

# “A Free and Responsible Search”

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A few years ago, I spent a lot more time  
in the Atlanta airport than I ever wanted.

Massive storms up and down the East Coast of the U.S.  
had grounded my flight, as well as everyone else's.

But, the real storm that was brewing that afternoon  
was to be found inside the airport.

The departure gates were packed with people.

Plane-loads upon plane-loads of people  
were growing crankier by the minute  
as they watched their best-laid plans unravelled by Mother Nature.

With every seat taken, the unlucky were left  
to spill and sprawl on the floor.  
Carry-on luggage was crafted into make-shift cushions.  
Folks staked out their turf  
with coats and backpacks and hostile glances.

Strangers entered pacts to protect  
each other's precious parcels of land  
while they went, one at a time, to stand in the long, snaking queues  
for the washrooms or whatever remaining scraps of food  
they could find.

It was not a pretty scene.

And, as it became clear that I was going to be stuck there  
for the better part of the day,  
I knew I needed to come up quickly with a Plan B  
to hold on to what was left of my own patience.

As much as I find airports to be  
fascinating laboratories of the human condition—  
as good a place as any to bear witness to intense joy and utter agony—  
I knew I had limited reserves for riding out this storm  
by staying put in the eye of it.

So, with plenty of time on my hands,  
I decided to check out the airport's Interfaith Chapel.

Now, calling this particular space a “chapel” was something of a stretch.

It was nothing more than a bland little room,  
devoid of any religious ornamentation,  
other than the Qibla in the corner, pointing the direction to Mecca.  
To be sure there were kneelers and prayer rugs available,  
but that was about it.

If it weren't for the sign out in the hall,  
with its all-inclusive, androgynous figure in a posture of prayer,  
it would have been difficult to distinguish that space  
from the waiting room of any poorly furnished doctor's office.

Still, I had set out seeking an oasis,  
a place apart from the chaos just down the corridor,  
and I thought this just might fit the bill.

But, when I entered the chapel,  
I discovered that I was not alone.

Indeed, I had walked in on a concert,  
or rather, I had intruded upon someone's private practice time.

The woman was instantly apologetic,  
explaining that in her travels as a professional oboist,  
she had found out-of-the-way airport chapels  
to be a safe bet as quiet places to pull out her instrument  
and make full use of her layover.

I assured her I wasn't bothered by her practicing,  
and confessed I hadn't actually come to the chapel to pray,

but in hopes of finding a quiet place myself to do some writing.

I told her that I would very much enjoy it if she would continue to play.

And so we commenced our little salon right there in the chapel,  
with me writing letters while being serenaded, as luck would have it,  
by the principal oboist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.

Eventually, a Muslim man came in,  
and the oboist and I both respectfully set aside our work,  
as he took out a rug, faced East, and fell to his knees,  
rising and kneeling again and again in Islam's moving pattern of prayer.

A bit later, a woman came in, and with a rosary in her hand,  
knelt for a few moments and then was gone.

Eventually, the oboist headed off for her flight home to New York.

I stayed on for a couple more hours,  
as a handful of other people came and went.

Just before leaving, a woman entered the room,  
and when it was clear that I wasn't busy praying,  
she asked if I was the airport chaplain.

(I had no idea, at the time, that there actually were such things.)

I explained I wasn't the chaplain, but that I was a minister,  
and that I would be happy to listen if she needed to talk.

And talk she did.

She told me about the challenges she was facing,  
and about her faith that God would help her to figure things out.

She explained that she lived in Atlanta and worked at the airport.  
And, then, she invited me to attend her church  
whenever I was ever back in town.

It was no small thing,  
given that her church was predominantly African-American,

and I was, clearly enough, not.

Before she left, she asked if I would join her in prayer.  
And, so, I bowed my head with hers, and closed my eyes  
while she, as they say in the South, “prayed up a storm” of her own.

We parted company, and in time, I made my way back  
to my terminal and gate and finally headed off toward home,  
but my experience that long afternoon  
there in that chapel has stayed with me.

Amid the storms of this life, our congregation  
sometimes functions like that humble little chapel,  
with spiritual tourists and travellers passing through,  
finding rest, and comfort, and solace, when needed,  
but not always taking the risk to engage one another deeply  
in matters of the heart and head.

It’s very easy to keep things at a superficial level,  
where we aren’t confronted with the discomfort of our differences.

Each of us just doing our own thing.

A few years ago, a Unitarian Universalist commission  
studied the question of what it means for us  
to truly engage our theological diversity.

For all our many theological beliefs,  
the commission confirmed that we, as UUs, by and large,  
struggle to talk to each other about what hold most dear—  
what we consider to be true, in matters of faith and belief.

And, the reason most often given, when people were pressed,  
was the fear that if we were to do so—  
if we really were to engage across barriers of belief—  
that our congregations would fall apart  
under the stress of what we might find out from one another.

Now, to be fair, that fear is not completely unfounded.

The history of religion, and really of the world itself,

is littered with splits, reforms, and revolutions  
fought over theological differences—  
some of which now seem so profoundly irrelevant  
as to make even more tragic and useless the blood shed in their defence.

Now, it must be said, that in this life,  
we may well find that there are times  
when our differences are simply beyond all hope of being bridged.

A few years ago, my friend Sam, on his wedding day,  
got off to a very bad start with his future mother-in-law.

He was marrying a Hindu woman.  
The wedding was a proud milestone in the life of her family,  
and though the ceremony itself was created to reflect  
the couple's interfaith background, it wasn't without its challenges.

When Sam arrived early for the ceremony,  
he was quite horrified to discover that a large swastika,  
that ancient Hindu symbol of good fortune,  
had been intricately crafted out of marigolds  
and placed into the elaborate arch over the very spot  
where the couple was to be married within a couple of hours.

Something had to be done.  
Sam, being Jewish, explained to his soon-to-be mother-in-law  
that the symbol had to go.

There were guests coming who had survived the Holocaust.  
There were members of his family,  
who had been put to death under that symbol during the war.

In turn, the mother of the bride explained to Sam how deeply significant  
this symbol is to Hindus and insisted that it stay put.

In the end, the symbol was covered over for the ceremony  
and unveiled for the reception,  
a compromise that left everyone unhappy,  
though, fortunately, at different times.

That is, of course, the difficulty of engaging across our differences.

When we take the risk, we are sure, on occasion,  
to invite upset and cause misunderstanding.  
Despite our best intentions, we may even cause offence.

And we may well learn that these differences are real, and important,  
and essential to the core identity that gives to both ourselves  
and to others our most sacred sense of self.

But, too often, we squander the gifts of our diversity  
by steering clear of the real tensions and challenges that come with it.

We take the path of least resistance  
by defaulting to the lowest-common-denominator.

We keep silent to keep the peace—  
rather than recognizing the blessings that come  
through our willingness to engage one another  
more deeply in the great questions of life,  
rather than practising the art of respectful listening,  
mulling over ideas that are at odds with our own,  
and opening ourselves to the sacred possibility  
that our own minds could be changed  
by taking in the insights and wisdom of others.

I say this, not as one who has mastered any of it,  
but as one who continues to learn and struggle  
with building—and sometimes rebuilding—  
bridges across the chasms that would divide us.

In our tradition the open invitation to embark on the religious quest  
is coupled with an obligation to do so with care and intention.

Our principles require of us a search for truth  
that is both “free and responsible.”

The quest for truth,  
far from being the cakewalk some imagine it to be,  
is an arduous path—much of it paved by others—  
that invites us to critically engage the world of ideas  
with every faculty we can summon from within us.

Now, for the longest time,  
the gift of reason was the primary tool  
that we UUs drew on for this journey.

It's the one that early Unitarians relied on  
when they scoured the Christian scriptures and found that,  
as pertains to the doctrine of the trinity,  
there's very little biblical support.

The primacy of reason was the enduring gift of the Enlightenment,  
many of the ideas and ideals of which  
have found a lasting home in our tradition.

And, so, it has been the tool used by those who came before us  
in questioning the foundations of the faith they had inherited,  
as they stripped away superstition  
and the influence of what some call "priestcraft."

Along the way, this process was not without its bitter battles,  
as the wisdom of one era inevitably gave way to that of the next.

As my colleague Susanne Meyer says of our history:  
"We would do well to remember that within our movement  
the radical young Turks of one generation  
frequently [go on to] become the revered sages of the next."

We have, though, by and large,  
over the decades and now centuries,  
cherished this path of religious evolution.

The motto *Semper Reformanda*—always being reformed—  
has been with us from our beginnings.

But when it comes to the evolving quest for truth  
at the heart of our faith, it turns out  
that we can only do so much of it alone.

Ours is not a do-it-yourself religion,  
but a faith forged in the crucible of engaged and ongoing dialogue.

At our best, we struggle through with each other,  
with our history, and with the world of ideas—  
to decide anew what it means to be Unitarian Universalists.

This is why I believe that Unitarian Universalism  
is the hardest religion we could possibly ever love—  
not because we have to make it up on our own,  
but because we are called to make it up together.

That's what is meant by our Fourth Principle  
that calls us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning:  
that alongside our cherished intellectual freedom,  
we pledge to hold ourselves responsible—  
and even accountable—to each other.

That requires relationships that are real.

It's the delicate balancing act  
at the heart of our faith and our life together.

Now, to be sure, there are days when any UU  
might well be tempted to abandon the challenge of it altogether  
and to strike out on their own.

But, when we live into the promise of this faith,  
and choose instead to engage—to risk saying,  
“help me understand what you mean by that,”  
or “that doesn't make a lick of sense to me,  
but can you tell me how it does for you?”

Such questions are, for us, the door to what  
the Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman called “creative interchange.”

It is that sacred give-and-take between people  
that offers, he said, “an appreciative understanding  
of the original experience of another.”

To sit with someone and truly hear the heart of who they are—  
to listen to the truth of their lives—  
is to engage in what I believe is the closest thing  
that we Unitarian Universalists have to a sacrament.

It's no accident that each week, in our worship services,  
we affirm together in the words of our covenant that:  
“the quest for truth is our sacrament.”

For such an exchange,  
whether it happens in a Journey Group,  
or in a breakout room after the service,  
or while chatting with a friend on a walk,  
can hold transformative power—  
and offer to us, in Wieman's sense, a glimpse of the divine.

In taking in the testimony of another,  
in witnessing to the truths they revere,  
we bear witness to the sacred struggle that is life itself,  
a struggle that yields one of life's most startling and stubborn lessons:  
that “we are what we do with what we have.”<sup>1</sup>

Our call is to look deeply into the life of one another,  
not with judgment or scorn,  
but with compassion and curiosity,  
wonder and gratitude,  
for the inspiration of seeing  
how someone else engages the great challenges and questions of life.

When we open ourselves to the heart of another,  
we witness the strength and resilience of the human spirit,  
we learn that what touches the life of one of us affects us all—  
and that in that sacred truth rests our saving hope:  
that we are not alone in this world,  
and that it's just downright dangerous to pretend otherwise.

This, Dearly Beloved, is our lived religion, our living tradition.

May we commit ourselves to the path  
that brings about genuine encounter.

Connections that crack open the heart.  
And that expand our minds.

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Robert Neville, Dean of Boston University School of Theology.

With truths still to be discovered.

And the sacred possibility that,  
in whatever way we understand it,  
we, ourselves, might grow, with every day,  
into harmony with the divine.

So be it.