

By What Authority
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Jesus, Buddha, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Maya Angelou, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Moses, May Sarton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J.K. Rowling, Toni Morrison, Bob Dylan, Isaac B. Singer, Paul Simon, Alice Walker, Barbara Kingsolver, Jimmy Carter, Dag Hammarskjold, William Ellery Channing, Judith Sargent Murray, Kabir, Rumi, Sheryl Crow...

Last week I ended my sermon with that list of prophets, voices of wisdom and truth--illustrative but by no means exhaustive. Which begs the question, if we don't subscribe to the concept of *sola scriptura*, claiming neither Torah, nor the Bible nor the Koran nor any other text as the definitive and exclusive source of religious truth and wisdom, and if we accept no creed, and if we refuse to recognize any official doctrine or Book of Discipline, then by what authority do I preach? By what authority does any Unitarian Universalist minister or lay person preach or teach?

By my own authority. By our own authority.

End of sermon. Very short sermon.

Well, maybe I should elaborate.

Let's look at a few other religious traditions first for just a minute. United Methodists base their theological work on something called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Simply put, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, while affirming the primacy of scripture, calls for the mature Christian to bring four sources of authority to bear on theological thought: scripture, doctrine, personal experience and reason. Pentecostalism, the fastest growing religious group in America, finds religious authority in the "gifts of the spirit", emphasizing such things as speaking in tongues. By contrast, fundamentalist Christians insist not only on the primacy of the Bible, but also its inerrancy, and claim it as the sole source of religious authority. Jews turn to both Torah and Talmud--scripture and the traditional teachings of the rabbis.

Unitarian Universalists take a different approach to religious authority.

A number of years ago a Christian colleague, after a couple years of acquaintance, really "got it" for the first time that many Unitarian Universalists, me among them, are not Christian. As he asked questions trying to clarify his understanding, I told him that I think Jesus' teaching are more important than his miracles, which may or may not have happened exactly as reported anyway. In reply he suggested that I should reread parts of the New Testament, which would surely convince me. The problem with his suggestion, of course, is that unlike him, I don't consider the Bible and whole revealed word of God, and neither is it Unitarian Universalism's authoritative scripture. The fact is, we don't have an authoritative scripture.

Those of you who were busy working last Sunday didn't hear my story about an exchange with a divinity school classmate. To recap, he asked me, "What do you UUs do? Just pick any

book off the shelf and preach on it?” And I answered in the affirmative. But the real answer, the full answer, isn’t that simple.

Yes. I can and do preach on just about any book I want to. No. My choice of texts is never that random. Each week I spend many hours choosing my sermon topics and the readings that will serve to introduce or illuminate or support or contrast my thoughts. Yes. With the exception of the sermons I sometimes sell at fundraisers, no one ever dictates what I must preach about or what text I should use. No. There are some books, some scriptures, some poems, some articles I have never preached on and probably never will.

My friend asked about preaching because he was talking about me, a preacher, but the question could easily be asked about where any Unitarian Universalist goes for devotional reading, for answers to the ultimate question of life, for spiritual enlightenment or religious understanding. Do we go to just any book off the shelf, and if so, the question implies, how could there possibly be any meaning or significance or truth in what we discover?

What do you do, just pull any book off the shelf and preach on it, seek truth in it? It sounds shallow and wishy-wasy that way. It sounds as if the preacher or seeker doesn’t want to do the hard work of struggling with an ancient, traditional text. It sounds as if the truth is relative or even non-existent. But it isn’t so. The reason I am free to choose my text from all the vast accumulation of printed material available in my library and the public library and friends’ libraries, and increasingly, the internet, and the reason anyone of us is free to do the same on our personal religious quest, is neither wishy-washy nor shallow. It is profound and serious and deeply connected to who we are as a religious people.

Was it the X-files that promised (or warned) “the truth is out there”? We seem to believe that is so. The truth is out there. We just don’t know exactly where out there the truth is. And like Sagoyewatha, we find it comprehensible that the Great Spirit, if there is indeed a Great Spirit, would reveal the one true religion, one true way of worshipping in a single book, and then give that book to but a few people, and yet expect every to believe the words and follow the teachings of that book--or else they will “be unhappy hereafter.”

Last week we read the words of Walt Whitman, *We consider bibles and religions divine--I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still; it is not they who give the life--it is you who give the life.* These lines sum up in a beautiful and succinct way the Unitarian Universalist attitude toward scripture and religious authority. Ideas of right and wrong, explanations of the origins of things, rules about how to behave and relate to one another, understanding of life and the universe in which we live it, the totality of the religious impulse is simply too vast to be narrowed down to a single text, even one as rich and varied as the Bible, or any other holy scripture. And beyond that, as Whitman suggests, any written text has its origins in human life and experience, and is brought alive each time it is read, by human life and experience. And human life and experience are themselves vast and varied--through time and space, from culture to culture, age to age.

We have in our Unitarian Universalist congregations an amazing collection of theologies and spiritualities. From humanist to pagan, from Christian to Jew, from atheist to theist to deist to agnostic. All our differences of religious background and current beliefs may go a long way,

perhaps, toward explaining why we don't have a single UU scripture. But the improbability of coming to agreement on one text tells only part of the story.

When I teach adult RE courses on world religions I ask participants why they want to spend several weeks studying and discussing world religions. The answers usually vary but one theme runs through most of them: the recognition that the wisdom of the world is too extensive to be contained in one religious tradition and the desire to learn some of the wisdom the great religions of humanity have to offer.

The truth is out there, and we, many of us anyway, have an almost insatiable curiosity about the bits and pieces of that have been revealed and discovered and hinted at by religious folks of all times and places, by science, by philosophy, by prophets and protesters, musicians and artists. We want to study and learn and try things out, and we want the freedom to do so.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” This I *know*, for the Bible tells me so. Those of you who grew up in Christian churches have probably sung those words dozens of times. And, in becoming Unitarian Universalist, you have given up both the reassurances such a certain source of authority provides, and the often uncomfortably tight limits such a certain source of authority imposes on personal beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Those of you who came into Unitarian Universalism out of other traditions have left behind or modified your understanding of similar sources of authority, with all the positive and negative changes that entails.

Far from being shallow or easy, our lack of a single authority scripture or authoritative law or authoritative ecclesiastical body calls us to do the demanding, often subtle, at times confusing, at times exhilarating work of examining each text or idea as it comes to us. Refusing to accept something as true or even good, simply because tradition or someone else tells us it is so, we must instead learn to read carefully, to listen closely. We must constantly strive to know ourselves more deeply and more fully, so that we might hear clearly not only the idea but also our heart's and mind's reaction to the idea. We must be familiar with history. Like Sagoyewatha and his people, we must be willing to wait a little while and see what effect a particular idea has on folks, ourselves or others, before making a decision. We must have the insight to discern our beliefs, the courage to declare them, and the humility to abandon them, no matter how cherished or long held, if we come to know them as false or harmful.

Our way in religion is not an easy one, but we're not alone. We frequently talk of Unitarian Universalists being on individual spiritual journeys. We say that each of us must find our own way, our own answers. But those statements are only half right. We are on individual spiritual journeys, *together*, in this congregation, supporting one another along the way. And, more than that, not one of us has to start with blank pages or an empty bookshelf. We may not have a single source of authority, but we don't reject all sources of wisdom wholesale.

Last week I read the part of the UUA Statement of Purposes and Principles that names the sources of wisdom we most frequently claim--briefly:

- *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder;*
- *words and deeds of prophetic women and men;*

- *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- *Jewish and Christian teachings;*
- *Humanist teachings, [and]*
- *Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions.*

Some of us draw more of our truth, our inspiration, our guidance from one or two of these sources, other of us from a different two or three. And some of us are pretty definite in our belief that there is nothing of value to be gained from one or another of these sources. But, our individual views notwithstanding, each of these sources has in fact shaped Unitarian Universalism in significant ways in the past, and each of them continues to shape Unitarian Universalism in significant ways today, and each of them is cherished by someone in this congregation.

When I officiate at weddings I say, "For as much as you have pledged yourselves each to the other in marriage in the presence of God and these witnesses, I therefore with the authority vested in me by the church and by the state of Minnesota, acknowledge that you are husband and wife." At weddings my authority is clear. I have the authority to solemnize weddings because the state says I do, and the state says I have that authority because our church says I have that authority. Beyond that the question of authority in a Unitarian Universalist context gets a bit fuzzy. There is no Bible, no bishop, no book of discipline, no law to tell us so.

By what authority? By what authority do I preach and teach? By what authority do any of us formulate our beliefs and act out of them? In the end the answer must be, each of us by our own authority. That sounds as if each of can believe whatever we will, behave however we want. That sounds dangerously individualistic, without regard for the greater good. What keeps that from being so is our gathering in religious communities and taking our place in a long and deep and rich religious tradition. Our individual congregations and our entire Unitarian Universalist heritage not only support each of us on our journey. They also challenge some of our beliefs and open before us new ideas, different views of the good and the true and the beautiful, clearer understandings of justice and injustice.

With our hearts firmly planted in this church and our minds actively engaged in this way in religion, we can say, each one of us, with humility, with thanksgiving, with conviction, "by my authority." Amen.