

Reading

- 1.) From the Unitarian Universalist Covenant, preface page x of “Singing the Living Tradition.”
- 2.) From the UUA Commission on Appraisal: “The world needs the message of our liberal faith. There are so many voices crying out for the UU message of inclusion, democracy, and justice. One thing has become clear, however. Despite consensus within the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important in this troubled world, we find it difficult to articulate that message clearly. Conversations with UUs across the continent lead us to wonder: Is our theological diversity getting in our way? These conversations lead us to believe that our theological diversity is not as much of a problem as UUs’ inability to do the hard work of finding common ground to build a strong, effective religious voice.”

Sermon

Today, I am going to show that we Unitarian Universalists do have something that *in fact* unifies us. More than that, I am going to tell you what it is and how it has been there all along! But before we get to something that might be an answer for us, we first have to agree, at least a little bit, on what is the question. Someone, maybe some of you, might look at the sources we just read and think, “gee, those are sure a lot of sources! Where is the unity in such a diversity of beliefs?” Or someone else, maybe some of you, might look at those sources and say, “wow, the variety and expansiveness of those sources would include a lot of people, even someone like me.” Both of those different statements or questions are reasonable to think about. How many of you have wondered about the first question, where is the unity in those sources? How many of you have had the latter thought that those sources would include me? How many of you have had both of those experiences? Now we understand why and how the Commission on Appraisal took four years to compile their report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*.

The excerpt that I read from the Commission on Appraisal report says that Unitarian Universalists find it difficult to articulate our important message of inclusion, democracy and justice in the world and that perhaps our theological diversity *is* getting in the way.

To frame the problem more fully, let me continue to quote the commission’s report, “*Engaging Our Theological Diversity*”:

“What is, indeed, at the center of our faith? What is it that holds us together? To refuse the challenge and the opportunity afforded by the question, “is there a unity in our theological diversity,” is to back away from one of the most important issues affecting the UU faith today. As Walter Herz writes, [In the 2001 Skinner House book, *Redeeming Time*], “theological diversity alone is an entirely inadequate basis for a strongly associated congregation of individuals, or for a truly functional association of congregations.”¹

On the other hand, our Sources begin, “the living tradition we share draws from many sources.” Our theological diversity creates a sense in which everyone is welcome at the table. It

has kept us free from lifeless creeds, and that's a good thing, as I'm sure we would all agree.

We have more of a unity within our theology than we might imagine. Of course, we will have to expand the customary definition of theology to include the study of religious faith, practice and experience. Yet that's not a big stretch since this definition is also in Webster's dictionary.

Returning to our Unitarian Universalist Sources [people are invited to turn in their hymnals], it says, "the living tradition we share draws from many sources." Our first source begins with two critically important words: "direct experience." Here is where we find the unity in our diversity! Unitarian Universalists believe in the possibility of direct experience, for you, for me, and for everyone. I want to further suggest that direct experience for each of us is what make each and every one of these other sources meaningful to our lives.

For example, the second Source says, "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." Let me ask out of curiosity, how many of you would say; this source works for me? No, you don't have to raise your hand to the exclusion of other sources! Does this source work for you? It works for me too.

But how does it work? Those words and deeds start here in our heads as we learn them. Yet somehow, we have got to get them integrated into our lives before they will mean anything. That's called experience. Getting stuff like the words of prophetic women and men integrated into our life means moving it from our head to our heart, so that we automatically do those things in our life.

That is how all of these sources work. They work when they become part of our direct life experience. Notice the words of action in these sources. In the first Source, "which moves us," in the second Source, "which challenge us," in the third Source, "which inspires us," in the fourth Source, "which call us . . ." in the fifth a Source, "which counsel us . . ." in the in the six Source, "instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." All of these words are words of action and experience. They are about converting truth into living experience. ["We are done with the hymnals now"]

Religion has historically been about believing the right things. Certain beliefs were sanctioned because they were thought to have been revealed, then they became part of tradition. To fit in, you have to believe the right things, or you would find yourself with no place at the table. Theological diversity is not easy. In fact, more human conflict has arisen throughout history over religious matters, then racial, political or economic ones.

Religion should not be about splitting people apart. In fact, the root word for religion in Latin means, "to tie together again." With this root meaning is the suggestion that there needs to be a reconnecting of two things that have been separated. Do we ever feel separated and alone? Of course we do. And the solution for us is to be reconnected, reconnected to one another and reconnected to a sense of our place of belonging in the universe.

We must not always think of church history as a constant, never-ending battle for the correct theological beliefs. That may have been a dominant theme, but behind the scenes were Christian mystics and theologians who emphasized a spiritual life based on an inner experience of God. One of those theologians was a simple Lutheran pastor in Germany by the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher said, “religion must be some intuition of the infinite in the finite.”

The key to understanding Schleiermacher is to understand his usage of the word intuition. I liken the term “gut-feel” to describe intuition. Schleiermacher did not use the terms emotion or feeling, but had a non cognitive understanding in view. Indeed, how could anyone have a cognitive understanding of infinity? The infinite was the term he used to describe the divine. Infinity is a less-loaded word.

Let me now connect what I said earlier about direct experience and what Schleiermacher says about religion being an intuition of the infinite in the finite. If we return to the line of our first Source, it says, “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures.” Let me suggest to you that these two statements are existentially and experientially the same.

Both of these statements, our first Source about direct experience and Schleiermacher’s statement about an intuition of the infinite in the finite, speak to me in very clear feeling ways. I understand at a gut level the transcending mystery and wonder, and what it is like to intuit the infinite universe. I believe this helps me draw inspiration from the other sources in this list.

When someone asks me, “do you believe in God?” I have decided to respond, that I am simultaneously, an atheist and a theist. If the person means that God is all-powerful and all-knowing and has human characteristics, then I say I don’t believe in that kind of God and I am an atheist. Yet, if they mean that the divine, however we name it, it exists and operates throughout the universe as a continuously creative force, and it exists in everything there is, including within you and me, then I believe in that kind of god or gods and I am a theist.

Now I know that there are some Unitarian Universalists, who do not like words like, “transcending mystery.” There are some in our congregations, who take our Unitarian Universalist high regard for reason to the extreme of Rationalism with a capital “R.” Rationalism is the philosophical view that holds reason as the primary source and test of knowledge and data received through the senses. Rationalists *tend* to disparage other ways of knowing. If you are in this camp, let me say that I believe that you are missing out on a lot that life has to offer, because there are other, equally valid ways of knowing. We can “know” something without knowing why we know it. I know, for example, that I love my wife Wendy and I know that she loves me, but it cannot be proven in a science lab.

Finally, let me look at some of the implications for regarding religion or theology from human direct experience. First, this approach requires engagement with, and commitment to other people. Schleiermacher said, “Everything is presently in vain for him or her who stands aloof; for in order to intuit the world and to have religion, [we] must first have found humanity,

and [we] find it only in love and through love.” In our Unitarian Universalist religious communities, we must remember that here we find humanity, and we find it in our love and commitment to one another. That is our experience. That is what religion is about.

The second implication is that every person’s *religious experience* is valid. It is valid because it is based on their intuitive knowing and experience. This is Universalism for our time. It means that the religious experience of Christian fundamentalists is also valid. It does *not* mean that we have to agree on ethical standards of living in society.

The third implication is akin to the second, and that is that religion is not based on one’s intellectual prowess, one’s brain power. The experience of religion is not controlled by how big and great our brains are. This means that those among us who are differently-abled mentally are capable of having the same religious experiences as you and me, and that therefore, they are our coequally religious persons with us.

The fourth implication is that dialogue and understanding of world religions becomes more hopeful. It isn’t limited to uniformity of belief, the “everyone- believes-the-same-after-all,” statement we hear frequently. We might begin to gain an awareness that belief systems are and were historically and culturally derived as interpretations of religious experiences originating in intuition and feeling.

The fifth and final implication is that this approach to religion suggests a slightly different orientation for Unitarian Universalists in our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” which is our fourth principle. This different orientation I’m advocating is a free and responsible search located more closely to our hearts, and less so to our heads.

I believe, we Unitarian Universalists do have a distinct theology that we share. It is a theology that says your religious experience is valid, and it is possible for anyone to have it. Validating everyone’s religious experience, I believe, has been in our tradition from the beginning. I believe each of us have had experiences of mystery and wonder, if we trace the memory of our gut, not our head. As Friedrich Schleiermacher says, to have this religious experience we must first have found humanity, and we find humanity in love and through love. May we all engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning as we intuit the universe and have direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder.

1. “Engaging Our Theological Diversity,” May, 2005 Commission on Appraisal report, p. 3.