby but keeping the bathwater.

I used to be offended by this – of course we have some key singular essence – but I
could never say what it was.
I could never find a way to place the UU Christians and the UU atheists – and everyone
in between – into the same theological statement that all would find acceptable. There
are many people here who experience a loving God and there are just as many people
here who don’t.

Eventually I decided to use the word **mystery**, for two reasons.

One, there is so much that is a mystery, whether your religious approach is mystical or scientific. We have barely begun knowing this infinite, dark matter filled, ever expanding, Einstein curved universe we live in. The term mystery acknowledges there is always room to learn.

Second, the term mystery makes room for those who don't experience a relationship with God, but doesn't exclude those who do. It allows us all to acknowledge that we are part of a larger whole, however you are comfortable defining it. God, the Divine, the Way or the universe. This is a whole that is awesome and magnificent, far greater than our individual selves.

For some of us, the mystery lies in when we look at the stars at night and realize we are looking into the past, seeing light emitted from distant suns thousands or even millions of years ago.

For some of us, the mystery lives in the presence of a loving God sheltering us when we are struggling and alone.

We experience the mystery in a myriad of ways, through prayer, meditation, walking in the woods, looking through a telescope, holding a loved one's hand.

All are valid paths to experiencing the terrible joys of being a very small part of a very great whole.

Albert Einstein once said: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the true source of all art and science."

I realized that at the seminary, I was trying to explain UU without saying God is not at the centre. Over the past century Canadian Unitarian Universalists have moved away from a focus on God. We come from Christianity, and we are clearly inheritors of the liberal Christian tradition, with our emphasis on social justice and democracy, but our religious understanding includes, but has expanded beyond, a focus on God.

We affirm humanity and the earth as much as we look out towards the Divine. And this is okay. This is a valid religious orientation.

It is a contemporary manifestation of the balance tradition type of religion. Balance traditions originate in China, with Daoism and Shintoism, but also occur throughout the world as indigenous religions. In a balance tradition there isn't a single focal point but a striving for harmony with self, society, and nature.

Balance traditions begin from a sense of interdependence, an awareness of being part of a whole. This is where we begin from.

So if God is not at the centre, what is it?

I believe our centre is open, empty.

Not empty as in lacking in the way Lisa Simpson was lacking ice cream but empty of dogma or creed, open to the mystery, willing to be immersed in it.

One of my images for UUs is little people figures holding hands high as they stand around the circumference of the green blue earth, embraced by blue sky. We come freely into community to explore standing between the earth and the mystery.

Some of us turn more to the world, some of us to the mystery.

We can't place anything at the centre because we seek to see the wholeness of life.

It is okay to be empty at the centre because it is a big empty:

It is empty the way the universe is empty. Empty yet filled with all life.

After all the universe is actually filled with all sorts of dark matter and dark energy that is present, but we can't see. Life is equally as strange, filled with all sorts of indescribable experiences and emotions. How can you truly explain meeting your new born child for the first time? We are immersed in mystery, living with it each and every day, if only we pay attention.

As an emerging balance tradition, we honour both the material and the spiritual and see how they are intertwined. We are not seeking personal redemption but balance in our lives. Balance between our individual freedoms and responsibility to the community, balance between our practical needs and our dreamy desires.

We explore the tension between being capable creatures of reason and creativity and being very small specks in the great big universe.

But words are not enough. To speak of mystery can also just make people think of Agatha Christie. Images also help people enter into a religious life – which is as much an emotional way of being in the world as an intellectual.

The shepherd, the fish, bread, wine, water. The cross.

All these images have associations with Christianity.

They provide a depth of meaning, entry points into experiencing Jesus and God.

Symbols are avenues to the mystery.

Humans are visual, sight is our primary sense,

and many of us learn better through seeing than through hearing.

We know what those multi coloured, five interlocking rings means.

We are also storytellers. We use stories to share meaning.
That's why advertising is so effective, using visuals and stories
to create an emotional understanding.

Unitarian Universalism evolved out of conversation and community as people
questioned church authority and trusted their own experiences of the sacred.
We're a young tradition, as religions go, and just beginning to develop a symbolic
language. At the seminary I didn't have a lot to offer in terms of symbols.
A coffee mug, perhaps? I mostly talked about the chalice, and I began to think about
the richness of the chalice image.
The rounded copper basin, filled with living, flickering flame.
Light, oil, metal. Full of the energy and power of combustion.

This is not about worshipping the chalice as a false idol –
I know not everyone is comfortable with the idea of the chalice,
but symbols have power, they matter.
And the chalice is ours. We are people of the chalice.

Each of us probably has a different understanding
of what it means to light the chalice.
Because we have so few symbols, a lot of meanings get placed on the chalice: spirit,
community, warmth, love, light.
It holds a lot! So much so, I found myself thinking of the chalice as a container,
containing flame, flowers and water.

For me the flaming chalice reflects the divine light within each of us,
just like our winter fire communion. When the chalice contains the water of our in-
gathering ceremony it holds our chosen community.
When we share the flowers in spring, it honours the diversity and richness of life. You
may have different understandings,
but these distinctions can help us start that conversation.
The chalice as a container opens up its possibilities, begins to separate out the many
meanings by what we place within it.
And a container can be empty.

The empty chalice can bring us to the mystery.
Our chalice is empty the way the universe is empty
– vast but so encompassing – nothing excluded –
with far more unknown than known.

Letting the chalice be empty is an opening up, a breathing space.
 The empty spaces - the silence - allows us to hear the music.
 It brings us back to all the quiet undercurrents that connect us
 and all the beings on the earth. The empty chalice opens us to the mystery, whether
 that is God, the Divine, the Way or simply the infinite universe.

By honouring the mystery with silence,
 by connecting ourselves to the empty and encompassing whole,
 we remind ourselves we are part of a great Wholeness.
 Our meditation time in every service gives us an opportunity to ground ourselves in the
 mystery. Any down time, waiting time, can be used to open ourselves up,
 to remind ourselves that our UU tradition is inclusive and whole, and we belong to it.

This is the interior path to the mystery,
 a UU orientation of prayer and meditation through stillness.
 For me this is very powerful – to see the chalice as empty.
 We honour the mystery by coming together,
 accepting the emptiness – filling it up with
 what each of us happens to bring in that particular moment.

Some of us today bring heavy burdens – old sorrows and new ones, pain and fear and
 heartache. The empty chalice has room for all our troubles. Others today bring joy and
 laughter, delight in a summer of pleasure and sunshine. The empty chalice has room
 for all our joys. Whatever you bring is welcome. We are accepted just as we are.

We fill the chalice with the sparks of light within each of us present,
 we fill it with the welcoming waters of our beloved community,
 we fill it with the amazing flowers and soil of this great planet,
 and still the chalice is filled with nothing but the mystery of living.
The chalice is empty the way the universe is empty
 – everything is present.

Ursula Le Guin says that “Love does not just sit there, like a stone;
 it has to be made, like bread, remade all the time, made new.”

That is true of spirituality as well.

As UUs we come together on Sunday mornings to remake our tradition, to renew it
 with the powers of our minds as well as our spirits. By sitting together, by bringing our
 whole selves into this moment, we create the sacred together.

We’re not missing the baby.

We’re not missing the ice cream.

We are seeing life steadily and seeing it whole.

As Unitarianism grows into a great religious tradition, I believe the chalice offers fruitful imagery to guide us. We live at an exciting time in Unitarian Universalism, a time to name and claim our path, through language, symbol and ritual.

The chalice **is empty the way the universe is empty**

– inclusive and uniting – we are all part of the whole.

We hold the cup gently in our hands, knowing that in its emptiness it has room for us.

May we hold it with kindness, making space for all who need us.

May we pay attention to the chalice and learn its language.

May it be so.