

The Limits of Liberal Religion: How Can You Have a Church Like THAT?

January 8, 2017

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Hymns: 346, Come, Sing a Song with Me;
123, Spirit of Life; 298, Wake Now, My Senses.

Antiphonal Reading: Sources of Our Living Tradition

Part 1—Roger's Update and a Reading

[*Background*: I have been on sabbatical leave in November and December. I am back in January and will be gone from February through May.]

As I said earlier, I have missed you all, and I have missed being here. This month is a break in my sabbatical, and I will disappear again at the end of January. Before then I hope to connect with as many of you as possible, and especially to get acquainted with the many families and individuals who have begun attending UUSS in the past few months. Please be in touch with me if you'd like that as well.

Some of you might have questions about what I've been up to. Perhaps the rest of you could care less, but I hope you'll be patient for the sake of the others.

First a clarification. I have not been traveling around the world. I've not made another trip to the UU congregations in the Philippines. Not enough people signed up for this year's trip, so it won't happen.¹ I do plan to go on a few trips during part two of the sabbatical, and I can let you know about that later, when I know. During the last two months, I traveled only once. I went to Chicago for a memorial service in early November. A dear friend who was the library director at my theological seminary and a professor passed away unexpectedly. He was only 73, and it was hard to believe he was gone. Going to the service made the loss real for me, and it gave me a chance to see a close classmate and other friends while I was there.

Since the service was on a Sunday afternoon, I am grateful that I had the time off to be able to go.

As I promised you in my sermon on prayer back in October, I did maintain my spiritual practice most of the time. Nearly every morning I looked out the window, prayed and mediated. The rest of the day I was writing my dissertation. I spent a lot of time looking out the window while doing that also. It was a real slog, chapter after chapter. As I sat at my desk in the corner window, the days of cold, gray weather often matched my mood. There were days of warm sunshine, with neighbors and their dogs walking by—and that was hard also. Why did it feel colder inside than it was outside? Sitting at the corner window, I was always chilly, always feeling a draft.

Creeping toward me on the wide surface of my desk were stacks of bound archives, notes from several interviews, and stray sheets of paper. The piles got bigger. As my fingers plodded over the keyboard, the computer screen's pulsing little cursor was spitting out letters and spaces and periods and commas. After an hour of that, the result... was a page full of junk. I got up so many times. I drank so many cups of tea and made so many pots of coffee.

One highlight of the day was the arrival of the mail! Remember the mail? The first Christmas card I got was from one of you. It had a cheery message: "Hope you are having a fantastic time!" NO! I AM NOT, I said to myself. I AM MISERABLE!

By today, I am less miserable and the dissertation is nearly finished. I have some loose ends and final edits and final paragraphs but it looks presentable. We'll see if it's *defensible*. If it is, after the defense my degree will be a Doctor of Ministry from Pacific School of Religion. My dissertation is a historical study of the culture of this congregation in the 1980s and 1990s. I'll tell you more about it in the future. As it began to take shape and I felt less miserable, I was looking forward to coming back on the first of January. One day late in December I was working out at the YMCA. As I was striding on the elliptical machine,

¹ If you are interested in an immersion trip with American UUs to visit UUs in the Philippines (Negros Island) or Northeast India (Khasi Hills), or the Unitarians in Transylvania,

see the UU Partner Church Council's website:

<http://www.uupcc.org/pilgrimages/pilgrimage-opportunities>

a congregant approached me. “Hi!” He asked: “You’ve been on sabbatical, no?”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m looking forward to seeing everyone and meeting the new folks.” He told me how well everything had been going here. [Nod to Rev. Lucy.]

In fact, he said, “If I don’t get there early enough on a Sunday morning it can be hard to find a place to park!”

“That’s great,” I said, “Maybe I don’t even need to go back.” (Joking, of course!) He said, “Yeah, you could just go on permanent sabbatical.” I hope *he* was joking.

Whether or not my presence is necessary, I am glad to be here. So I hope you will be in touch with me by phone, email or in person. For now, I hope you will take out the insert from your order of service. This antiphonal reading is composed of the list of the [Sources of Our Unitarian Universalist](#) tradition. The statements you see there came about after a few years of discussion, deliberation and voting by delegates at our denomination’s General Assemblies. It was the work of members from UU congregations all across the continent. The list of Sources appears in the bylaws of our denomination. Those of you sitting on the right side, please read the lines indicated for you, and the same for those of you on the left side.²

Part 2 –Sermon on Liberal Religion

Every year about this time I like to give a sermon about liberal religion, and about our brand of it in particular: Unitarian Universalism. But every year I’m not sure which direction to go.

I could explore the foundational idea of liberal religion. It is this: The revelation of truth is continuous and ongoing. To religious liberals, religious truth is not sealed once and for all. It’s not sealed in one set of scriptures, unchanging in their interpretation; nor is it sealed in the dogmas pronounced by a religious hierarchy; nor is it sealed once and for all in the recitation of one final prophet.

Religious insight is continuous, and it comes from varied sources, like the natural sciences and social sciences. All kinds of literature, music and the other arts are sources of ongoing revelation. The practice of dialogue, philosophical reflection, and reasoning together are sources of new revelations. The natural world is a source of new information and a source of religious wonder and awe—nature never stops teaching! *Religious truth also comes from us, each one of us*: our personal experience, our intuition, our mindfulness, our emotions, our physical bodies, and our dreams, hopes and prayers. We can all participate in the unfolding of truth and wisdom. That’s why we come together in community, to participate in the ongoing revelation of religious insight.

So I could talk about all of that. But then I’d be leaving out our specific heritage. You know, the two U’s—those two long words. Here is a thumbnail history.

Though there were Unitarians in Europe as early as the 1500s, I’ll stick to the United States, in the early 1800s. The first Unitarians were liberal Christians in Massachusetts. God gave us reason and heart, they said, so we should use reason and heart when reading the scriptures. When they read the Bible that way, they saw no evidence in it for the Trinity. They argued that Jesus was a fully human being. He was a healer, a teacher and a prophet with a radical message of love and human dignity.

In the early 1800s, leaders of the dominant religious culture of New England were still preaching that every person is depraved and evil--from even before birth. The Unitarians replied NO --that’s wrong, and it’s cruel. They said that Jesus’ life and ministry show us that we all have worth. Every person has the potential to grow in goodness, and everyone should be free to pursue that growth. Those were our Unitarian beginnings.

Just a few decades earlier, in the 1790s, the Universalists came on the scene. Leaders of the dominant religious culture of New England were *also* preaching that all human beings were predestined, either for hell or for heaven, before we are born. A few, a lucky few, have been elected for heaven, but most are going to hell!

² See them at <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>

The Universalists replied NO--that's wrong, and it's cruel. They said God is love. No loving parent would create us all only to send some of us off to eternal torment. Arguing from the Bible, from common sense, and from the heart, they proclaimed universal salvation, hence universalism. If God is love, they said, then God makes no boundaries or borders among us. The divine parent does not play favorites. We are loved, and we are loved equally. We are loved, and we are all family! Hence, let us treat one another as equal members of one human family. This is our Universalist background.

And that's my thumbnail history. Sometimes when I'm at a party with people I don't know, and someone asks me to describe what we are, I give that little bit of history. Before I can go further, a person might ask: "So it's a Christian church, right?"

"Well..." I say, "our roots are in Protestant Christianity and we have some similarities, just as Christianity has some similarities with the Jewish religion and with Greek philosophy, both of which Christianity came from. Yet Christianity became its own movement.

Our own movement has changed and grown, so even with roots in Christianity, it's not accurate to say we're a Christian institution by now. After I say that, I may feel that I should explain more. That is, over the past 100 years or so we have become a very diverse movement, theologically speaking. We are eclectic. We do Tai Chi and Yoga and walk the labyrinth. We light candles, sit in silence, have book discussions, and go camping together. Among us we have Pagans and Buddhists and liberal Christians and Jews, and a Muslim and Hindu or two. Some of our folks are best described as religious naturalists; they gain inspiration from the natural world without necessarily believing in God. A relationship with Life matters to most of us, and we strive to revere all of Life--Life with a capital L. Many of our folks identify as Humanists, and this includes agnostics and non-theists. However, you could say that no matter what other spiritual category we are in, we're all Humanists, because we value the worth of any human being as more important than any ideology of religion or politics. Some of us do identify as theists. This could mean we open ourselves to God as Love, or to God as

what lures us to make the right choice, one day at a time. Sometimes we invite the Spirit of Courage to be with us and ground us, or we pray to the Divine Source for peace and clarity. However, if you hear one of us use a word such as God, you can't assume you know what we mean. You'll have to ask.

This is a snapshot of our eclectic religion. The person I've told this to at the party says WOW! You know all they wanted was a simple Yes or No answer. But we are more complicated than Yes or No. So they are astounded; they can barely imagine. "How can you have a church like that? Is it even a religion?" "Well," I say, "it started as a religion, and I haven't found an expiration date, so I think we still are. I've been researching the archives of our congregation and I didn't find an expiration date."

That reminds me of another conversation. Years ago, I did a wedding for a couple who didn't go to any church. They wanted the language of the ceremony to be poetic but non-theistic. That was easy; they were the people getting married and it was their ceremony. They were satisfied with my words, but my words didn't work for *everybody*. At the reception after the ceremony, I met a young woman who was a relative or friend of the couple. "What *was* that?" she asked. It didn't sound like a wedding ceremony to her. "Are they even married?" I didn't take offense. I could have said, "Yes, they really are. And you know, when I conduct a funeral, that person is really dead." This kind of thing is why I don't stay for the reception much anymore.

But most people don't react like that when I tell them about this open-source religion called Unitarian Universalism. Some have said, "Wow! It must be hard to have a church like that. How do you get everybody together with all those beliefs?" I reply: "I don't know, but when Sunday rolls around, most of them show up!"

What does hold us together? Well, it's not a single belief that we hold, though perhaps we hold many beliefs in common. What holds us together is an aspiration, an awareness and a practice. And by these terms, I mean a covenant.

A Unitarian Universalist congregation is not based on a uniformity of religious belief. It is based in a commitment to one another. A covenant is a

set of explicit intentions by which people in a congregation measure and affirm our conduct with one another. It reflects our identity as a religious community.

One of our UU values is inter-dependence, mutual dependence—which we see not only in the natural world, but here in this world, inside the congregation. A covenant is how we give words to our *dependence* on one another. It is the way we give words to our *trust* in one another.

In the words of the Reverend Sydney Wilde, making a covenant implies “an awareness that everything we do affects the lives of others.”³ Sydney and her husband Dennis Daniel served here at USS as interim co-ministers for a year, from 1999 to 2000. With their encouragement and the leadership of several volunteers, in the spring of 2000 this congregation spent several weekends coming up with ideas and words for our covenant. They winnowed the words into a few phrases, and then voted to adopt the covenant. They marked the occasion in a worship service. Let’s recite it again together (in the Order of Service):

We, an intergenerational community,
travel together
with open minds, open hearts,
and helping hands.

We value justice, compassion,
integrity and acceptance.
We seek spiritual growth,
intellectual stimulation,
caring and laughter.

To these ends
we pledge our time, talents and support.

The language of the covenant was not imposed on the members, nor was it handed down by apostles. A covenant is a source of guidance, not a dogma. Of course, it is always open to review and revision and another vote, but since this involves a lot of work and time, we don’t revise it every time we turn around.

In a community held together by a covenant, there will be differences of opinion and preference.

Everyone will find at least one trait, one feature, one person, or one practice which tries your patience or leaves you cold. Something may be important for the person sitting behind you or in front of you, even though you would be glad if you never heard it again. Something may not work for the person down the row from you, but for you it serves a need. This is what coexistence means, at least in an eclectic religious community held by its covenant. In community, there at least one thing for every person to dislike!

For some folks, maybe a particular song, the sermon and the ritual of the day don’t move them, but sitting among other human beings does. And right next to them is the person who is really into it. They can’t wait for the pastoral prayer, or that minute of silence after the prayer, or the music after that silence. It’s a safe bet that in a typical Sunday morning service here, not every metaphor I say or kind of music we sing will work for you. Yet for another, it’s just what they need. And that’s why you’re here, because we depend on one another. Even singing in a service is not everyone’s cup of tea. I appreciate those of you who sit or stand in solidarity with your community singing around you, even if you don’t quite like it for the 2.5 minutes of the song.

A covenant is an agreement of coexistence of our varied individualities. We aspire to it and practice it for the wellbeing and benefit of the community, for the people who are here, and for the people who have yet to seek us out and see if we are a place they could call home.

A covenant is a tool of awareness. When we turn to it, we again become aware that every person has an effect on everyone else. In that spirit of awareness, we practice listening, speaking, giving and serving together. We support our common purposes because we support one another. Because we *trust* one another.

Unitarian Universalists like to say that we emphasize “deeds over creeds.” What matters is not what we believe about theological questions, but the way we live out our beliefs. In addition to “deeds” of service, generosity, action and advocacy in making the larger world a better place, it matters how we treat one another in this world, right here.

³ Sydney Wilde, “Wilde Wanderings,” *Unigram*, January 2000, USS Archives.

What matters is the quality of our actions and our interactions—the qualities of patience, awareness, kindness, trust and gratitude.

Liberal religion asserts that the revelation of religious truth and insight is ongoing, and you have a part to play in its unfolding.

Every person has worth and value, and everyone should have the freedom to pursue their gifts and grow in goodness.

You are loved. We all belong together in this human family.

In our diversity of beliefs and practices, opinions, needs and interests, we hold one another through our covenant—our dependence on one another.

May we continue to hold one another, and our world, with patience, awareness, kindness, trust and gratitude. So may it be. Amen.