

Theological Gardening

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Why are UUs the worst hymn singers? Because they are always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next line.

Unitarian Universalism - Where all your answers are questioned.

Being a Unitarian minister is like pushing a wheelbarrow full of frogs.

A Unitarian and a Christian were arguing about the existence of God:

“OK, then prove there is no God.”

“You can’t prove there is no God...you just have to take it as an act of faith.”

These lighthearted jokes poke at us, but as we know, there is always a bit of truth in jokes, and there’s some truth in every one of these. Each of them reflects some aspect of UU theology as we know it today.

Now, I have to warn the UU individuals here, which presumably is most of us.... much of what you’ll hear may not be a newsflash about Unitarian Universalism for you as much as it is an invitation to revisit our UU roots in order to gain some perspective about our *modern* day theology.

So we’ll take a quick look back in history to appreciate where we’ve come from, and who helped us to get to where we are today.

From the beginning the UU movement has been characterized by its devotion to three principles.

I use the term “movement” purposefully, because it’s been an evolutionary faith, one with a foundation of change.

So, the principles of this *movement* have been:

- freedom in religion rather than adherence to specific creeds;
- use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition;
- tolerance of other religious views instead of insistence upon uniformity in doctrine and liturgy.

Freedom, reason and tolerance.

These ideals were brewing back in the 16th century when the grandfather of Unitarianism Michael Servetus wrote about the unity of God, and that the doctrine of the Trinity was senseless.

He was rewarded for his ideas by being burned at the stake by Christian leaders.

But before his untimely death, Servetus had brought a revolutionary concept to the table – *religious consideration could be based on reason*.

For him, the trinity was unreasonable, it *didn't make sense*.

15 years later one of his successors, Francis David, found no scriptural basis for the Trinity, so in opposition to a *Trinitarian* concept, he coined the term "*Unitarian*."

As a result of his efforts he was thrown in a dungeon, where he died a year later.

A Unitarian by the name of Joseph Priestly was driven out of

England in 1794 after receiving death threats because of his Unitarian beliefs, and in his exile brought our faith tradition to our continent of North America.

As we moved into the 19th century three other individuals, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker, moved us from being totally Christian to being open to the other world religions and philosophies theologically, and in the early 20th century Curtis Reese took it a step further and helped usher in acceptance for non-theistic thinking.

Within the other half of our UU heritage, the Universalists were experiencing a similar evolutionary/revolutionary process.

In England in the 1760s James Rely began preaching about universalism, which held that since God was a loving God, it was *inconceivable* (again, the exercising of *reason*) that God could condemn anyone to eternal torment, and so there were no such places as Heaven or Hell; all people, *universally*, would be loved and saved.

In 1770 Rely's associate John Murray came to North America, to establish Universalist churches.

Like the Unitarians, Universalist theology experienced major changes in the following century, especially under the influence of Hosea Ballou, who single-handedly moved Universalism to the more Unitarian-like theology that celebrated non-creedal religion.

In short, the Unitarian and Universalist bodies were coming closer together, and it seemed inevitable that they would merge. And in 1961 they did, to create the Unitarian Universalist Association.

So there's your crash course in UU history, and in our theological evolution.

Although our early founders had Christian doctrine on which to rely, in this era we don't have doctrines that embody our faith, that give our tradition identity.

Back in the day the issue of reason vs. tradition and doctrine were the sticking points. These days everyone's on board for being "reasonable."

An issue for us today is the role of the heady domains of knowledge and action vs. the more soulful aspects of faith.

This reminds me of another entry from the UU joke book:

A UU minister was busy writing a sermon on social action. Someone called and asked what time the service begins. The minister answered, "The service begins the moment the worship ceremony is over."

What a lovely, Unitarian response. If I were the caller I would then said, "Great! And what can you tell me about the worship that precedes the service and action?" ...

How does worship fuel action?

In the 18th century one Friedrich Schleiermacher ("sch-lay-er macher") published a book entitled *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* that addressed the *action and knowledge vs. devotion* issue.

Theologian Rudolf Otto commented on this book when he wrote, "(The author) wished to show that humanity is not wholly confined to knowledge and action, that the relationship of humans to their environment – to the world, to each other, and events, *to being* – is not exhausted by the mere perception of it. If one experiences the world in a state of deep emotion, as intuition and feeling, and if one is deeply affected by a sense of its eternal and abiding essence to the point

of being moved to devotion, awe, and reverence – then such a state is worth more than knowledge and action put together.”

Devotion, awe and reverence bring soulfulness to what we know and what we do.

Along with this quotation, our faith came to mind yet again when I recently attended a talk given by Muslim scholar Dr. Ingrid Mattson, where she talked about women having a tendency to be self-congratulatory.

“We’re more nurturing, we’re better joiners, we’re superior listeners.”

As I listened to her speak about these gender tendencies, I couldn’t help but wonder how self-congratulatory we as Unitarians can tend to be.

You might recall from today’s reading the line “Unto the Church Universal which...*a/ways* magnifies all that unifies and brings peace...”

Do we ALWAYS magnify all that unifies?

As UUs, we like to think of ourselves as open, inclusive, all embracing... the picture of theological pluralism.

And of course we *are* these things, to an extent anyway – they’re certainly central to our theology.

But if we as a denomination are truly committed self-awareness, we’d be remiss to overlook the possibility of a bit of a tendency toward narrowness.

Perhaps some of you have heard in UU circles the adage ABC...Anything But Christianity.

Maybe some of us have had the occasion to see a Muslim woman in a head and body (he-JOB) hijab covering and have grumbled to ourselves about the injustice to women in that religion.

I speak with authority about such responses because they have been my own.

And such responses are isolating, drawing us away from ‘all that unifies,’

While we are trying to lay brickwork for roads that join, sometimes the bricks don’t go outward, but instead go upward, creating walls that divide.

This brings to mind a story about Travis. Travis is a man who knew something about walls that divide, because he was a prison inmate for many years.

As a child Travis had been in and out of many foster homes after having been abused and neglected by his parents.

It wasn't long before he began engaging in illegal activities, and had numerous exposures to the legal system.

By the time he was 18 years old, he was in prison with a life sentence for his involvement in the assault and death of a police officer.

Years passed as Travis did his time, and two things emerged during those years. One was mounting evidence that he actually wasn't a part of the plan regarding the officer.

And the other, more relevant to our story, was that a softening of Travis' spirit began to occur. Instead of continuing to look outward at the injustices that the world had dealt him throughout his life, Travis began to look inward for fulfillment and balance. In an attempt to get to know himself more, he developed a daily meditation practice.

Time passed, and Travis developed an eye condition that resulted in him being taken off prison grounds for treatment.

For 22 years he had been behind the walls of a prison, and he didn't know that he'd be transported off grounds.

As he was being driven away from the prison his face was pressed to the glass of the prison transport van, his heart bursting as he saw things he hadn't seen in over two decades.

On the highway he saw billboards and people's homes. Once in town the people, store fronts, traffic lights.

Although his physical vision wasn't perfect, his eyes and heart drank it all in as he made the most of every moment,

until he was returned back to the prison, where he reveled in his brief exposure to the rest of the world.

When I heard the story of Travis I couldn't help but examine myself and my

beloved UU faith.

While one of the hallmarks of our faith is inclusion, how much do we allow ourselves to be theologically confined, seeing only the landscape of OUR way because of theological walls?

Here's yet another good natured observation about our tradition:

"Unitarians don't have any religion of our own. So we borrow other people's."

This reminds me of the movie Gandhi where there was a lot of conflict between members of opposing religions. When asked about *his* faith of choice, Gandhi said, "I'm a Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and a Christian."

I've always loved that line, and I think it reflects the greatest potential of our UU faith. We can choose the tenets of faith that inspire us in our personal spiritual lives.

It's like it's your birthday and you get to go to the candy store. It's always nice to get any candy.

But would you rather be greeted at the door by someone who says "Here's your pre-packaged box of truffles..."

Or by someone who says, "Here's the biggest shopping cart in the world, it's yours to fill as high as you'd like with whatever you want. Take your time going down each aisle, by each bin and choose as you'd like."

What a sweet life.

That's not to say it's an easy life.

At first glance an on-looker might think, "Man, those UUs have it easy, they don't have to believe anything."

That's not true. It's not true that we don't have to believe anything, and

it's certainly not true that the sweetness of our theology is easily come by.

We just don't have our candy chosen for us. And in choosing to choose, we are required to be thoughtful, self aware, discerning, engaged.

A couple of weeks ago we were reminded of spiritual thoughtfulness, self-awareness, discernment and engagement when our youth stood before us in the Coming of Age service,

definitively expressing their theological ideas, many of which varied greatly.

As I sat there listening to these wonderful proclamations of faith (or lack thereof), I couldn't help but think of my own youth, when such freedoms certainly were not available.

Theology in our household was similar to my father's way of gardening.

We lived out in the country and had huge gardens, acres big. We were not a family of means by any means, so we grew as much food as we could.

I can still see the row after row of beans, peas, carrots, beets, onions, and radishes. But what I remember most were the long rows of potatoes that went on forever. Those rows needed to be arrow straight, all very systematic and orderly.

Like many theologies, my dad provided concise instructions about planting, fertilizing, weeding out and harvesting.

Being Unitarian means that we're not instructed how to plant and harvest, and aren't given a scripted manual for the use of tools to assist us down *our* row in life.

Instead we're invited to explore which soulful life-giving seeds are needed in the sacred garden of our spiritual lives, and to seek out what to unearth within ourselves during our growing seasons, to choose what makes spiritual and theological sense, as Michael Servetus did centuries ago.

I'll leave you with a story about one of the youngest theologians I've ever met. He is my son Nathan, who is currently 12 years old.

But he began his illustrious career in theology began 7 years ago as a 5 year old at a Christmas Eve candlelight service.

We had traveled to a small town in Kansas to celebrate the holidays with the family of Candice, Nathan's other mom, and we're at the Christmas Eve service of a mainline protestant church – the Disciples of Christ.

Everyone had made a circle around the sanctuary, the lights had been dimmed, and all were solemnly holding candles.

A hush fell over the sanctuary and the minister begins by saying something about celebrating the birth of Jesus, God incarnate, and Nathan interrupts him and says, "God is neither man nor woman."

It was said so loudly that it was impossible for the poor minister to ignore it. "Uhh,,,What?"

Now that Nathan had the floor and all eyes were on him, he made his proclamation even more loudly. "God is neither man nor woman."

About this time you could see the color drain out of the face of Nathan's aunt, whose church this was. As Nathan's parents, on the other hand, Candice and I could barely contain our glee as we watched on.

The minister quickly acknowledged Nathan, mumbled something about sticking to what was in his book, and quickly got on with the rest of the service.

It wouldn't surprise me if they're still talking about the kid of those lesbian Unitarians who attended the Christmas Eve service, proclaiming the gender attributions of the Almighty.

We never know what shape or size UU theologians will come to us. As Unitarians, sometimes we may not be entirely sure of what the theology itself looks like.

And yet it's there, waiting to present itself to us and through us. May we be ever open to it, so that the flame of the universal chalice that is within each and every one of us will make the world a brighter place...brighter both intellectually and soulfully.