

Rooted In Our Faith

Alison Wohler, September 27, 2009
Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

Do you remember the old song about the wise man who built his house upon the rocks and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand? And the rains came tumbling down.. You can guess whose house washed away in the torrent. I used to sing this song as a child when the kids were being entertained while the adults did other things. I remember that I loved to sing this song. “The rains came down, and the floods came up.” Clearly it stuck with me. I wonder, though, if I really understood the last verse which was about building your life upon the rock of the Lord Jesus Christ? Now I know that the text of this song comes out of the New Testament book of Matthew.

As a good Unitarian Universalist child I was probably already learning to translate these kinds of specific religious ideas into more general ideas that had meaning for me and might have meaning for everyone. I might have translated the idea of building your life upon the Lord Jesus Christ into the idea of building your life upon strong moral values and convictions about how we want to live our lives. The kinds of things the-person-called-Jesus stood for in his own life.

What I didn't see then, but understand now, is that the idea of building one's house (let's think of it as one's faith) upon a dogmatic rock (that's a newly discovered geologic formation called dogmatite) or a rock of required belief is not very UU at all. We *are* the institutionalization of religious freedom, and one could think of us as that proverbial house upon the sand, especially given our comfort with uncertainty at not knowing all the answers. But what if our rock, upon which this tradition is built, is a different kind of rock? Maybe its not a rock at all that undergirds our existence, but rather *roots*. Perhaps we can describe our UU foundation in terms of roots: tap roots, feeder roots, branching roots, adventitious roots, prop roots, tuberous roots with buds to create new life. The wise church, *we* might say, builds its faith out of its roots, not on top of rocks. We can take some comfort knowing that roots are very useful in preventing erosion and washouts when the landscape is precarious.

What are our Unitarian Universalist roots? Just as plants have their specialized root systems, so too do I see our UU roots as being unique to our UU character, values, and method of doing religion.

This poem by May Sarton describes what may be one of the tap roots of our liberal religious tradition.

*Lovers and friends, I come to you starved for all you have to give,
nourished by the food of solitude, a good instrument for all you have to tell me,
for all I have to tell you.
We talk of first and last things, listen to music together.*

No one comes to this house who is not changed.

I meet no one here who does not change me. May Sarton (from Gestalt at Sixty)

For me, May Sarton describes perfectly what we are doing here, today and always, in religious community. We are human beings, starved for each other and the relationships we forge here. We talk here about the big questions of life and death. We listen to music here. We are changed here.

No one comes to this house who is not changed.

I meet no one here who does not change me.

There are several significant things that distinguish Unitarian Universalism from what might be called the mainstream Protestant denominations. I prefer, this morning, to speak of what we do believe and not of what we don't believe, although it is sometimes difficult to describe Unitarian Universalism totally in the positive.

One of the big differences between ourselves and other, more rigid, traditions, is that we really and truly believe that each of us is on a lifelong and very personal journey of discovery and discernment about what makes sense to us and what works, for us, to give strength and direction to our lives. We believe that it is through our own experiences and reflection on those experiences that we will discover, for ourselves, what is true and meaningful in life.

D. H. Lawrence wrote: *It appears to me that one gradually formulates one's religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it. One's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.*

A corollary to this idea is that Unitarian Universalism is a totally non-creedal tradition. We have no test of beliefs for membership. We have no creedal recitations in our services, such as the Nicene Creed with which many of you from other denominations may be familiar. As Jack Mendelsohn wrote in his classis book called Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I am a Unitarian Universalist, *Unitarian Universalists are people who cannot leave their religious beliefs in the care of experts.* (p. 39) We believe there is no one answer, decided upon by someone else, that fits every person or circumstance. We are a rather independent group.

Thom Belote, a colleague of mine out in Kansas recently described an encounter he had with some reporters at a protest against abstinence only sex education in Missouri. The reporters wondered how it was possible that a minister supported honest sex education. Thom wrote:

I introduced myself as a Unitarian Universalist minister. They asked me how to spell that, and then they asked me to explain what UUs believe. I explained that we are a covenantal faith, not a creedal faith. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not a creed of what we all must believe together.

Then the questions really began: “Well, does your church believe in the Bible?”

My response: That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal church. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.

“Does your church believe in God?” they asked. That is a creedal question. We are a covenantal church. We share a covenant of how we try to be together, not what we are expected to believe together.

This went on for a while. They were being challenged to think in a new way.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do our religious thinking in a new, and sometimes challenging, way.

I would continually remind us that our seven UU Principles are neither creed nor dogma. They are attempts, always under scrutiny and refinement, at explaining the values with which we would hope to live our lives, regardless of the underlying specifics of our personal beliefs. We call ours a Living Tradition. Our hymnal is called Singing the Living Tradition. Living things, by their nature, do not stay static.

We are a way of “doing” religion, a promise of how we want to be in relationship with each other and the world, not a set of beliefs.

Another product of our insistence on the importance of personal religious experience is that Unitarian Universalists believe that revelation, as in the discovery of what is true and meaningful, is never complete, forever on-going. We hold no text sacred above any other. The Torah, the New Testament, the Koran, are among the many pieces of significant and powerful literature we find equally meaningful. Poetry, literature, music and art all have their place in revealing to us what we might not previously have understood. We find truth and revelation in the discoveries of the natural sciences and the social sciences, as well as in the feelings stirred in us by beautiful music, our relationships with each other, and most significantly for many of us, the natural world.

In the words of John Ruskin: (Earth Prayers from around the World, p. 56)

*There is religion in everything around us,
A calm and holy religion
In the unbreathing things in Nature.
It is written on the arched sky,
It looks out from every star;
It is on the sailing cloud and in the invisible wind;
It is the poetry of Nature;
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us..
And which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty and holiness.*

In talking about our individuality within Unitarian Universalism, and this is important, I would add that while we believe we need not all have the same beliefs, we do believe that it is important to intentionally share our religious journeys with each other. Thus, one of the purposes of this place and time, this meetinghouse. No one mind or heart can contain all there is to be contained. There is always something to be learned, something more to feel, from being in religious community together. We need each other, in all our diversity, to be complete.

Part of the root system underlying Unitarian Universalism is our shared history. This sense of a shared experience is described by David Bumbaugh in his narrative history of Unitarian Universalism. (p. 5) *We are one people because of our inchoate understanding of the journey through time which we share. We are enraptured by a mythic sense of having shared a journey which began by rejecting conventional views and has been defined by a continuing struggle toward a personally satisfying understanding of the self, of the nature of human venture, of the meaning of existence.*

To squeeze our entire Unitarian Universalist history into a few sentences will only give the tiniest snapshot of a very complicated, indirect, and conflicted history. Our origins, on both our Unitarian and Universalist sides, come out of theological differences with mainline Christianity beginning as early as the first centuries following the birth and death of Jesus. Our early churches in this country were decidedly more Christian, decidedly more theistic than most of our congregations today. But the Unitarians rejected notions of a god in three parts. The Universalists rejected a god that could condemn anyone to eternal damnation. They also rejected the concept of original sin and the inherent depravity of humanity. Along the way over the last 200 years our tradition has been influenced by all the religions of the world, by Transcendentalism, by Humanism and science, by Earth based spiritualities, and most certainly by our own sense of justice and fairness as these are applied to the oppressed of our world, including women.

We are a religion one joins by choice, not by pressure or place of birth or family tradition. And especially not by fear. We want our children to grow up secure in their own sense of spiritual need and identity, yet open to the ideas that may come their way. I grew up UU, and was told many times that it was my privilege, if not my responsibility, to search the teachings of the world and make up my mind for myself what my path would be. I have never wavered from this approach or this path.

We are a religion that holds fast to the value of the separation of church and state.

We are a religion that wants, doesn't always succeed, but sincerely wants to put our principles and our beliefs into action. We want to help heal this beautiful, yet broken, world, and bring all of humanity into peace, equity and universal justice. And we want our Earth to be able to sustain that life into the indefinite future.

We are a religion that believes the way we live our lives is more important than the specifics of our beliefs. But we also know that, seen from the eyes of another, the way

we live our lives must surely, truthfully, be what we believe. Our method, our way of living, is the message that is seen by others, including our children.

We are a religion that holds itself accountable for its mistakes, in the past and in the present. We humbly admit our limitations and do what is in our power to do better. We admit to not adequately serving the diversity of men and women and children who are living in our communities. We understand the need to change and grow as our needs, and the needs of the larger society, change and grow.

A. Powell Davies wrote: *We are the consummation of thousands of years of religious history. We are thousands of years that have stripped off superstition and battled with tyranny; thousands of years that struggled to take fear out of religion – to take it right out of human life; thousands of years that have marched, sometimes joyfully, sometimes in agony, toward spiritual emancipation.*

We are the religion, he writes, that declares “freedom.” *Freedom from ignorance and false belief, freedom from spurious claims and bitter prejudices; freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it; freedom from the hates and greeds that divide humankind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought; freedom for equal justice, freedom to seek the true, the good and the beautiful with minds unimpaired by cramping dogmas and spirits uncrippled by abject dependence.*

We are the religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brother and sisterhood unbounded! The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never [be complete] until our hearts are big enough for the worldwide love of one another. (Without Apology, p. 15-16)

Our Unitarian Universalist roots touch on many sources of history, sustenance, and yes theology. Some of those roots are wrapped around the very dogma we have rejected, but the roots remain. It is good to know from whence we have come.

Here, though, is what’s important: Roots hold us close, but we have found wings that set us free. From these many roots, holding us strongly but flexibly in our Unitarian Universalist identity, we have the freedom to grow wings. Wings to carry us to new discoveries and growth. Wings with which to heal ourselves and the world.