

Before Us, A Smorgasbord

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Oct. 4, 2009

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On an old episode of M*A*S*H aired the other night Major Houlihan asked a visiting surgeon from Norway about smorgasbord. “Unfortunately in your country,” he replied, “it has come to mean all you can eat for 99 cents.”

That exact criticism is often leveled at Unitarian Universalism. It is thought that because we have no creed and because we believe wisdom is to be found in many places from many sources that ours must be a kind of theological Old Country Buffet. Fill your own plate from an ever expanding array of poorly cooked and not very nutritious but plentiful dishes never meant to be served at the same meal. All you can eat for \$10.00.

It was just such a view that led a divinity school friend to ask once, “What do you UUs do anyway? Just pick any book off the shelf and preach on it?” I answered proudly in the affirmative, but he hadn’t intended his question to be complimentary. He implied that our approach to truth and wisdom is sort of willy nilly and insubstantial. Whereas I replied enthusiastically out of my belief that our approach to truth and wisdom is broad and inclusive.

One of the books I picked off the shelf for today was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Harry, for those who might not know, is an orphan wizard who doesn’t know he is a wizard until the early morning hours of his eleventh birthday. He has spent most of his life up to that point the unwelcome ward of non-wizard relatives who make him sleep in a cupboard under the stairs, wear ill-fitting hand-me-downs, and eat what the rest of the family rejects. Author J.K. Rowling describes the first meal of Harry’s new wizarding life at Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry:

Harry’s mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

Now, despite giving you this excerpt and having chosen opening words a couple weeks ago from this same book, I’m not suggesting that J.K. Rowling tops my list of wisdom sources or that embracing witchcraft and wizardry is the future direction of Unitarian Universalism. But I do believe she has a keen eye and a gift for story-telling. And what I find of note in this passage is the selection of food. A list of “...so many things [Harry] liked to eat” comprised hearty, nutritious fare--meat, potatoes, even a couple veggies. Not a word about candy or pizza or pop or doritos. To be fair, the desserts do appear a bit later in the chapter. But the first foods this deprived, if not exactly malnourished, boy delights gratefully to consume are not junk but rather dishes most working and middle class families would routinely put on the table. A bit high in fat, not overly generous with

the fruits and veggies, little apparent concern for organic or locally produced foods, but filling and tasty with few “empty calories.”

Now the parents among you, particularly those with picky eaters, may disagree, but I’ve read, and it makes sense to me, that the average person, given the choice and a good selection, free from expectations, restraints, and judgment, the average person will eat what he/she needs to eat. Oh, he might gorge himself on chips and dip for a while. She might go overboard with ice cream or doughnuts. But after a while--hours or days or months, depending on the individual--the body will assert itself. Cravings will turn toward fruits and vegetables and protein.

The same, I believe is true of our spiritual appetites. Trendy spiritual practices, popular theology, and cheap grace may be appetizing for a while but they won’t sustain us. In times of aching need, crushing pain, persistent doubt, debilitating fear, uncontainable joy, unfolding wonder, we will look for more substantial fare. We’ll turn toward words, ideas, art and music that have stood the test of time, or that, while contemporary nevertheless reveal raw truth and disarming wisdom. And if we don’t find it on the airwaves or the shelves at Barnes and Nobel, then we’ll search the libraries and ask friends and try out different churches and temples and mosques until we find it.

One of my colleagues in a chaplaincy program at the University of Minnesota Hospitals and Clinics years ago was a Lutheran whose native language was not English. When his turn came to preach in the hospital chapel the lectionary readings for the day included John 6:35, “I am the bread of life.” My colleague turned to a resource book and found canned sermon illustrations and what he said was the one and only proper interpretation of the scripture. When our chaplaincy group encouraged him to broaden his thinking and perhaps include some original ideas he refused, insisting on building his sermon around illustrations and interpretation from the book. Later that same day, however, my colleague and I were chatting in the office. Bread, it turned out, was not a staple in his native country. He described his amazement the first time he walked into an American supermarket and saw the huge variety of bread-types--white and wheat and pita and sourdough and French and rye... “That’s it!” I told him. “That’s your sermon illustration. Jesus is the bread of life. And there are lots of different breads. The spirit comes in many forms, many guises.” Still he would have nothing of it.

Though one I believe would also be embraced by many liberal Christians, it was, of course, a typically Unitarian Universalist approach to the scripture passage. As a movement we acknowledge many paths to the truth. The Unitarian Universalist Association Statement of Purposes and Principles adopted by the 1984, 1985 and 1995 General Assemblies states

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life;*

- *words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*
- *Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- *Jewish and Christian teachings which calls us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*
- *Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit, [and]*
- *Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

In this one service alone we've heard words from the Christian tradition, the Jewish tradition, and various secular sources. Throughout the course of a church year we'll hear voices of neopaganism and science, Islam and Buddhism; words and ideas from all ages and continents. We won't pull books willy nilly from the shelf and let them fall open to any page. The program committee, the guest speakers and I will all read broadly and deeply, searching out dishes both tasty and nourishing. And Sunday after Sunday, month after month, we'll spread before you a smorgasbord, from which you might choose those morsels that satisfy your heart and your mind, your soul and your reason.

We'll lay this smorgasbord because as minister and program committee that is our chosen job. But really, in our tradition, it is a task for each one of us. Doing our spiritual grocery shopping, seeking out those thinkers, prophets, poets, musicians, artists, preachers, novelists, scientists whose work fills our hunger. One book isn't enough, no matter how holy. One religion isn't enough, no matter how profound. How lucky we are that the world offers us more, much more. And the church is here to offer adult religious education classes, discussion groups, book clubs, Sunday services, lecture series and other to provide choices for our selection.

It's not all we can eat for 99 cents or even \$10.00, this approach to the religious life. We pay for this smorgasbord with our active participation, our financial support, our relationships, and our presence. And, while we fill our plates at our own discretion, we mostly ingest the nutritious, the sophisticated, the subtle, the exotic and the spicy along with the sweet, the comforting and the familiar. We pay heed to Zen koans and Native American legends and quantum physics theories, to classical music and African American spirituals, to revealing drama of August Wilson and the immortal tales of William Shakespeare. The non-linear insights of Eastern religion add seasoning to the comforting rituals of our childhoods.

"lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce",

“small juicy clams, scarcely bigger than hazel nuts, mixed with pounded ship biscuit, and salted pork cut up into little flakes; the whole enriched with butter, and plentifully seasoned with pepper and salt,”

“a hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick rich gravy and cranberry sauce,”

“fried chicken, biscuits, sweet cob corn, cinnamon bread, peach cobbler, yams and potato salad and collards and tender, melt-in-your-mouth cornbread,”

lefse, herring, deviled eggs, meatballs, rice pudding, flatbrod, krumkake.

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.

Before us, a smorgasbord. Let us eat and be satisfied.

Amen