

Engaging Our Theological Diversity

A Sermon by The Rev. Robert L. Morriss

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The 2005 report of the UUA's Commission On Appraisal entitled *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* contains a wealth of information for those interested in the current state of Unitarian Universalism. The commission's report, available on line at UUA.org, has various chapters that address what holds us together, our history, culture, values, worship styles, and our sense of community, as well as making recommendations for what we might do as a movement to strengthen our faith tradition.

While most of these chapters contain valuable insights for those wanting a deeper understanding of the breadth of Unitarian Universalism, the chapter I want to focus on this morning is the chapter on Theology or how we frame the world.

Now the commission is quick to point out that as a non-creedal tradition, when talking about UU theology we are at best talking about things believed by a significant percentage of Unitarian Universalists rather than any official position held by members of the faith tradition. Furthermore, their conclusions are based on data gathered from those who were willing to take the time to respond to their surveys, which were sent to congregations, available on line, and gathered at General Assembly and District workshops. And yet even given these limitations, their work is highly informative.

One of the issues that arises immediately when we begin talking about a UU theology is how much our beliefs seem to be guided by two themes. The first is our history – specifically our emergence from the liberal wing of the protestant reformation. The primary gift from our history is the emphasis on the use of reason in interpreting sacred texts and in thinking about religious experience in general, though the report addresses the use of reason in greater detail a little later.

The second major influence in our current theological understanding is our statement of principles and purposes. With respect to our principles there is a high degree of consistency. Of note is the fact that the first principle, our respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, resonates through almost everyone's theological formulations. Our integration of this principle into our theological perspective radically distinguishes us from all those who see themselves as somehow specially chosen by God. To the extent that Unitarian Universalists believe in god or see a source of the sacred in the universe, we almost unanimously agree that this source has spoken to or been discerned by people in all cultures of the world. While different individuals may find that they resonate with one tradition more than with another, we rarely hold any tradition to be superior to others or insist that others need to adopt a particular path in order to attain salvation.

While this perspective invites us to be open to whatever insights might be offered by the belief systems of all those whom we encounter, it also seems to diminish our passion for putting forth what we do have to offer to the world. What is the point of

evangelizing if you do not have a unique revelation to offer the world as to how everyone should believe and structure their lives? And yet in a world so torn with religious strife, how can we not be evangelistic about a religious tradition that offers everyone the opportunity to live together in peace without sacrificing their personal beliefs or integrity?

I think the reality is that what we have to offer is worthy of all the evangelism we can muster, for what we offer is more than a set of beliefs that one must hold to be one of us. What we offer is a process for dealing with theological inquiry and with one another, which maximizes the opportunities for the spirit of the sacred to find its way into our minds and hearts and to thus influence how we behave towards one another.

While the commission's findings were undoubtedly influenced by the questions they asked, many of their insights into how we currently function ring true and are worth highlighting. In looking at the tension between a faith rooted in beliefs and one rooted in experience there seems to be a shift occurring. While Plato and Aristotle started a process of valuing abstract principle more highly than experience as a source of truth, increasingly, experience is being regarded in UU circles as having something to contribute that can not be reached through thought alone. As UU theologian James Luther Adams pointed out, "Actuality is richer than thought. There is always a tension between *logos* and being." The shift that is occurring undoubtedly contributes to the popularity of small group discussions such as those that take place in our chalice circles, where dialogue is considered a more valuable source of enriching our understanding and conviction than debate which focuses on which position in a discussion is most soundly supported by logic.

Two statements in the theological questionnaire that received a great deal of support that affirm this shift were: "*Our primary religious authority is our own experience. Therefore freedom of choice and conscience are central.*" and, "*We deepen our wisdom in community when we share our stories and engage in dialogue across our differences.*"

Another statement of great interest to me was the item: "*We are committed to the use of reason to interpret our experience and to form and test our religious convictions.*" Of particular interest here is the commission's observation that "A solid 90 percent of those responding to the theological questionnaire considered reason 'important.' However, a substantially lower number (26 percent of clergy and 46 percent of laypersons) answered 'very important.' In contrast, 72 percent of the clergy surveyed considered the first Source ('direct experience of mystery') to be 'very important,' and only 2 percent rated it less than 'important.'" What is noteworthy here, is that while reason is important in interpreting religious experience, for most UUs it is rarely seen as being as close to the source of religious inspiration as it once was.

Also of note in the survey was the fact that the Commission's research supports the perception that most Unitarian Universalists draw religious inspiration from diverse Sources, in every conceivable combination. Despite that fact that the majority of the respondents who actually filled out the survey questions belonged to congregations with a strong humanists identity, all of the sources named in our principles and purposes were

deemed important by at least 65 percent of the respondents. What this tells me is that this congregation is squarely in the center of the direction in which Unitarian Universalism is moving with its emphasis on and embracing of, those who draw religious inspiration from the wonderfully diverse sources of inspiration that have become known to humankind. What matters is not from what source we draw inspiration, but whether or not our religious convictions lead us to dwell together in peace with those who draw their primary inspiration from a different source.

Next, the commission notes that on the whole “UUs do have a cosmology, and it stands in contrast to the most common interpretations emerging out of the Abrahamic faiths” – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Rather than there being a hierarchical relationship between the source, humanity, and the natural world, the response that indicated the largest piece of common ground for both ministers and laity was the statement that, “*The natural world is a web of interdependent connections, of which we are inescapably a part.*” Over 90 percent of respondents, across all demographics, asserted that this understanding is highly important to their faith.

Also of great interest to me was the Commission’s exploration of whether or not UUs as a whole believe in a transcendent dimension. Close to 90 percent of respondents affirmed as of high importance the statement, “*The depth dimension of our lives (spirituality) calls us to live mindfully, seek meaning, and serve love.*” Despite some suspicion harbored by humanists among us as to the meaning of the word, minister Nancy Arnold points out that for most, knowing and experience come together in spirituality – “that elusive term that almost defies definition.” She continues, “Spirituality points, always, beyond; beyond the ordinary, beyond possession, beyond the narrow confines of the self, and – above all- beyond expectation. Because ‘the spiritual’ is beyond our control it is never exactly what we expect.” In noting the difference between our culture’s modern embrace of spirituality and its shying away from formal religious structures, Arnold further noted that, “Carl Jung ... remarked that ‘one of the main functions of formalized religion is to protect people against a direct experience of God.’”

Within my experience, this congregation’s embracing of the spiritual, does the exact opposite, it invites each of us to our own direct experience of what we might call God, and it invites us to have a fluid experience – one in which our understanding of the sacred is always open to increased clarity and understanding.

Interestingly, the statements about God that drew the strongest response seemed to express a kind of process theism. “*We encounter ‘God’ in our own depths, in others, and in nature, seeking wholeness and transformation.*” was a statement that was rated as important by 80 percent of respondents. The statement “*God can be conceived as a pervasive Creativity, ever evolving, that lures us beyond our limiting horizons.*” was more controversial among lay respondents with only about 60 percent considering it highly important, while 82 percent of the ministers did. Among ministers, correlations reflect both the relational and creative emphases of process theology. Richard Gilbert, a mystical humanist, explained, “With Henry Nelson Wieman, I think of the divine as the power of cosmic creativity. That creativity is manifest in nature as creative evolution; it is observed in history in those prophets of the human spirit who have tried to bend the arc of history toward justice against all odds; it is manifest here and now as we are co-

creators of the Beloved Community.... It is my mystic identification with this creative process that prompts me to continue.”

For the most part, while some are still uncomfortable with terms like spirituality and mysticism that can not be precisely defined, even those UUs who see themselves as humanists tend to take a both - and approach to their understanding of themselves at this point. Again, Richard Gilbert writes, “By *mystic* I mean one sensitive to a reality greater than the self, but of which the self is an integral part. Believing self is enmeshed in ultimate reality, the mystic celebrates that serendipitous union.... I try imaginatively to take a ‘God’s eye view of the world,’ seeking to distance myself, however slightly, from my humanist perspective, to identify with the highest cosmic good insofar as I can imagine that good. In that sense I am a mystic, with a prophetic twist.”

Of our spiritual paths, the following seem to be important. The path of love and service is well illustrated in this piece from Marilyn Sewell, a minister in Portland, Oregon, who writes: “Only one kind of religion counts today, and that is the kind which is radical enough to engage in the world’s basic troubles. If it cannot do that, then it can do nothing which merits our concern or the world’s respect.... Transformation will occur when we dare to stop talking about our social concerns and actually move to alleviate real human pain.”

With respect to the path of community, Meadville Lombard professor David Bumbaugh challenges us: “It will not be enough to offer people the opportunity to ‘build you own theology.’ They must be offered the freedom to build their own theology in the context of a community which is asking serious and probing questions, and has the courage to make deep and profound affirmations – questions and affirmations rooted in a sense of who we are and what we care profoundly about.”

Similarly the path of understanding is important to many as is the way of inner harmony. Here minister Barbara Carlson writes, “It was not until I began a daily practice of meditation and in the deep silence fell smack dab into my own shadow – all the rationalizations, justifications, intellectualizations used over the years to maintain my ‘good girl’ self image – that I truly began to heal, truly began to learn the meaning of compassion.”

The commission’s report is rich enough that I cannot do justice even to one chapter in the course of a single sermon. Again, if the subject interests you, I would encourage you to borrow the report from the church library, or catch it online.

The Commission closed their chapter on theology with the following observations. Given our diversity, it is somewhat difficult to say that Unitarian Universalists stand on any shared theological ground. And yet with respect for the integrity of individual perspective, they did offer the following statements as descriptive of who Unitarian Universalists are theologically:

We are a grounded faith. We are a faith with roots, however lightly held, that go back two thousand years and more. Unlike other more recently evolving nontraditional faiths, ours is solidly grounded in both the realm of history and the realm of ideas.

We are an ecological faith. We have placed the concept of the “interdependent web” squarely at the center of our shared worldview.

We are a profoundly human faith.

We are a responsible faith.

We are an experiential faith.

We are a free faith.

We are an imaginative faith.

We are a relational faith.

We are a covenantal faith.

We are a curious faith.

We are a reasonable faith.

And we are a hopeful faith.

Taken together, this represents a powerful vision for the world in which we live. While some may see disadvantages in our lack of a single creed upon which we all agree, it is my personal belief that it is our celebration of diverse paths in the context of what we do hold in common which is our greatest strength. It is a strength that gives me great hope for the future of this congregation for we genuinely honor diversity as well as any congregation of which I know.

So may it be and so may it continue to be!