

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“One Congregation: Many Paths”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 18, 2009

READINGS

from *Finding Your Religion*, by the Rev. Scotty McLennan:

It turned out that this [Brahmin] priest knew the bible better than I did. Even though he was Hindu, he kept a copy next to his bed. He'd also read the Qur'an from cover to cover and recited passages from its suras (chapters). He seemed as familiar with the Buddhist scriptures as the Hindu. He spoke of many avatars - incarnations of divinity - throughout history, including Krishna, Buddha, and Jesus. As I sat cross-legged each day in my white cotton dhoti and kurta, I began to think, Maybe this is the way to spiritual maturity. Be open to all religious traditions. Pick and choose from what rings true for me in each. Yet the priest kept emphasizing getting on a path, following a discipline, becoming committed to a teacher and a set of teachings. "There are many paths up the mountain," he would say, "and they all reach the top, but you need to follow a path and you can't be on more than one at a time."

By the end of the summer I had decided I wanted to become a Hindu. On the morning I approached the priest with my request, he took me to sit with him in the front room on a Persian rug. The rain was coming down in sheets and banged loudly against the roof. I was stunned by his response. "No, no!" he chided. "You've missed the point of everything I've taught you. You've grown up as a Christian and you know a lot about that path. It's the religion of your family and your culture. You know almost nothing of Hinduism. Go back and be the best Christian you can be."

I remember how the rain against the roof seemed to rattle my brain. I was upset. "But I don't believe Jesus was any more divine than Krishna or the Buddha," I pleaded. "And Christians would condemn you for knowing about Jesus and not accepting him uniquely as your Lord and Savior." His response was simple: "Then go back and find a way to be an open, nonexclusive Christian, following in Jesus' footsteps yourself, but appreciating others' journeys on their own paths." The more I could learn about others' paths, he explained, the more it would help me to progress along my own and deepen my understanding of it. Those words have remained my marching orders for life.

Hard rain always reminds me when I forget.

Denise Levertov begins her poem "Beginners" with this quote:

From too much love of living,
 Hope and desire set free,
 Even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere to the sea –

Then she writes:

But we have only begun
 to love the earth.
 We have only begun
 to imagine the fullness of life.
 How could we tire of hope?
 -- so much is in bud.
 How could desire fail?
 -- we have only begun
 to imagine justice and mercy,
 only begun to envision
 how it might be
 to live as siblings with beast and flower,
 not as oppressors.
 Surely our river
 cannot already be hastening
 into the sea of nonbeing?
 Surely it cannot
 drag, in the silt,
 all that is innocent?
 Not yet, not yet --
 there is too much broken
 that must be mended.
 too much hurt we have done to each other
 that cannot yet be forgiven.
 We have only begun to know
 the power that is in us if we would join
 our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
 So much is unfolding that must
 complete its gesture,
 so much is in bud.

SERMON

“One Congregation: Many Paths”

The first reading from the Rev. Scotty McLennan really bugs me. I didn't grow up a Jew or a Christian, a Hindu or a Muslim, in a rich tradition that has deep spiritual roots. I grew up in a Humanist Unitarian Fellowship located in Newark, Delaware. My parents were scientific atheists, rejecting most of what passed for religious heritage. We thought belief in God was a sign of a weak mind that couldn't face the Existentialist reality of the Big Bang, quantum mechanics and physical chemistry. For me to go back to *my* home religious tradition would be to return to the rejection of religion.

The Unitarian Universalism of my childhood was hell bent on hacking away at and disconnecting us from our Christian roots. We didn't use the words God, grace, prayer, devotion, or any other that had a religious tone about it. Philosophy, sociology, and psychology were our tools to build a moral and ethical life and advocate for a just society. I was quite content with this approach to life ... until the time of my 23rd birthday.

On that fateful, February Friday night, 1980, I played a game of chess that changed my entire world view. Matched against a much stronger player at a rated United States Chess Federation tournament, I relaxed, realizing I would be crushed by my opponent. I played, what felt at the time, like an effortless game, with the moves appearing in my mind *as if* my play was being guided by someone or something beyond me. I won easily. We looked over the moves and found I'd played a strong game. *Then* it happened. Subjectively, I felt *as if* I'd been initiated in a profound kind of universal love, what I now might associate with the Greek term, agape. I had *never* experienced *anything* like this before. I could hardly sleep for the next three days as so much energy was released within me. All of a sudden, my scientific atheistic world view *wasn't big enough* to contain the experience I had just had. Thus, I stumbled upon, quite unintentionally, a spiritual path. (For all the details, check out my bio on my web site.)

My mind altering experience coincided with the growing view that Unitarian Universalism had lost something really important by the Humanist attempt to make a break from our heritage and create a mind-centered, secular, religion-rejecting association. What was missing was a similar awareness that was missing when William Ellery Channing was formulating a rational Christianity in the 1820's. Emerson and the Transcendentalists came along with what we now call, in our sources, the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. The spirituality groundswell today draws sustenance from those first American Transcendentalists and carries forward their religious enthusiasm.

What can get lost in the struggle between the Unitarian Christians and the Transcendentalists

in the nineteenth century and, today, between the Humanists and the Mystics or Theists or Pagans is what they *all* have in common. All have a *radical respect* for the individual conscience, individual discernment and individual experience. As I've been on both sides of the contemporary humanist-spiritualist controversy, I've worked hard to remain appreciative of the wholeness of both faith (or rejection of faith) orientations.

Our individualistic, non-creedal religious approach can be very confusing for someone who comes here for the first time. It reminds me of a fellow who had never been involved or paid much attention to organized religion. In middle age, suddenly he developed a religious urge and wanted to find a religious home.

His first stop was a Roman Catholic church. He asked to see the priest. "What do I need to believe to join your church?" he asked. The priest said, "You need to affirm to Nicene and Apostle's creeds." He didn't know them but he figured he could fake it. "What else do I need to know?" "Well, you need to know something about Jesus. Do you know, say, where he was born?" The clueless man thought for a minute and tentatively volunteered, "Pittsburgh?" "Get out!" cried the indignant and shocked priest.

His next stop, across the street, was the Southern Baptist church. He asked to see the minister. "What do I need to believe to join your church?" The minister said, "You need to affirm the Nicene and Apostle's creeds." The man was catching on that these creeds were important. "And you'll need to stop drinking and to be baptized, full immersion, not any sissy sprinkling." "Okay, what else do I need to know?" "Well, you need to know a lot about Jesus. You must know this, where he was born?" The man was getting worried and changed his answer, "Philadelphia?" "Get out, you heathen!" yelled the angry minister.

Our perplexed protagonist finally walked into a Unitarian Universalist congregation where the President told him didn't have to believe anything. All he had to do was sign the membership book. "You mean I don't have to renounce anything, swear to anything, or be dunked in anything?" "That's right. We have no special tests for membership, no creeds. We support individual freedom of belief." "Then I'll join! But tell me--where was Jesus born?" "Why, Bethlehem, of course." The man's face lit up. "I knew it was some place in Pennsylvania!"

Not only do people come here with lots of different beliefs, they have *different religious needs*. Some are here because they want to be part of a community that shares their values and have little interest in traditional religion. Others are here because there are services our congregation offers. They want religious education for their children, a place to act out their sense of social responsibility, to quilt or play bridge, a network of support. For some, our congregation is a refuge from noxious religious institutions they wish to fight. For some, but

not *all* of us, this is a place to explore diverse religious perspectives, seeking nourishment for their individual spiritual journey.

We're really no different in this respect. People bring diverse needs to other religious organizations too. What is radically different about us, as a religious tradition, is our *unwillingness* to define the transcendent dimensions of existence. And this unwillingness makes us uneasy too, even though it is *critical* to our identity. We don't like getting pronouncements from the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston (which has no authority to speak for us or define us) that don't match our personal theology. Terms like God, church, faith, prayer, belief make some uncomfortable. Others are uncomfortable when they are missing.

The Commission on Appraisal, an independent, elected UUA committee, took on this problem for study and came out with a 200 page report titled, Engaging our Diversity. They looked for that elusive center that holds us all together. And they didn't come up with a definitive answer.

But they didn't say we could believe whatever we wanted. I cringe when I hear people use this expression to describe our lack of a unifying theology. Not having a creed *doesn't mean* every belief is welcome here. Those who proclaim *racial superiority* are not welcome here. Those who *reject individual responsibility for belief* are not welcome here. Those who *champion violence* as a way to solve problems are not welcome here. We do have very clear areas of agreement about *how* we do religion even if we don't come up with the same answers.

At a deeper level, each one of us *isn't* free to believe whatever we want. Our mind, heart and spirit will *not permit us* to believe that which violates our inner sensibility. A good analogy is sexual orientation. When I was in college, I had a very good friend, a gay man, who was attracted to me. I wondered just how malleable my sexual identity was. I knew I was attracted to women. Could I be attracted to him? I found out pretty quickly the answer was no. The chemistry just wasn't right for me.

I've heard the same story going the other direction. Some men and women discover their sexual orientation doesn't permit them to be sexually attracted to the opposite gender. It is, for them, (as was the case for me) *not* a lifestyle choice. A major moment of liberation from suffering happens when they accept and value their sexual orientation.

Some are here because they cannot say the creeds or believe the doctrine of their religious home. Life would be much easier if they could fit themselves into these theological frameworks, but they can't. A little doubt can topple the Fundamentalist world-view very easily. Some of us look around and see no credible evidence for God. Others look around

and see only the beauty of what God has brought forth. Some of us feel the presence of the holy in a redwood grove. Others look through a telescope or a microscope lens and see all the wonder they need to inspire them.

I really don't have the freedom to be what I'm not. I can't just decide to be a Jew, a Pure land Buddhist, a Hindu, or an Orthodox Christian. I can try if I want. I can appreciate them, learn from them and honor them. But in the end, something inside me is holding me to this way of doing religion. Henry Nelson Wieman, the great 20th-century Unitarian theologian, captured our spirit well in these words: "there is no prescribed form or limited bounds within which (we) can live with contentment."

And yet we have much in common. We have in common, the drive to live meaningful lives. We have in common the desire to foster the development of a just society and a humane, sustainable, bio-diverse world. We have in common the desire to pass on a livable world to future generations. Rabbi Joseph Levine once said that the God of the Jews is the sum total of what all Jews everywhere believe God is. Unitarian Universalism has a similar wholeness of what all of us bring to our living tradition.

So, I can't follow the Hindu Brahmin priest's advice and return to my religious roots in exactly the way he advises. What I can do is help Unitarian Universalism evolve a new way to stimulate personal growth and spiritual development. Evolve a new way that is inclusive of more than one religious tradition. Right now, we are evolving a new way to follow each individual's inner guidance. We can learn from the great religious traditions, we may even practice individualistic combinations of their methods and techniques. Still, the compass we follow is our own conscience, guided by our own heart *in the context* of this religious community. And this context influences and guides our mind, heart and spirit. Not as any one directive or leader, but through the interdependent web of our relationships with each other, with our heritage, and with our vision for the future. As James Luther Adams put it, "Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete...".

Every historical religious tradition is limited, its leaders flawed, its followers imperfect including Unitarian Universalism. Each one, though, points beyond itself, like a finger pointing at a new moon, hidden from sight. The best of what Unitarian Universalism can be, is a pathless path pointing toward the truth, pointing toward, what might be called, the next stage of the evolution of consciousness.

With your support, and encouragement, I aspire to exemplify and realize this pathless path and leave behind guidance for others to make their own journey too. I invite you to join me.

BENEDICTION

Apollo 9 astronaut Russell Schweikart said about orbiting the Earth:

“Up there you go around the earth every hour and a half, time after time after time. You look down; you can’t imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross, and you don’t even see them. The earth is a whole ----so beautiful, so small, and so fragile. You realize that on that small spot is everything that means anything to you: all history, all poetry, all music, all art, death , birth, love, tears, all games, all joy....all on that small spot. And there’s not a sound-----only a silence the depth of which you’ve never known.”

In the outer silence, let us turn inward, find and follow our inner light.

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