

Reading(s)

From the cartoon series *The Simpsons*, as told by Dr. Richard Grigg, Unitarian Universalist theologian:

It is the annual church picnic, and Reverend Lovejoy is manning the ice cream booth. Lisa Simpson, by far the most gifted and probing of the Simpson clan, approaches the stand, only to notice that the different flavors of ice cream are not identified in the usual fashion but have been given the names of religious denominations. In her usual thoughtful manner she pauses, and then says, "I'll try the Unitarian." Reverend Lovejoy hands her a bowl. She looks at it and says, "But there's nothing in here." Lovejoy responds, "That's the point."

From Rabbi and Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel:

Religious thinking, believing, feeling are among the most deceptive activities of the human spirit. We often believe it is God we believe in, but in reality it may be a symbol of personal interests that we dwell upon. We may assume that we feel drawn to God, but in reality it may be a power within the world that is the object of our adoration. We may assume it is God we care for, but it may be our own ego we are concerned with. To examine our religious existence is, therefore, a task to be performed constantly.

SERMON

My first experience in a Unitarian church was Fire Communion six years ago. After a lifetime in the high church world of the Episcopal church, I was not prepared for long lines of people waiting to ignite little pieces of paper in a chalice flame as a symbol of what they wanted to put behind them. This was so outside the norm for me, it's a wonder I came back.

But come back I did, and I brought questions with me. One persistent one (I posed it to Dana in yet another form just last week) is this: What is the underlying mythos of Unitarian Universalism? Or, to make it more black and white, What do Unitarian Universalists believe? What ties us together? Is there something significant at the center or, as Lisa Simpson's ice cream bowl would suggest, is the chalice just empty?

Having spent over half a century with Anglicans, and having attended both an Episcopal School and an Episcopal Seminary, I wanted something from the Unitarians that was as rich and mythic as the history of the Christian tradition. I wanted something that spanned the centuries, something that wove in and out of world history. I wanted something I could pin my faith and hope to. But I just wasn't finding it.

Before I dipped my toes in this particular stream, I thought the common perception of Unitarians was the correct one. You know the one. It says Unitarians can believe anything they want. I thought it was like this Wheel of Wisdom. It says Choose Your Own Religion: A Guide for the Savvy Convert. Just match windows until you find one you can agree with, then become a Unitarian. Unitarian Universalism, by the way, is one of the many options on this wheel.

I have pestered Dana with questions, read books, talked to many of you over the years and asked you to tell me your stories of how you became UU. And in many ways, I'm still unsatisfied. But in other ways, I think I'm getting a glimpse of what it's all about.

Back in the early 90s, Oregon was embroiled in the No on 9 campaign. For those of you who missed it, Measure 9 was a ballot measure that wanted to write into law that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people were "abnormal, unnatural, and perverse." While I may be all of those things at times, it's not because I'm lesbian.

A group of Roman Catholics formed a group called People of Faith against Bigotry that proved to be one of the most effective groups in fighting the ballot measure and its later evil spawn. But not without their own internal struggles.

The first issue came when the Protestants decided they wanted to join PFAB. Well, it's not a far stretch from Catholic to Protestant: After all, they are both Christian denominations. Not long after that, some Jewish folk wanted to join. Well, it is the Judeo-Christian tradition so, after some discussion, the Jews were in. Then came the Buddhists. More debates, but Buddhists are fairly harmless so they were also welcomed. Then the Pagans wanted to join. Now what? The Judeo-Christian tradition has spent centuries trying to suppress all things Pagan or Wiccan. But, being reasonable People of Faith Against Bigotry, we finally decided that anyone who based their political action on their faith, whatever that faith might be, was welcome. Eventually we had members of all different traditions from Society of Friends Quakers to the Wiccans of SisterSpirit, from high liturgy Christians to Muslims, secular and religious Jews, Buddhists, feminist Roman Catholic nuns, and everything in between. We came together and we made a difference for the queer community in

Oregon, not once, not twice, but three times as three different ballot measures attempted to make us legally less than human.

But there was still trouble in paradise. Being People of Faith, we wanted to worship together. Being against bigotry, we didn't want to offend anyone. We tried for quite some time to develop a liturgy all could participate in and feel comfortable with. To no avail. Everything we came up with was either mealy mouthed and watered down to point of meaninglessness, or it contained an element that someone found offensive. Finally, someone said, "I have an idea." Since leadership of worship was going to be passed from person to person, it was proposed that whoever was leading worship would lead from their personal tradition. So simple. So elegant. And so life-changing. When it was my turn, I used Compline from the Book of Common Prayer. When the Quakers took over, we sat in silence and spoke if we felt called to do so. The folks from SisterSpirit taught us to call the corners and raise a cone of power. And in each ritual, we all found something that spoke deeply to our own sense of who we were and what we believed, and we found deeper understanding of the beliefs of our fellow members. This simple act: Sharing our individual understandings of the greater Mystery that some call God and others give different names or no name to, led us to become a community of believers able to find unity in difference.

I didn't realize it at the time, but that was my first experience in Unitarian Universalism.

The chalice is the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. And, unlike the wine-filled chalice of Christian tradition, our chalice is empty. Not empty in the way Lisa Simpson's bowl was empty, but empty of all dogma, of all preconceived notions of what that sacred mystery is, of all prescriptive belief systems that tell us what we are to believe and what path we are to follow. The only thing in our chalice is light; there is plenty of space for whatever each one of us wants to fill it with.

That doesn't mean that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want. We have our Principles to guide us. (You can find them about six pages into the large hymnal) Anything that falls outside of those Seven Principles also falls outside the purview of our tradition. That means that any belief system that does not respect the human dignity of every person; does not strive for justice, equality, and compassion; does not allow for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and does not honor the interdependent web of all existence, including the planet that sustains us, does not belong in this sacred space.

But, what do we believe? What do we have in common? One friend I had lunch with this past week pointed to our liturgy. Now, coming from the Episcopal Church with all its pomp and circumstance, linens and vestments, silver dishes, wine and wafer, and trappings and words that date back centuries, I had a hard time at first even finding the liturgy here. For one thing, it seemed to change. One week we'd do candles, another week we wouldn't. Sometimes there would be one offering, sometimes two. Special music. No special music. Things seemed to move around. The sermon wasn't always where I thought it was going to be. The readings weren't proscribed and seemed to come from all over, even from irreverent cartoon shows. Sometimes there was one reading, sometimes two. It wasn't predictable, and there was no book where I could turn to page 355 and follow along until the end. I didn't know what part I was supposed to play, and liturgy, after all, is the work of the people. I just didn't get it.

Fortunately, Dana invited me to be a worship associate, and I'm finally able to see the larger framework of what we do as a community on Sunday mornings. We do have a well-defined liturgy, even if the individuals leading worship get to tweak it a bit. So, in part, what we do is what we believe. We have a liturgy, a work that we do together, and that we can all relate to as our common thread. But that's not all, nor is it enough.

As a person who is drawn to symbols and meaning, stories of faith, and to the greater Mystery behind it all, I still want to know what Unitarians believe. But it's tough. We had dinner a few nights ago with another friend and her faith is rooted in evolution. What she believes both touches on and veers far away from what I believe. And my partner, Jenny, who is worshipping at the Episcopal Church four blocks away right now, singing an anthem for a Bishop, intersects and veers from my path in even different ways. Yet we were able to carry on a respectful, animated, and interesting conversation with moments of shared Aha! Along with moments of shared Huh?

Dr. Richard Grigg, a Unitarian theologian if there can be such a thing, says the business of the UU tradition is to re-enchant the world. Old ways of understanding our religious experience have fallen away. There is no longer magic in traditional understandings of faith. And the New Age traditions that have sprung up often seem rootless and more intent on lining some self-proclaimed guru's pocket than on helping us deepen our understanding of the Mystery of Being. To Grigg's way of thinking, the world has become disenchanted with traditional forms of piety, and the Unitarian Universalist tradition is uniquely positioned to lead to re-enchantment of the world. UU tradition is unique in that it combines many different spiritualities within one affirming community.

Getting closer. But, on the surface, that still looks like the old "Unitarians can believe anything they want" clap-trap. To find a shared thread, I had to look even deeper. What is it we are all searching for? I came up with several things: meaning, truth, understanding. But one stands out. We are looking for self-transcendence. We know that there is something beyond our finite beings, something larger than we are. Because I have chosen to live out of the faith I'm most familiar with, I call that thing God (although usually with a feminine pronoun). I relate to God through a person named Jesus. Not because I believe Jesus is the only way, but for the same reasons I speak English most of the time. I can fake good in French and Spanish, but I dream and think and contemplate in my milk tongue. Same with Christianity. The symbols and myths of that tradition are so deep within me, I find it much easier to do hard theological and meaning-full work in that theological language.

Others of you have found other languages that are more comfortable. Some of us are humanists, Buddhist's, Jews. Other are drawn to Native American traditions, Wicca, or some find meaning in nature or science. The important thing isn't the name of God (or the lack of a name, or even the lack of a God). The important thing is the recognition that we, all of us, are searching to transcend ourselves and our finite needs and wants. And there are as many ways of doing that as there are people in this congregation, as there are people on this planet. Some of us meditate or pray, some think about the future and try to en flesh ways to bring that future into being. Some, like me, may sneak off to partake of Eucharist once in awhile. Others work hard to bring justice and compassion into being through work with the hungry, the homeless, and the damaged of this community. Others find self-transcendence in writing, or singing, or teaching prisoners how to make quilts to share with the less fortunate. Some of us put our faith into action raising the next generation. We are all searching for the mystery of how we are connected to the world, to each other, and to the holy as we understand it. It's facile to say that the journey is the destination. We are all travelers, and it is true that the journey is important. But we believe that there is a destination and sometimes we have glimpses of it right here in the unity of difference.

We all have made a significant choice in coming to this sacred space, entering this holy time, and sharing our different views of the sacred with one another while living out our shared principles and values. That choice, to share our common and, at the same time, exceedingly individual journeys in one place at one time, is another part of what we believe.

Unitarian Universalists tend to be people who want to change the world. We tend to be people committed to peace, social justice, equality, compassion. We want to make this world a better place and we believe that we have the ability to do that. We are called to re-enchant the world, to provide

as many opportunities for people to find self-transcendence as possible, to welcome all who share our values and principles, no matter what they “believe” about the great mysterious sacred.

I said earlier that I really wanted the Unitarian Universalists to have a story and a history that I could latch on to. Thomas Jefferson, while not a book-signing Unitarian, still hung out with them. One of the founders of the greatest experiment on earth, American democracy, he once stated that he believed all young men would be Unitarians by the time they died. I believe that Jefferson was speaking to that re-enchantment of the world: that something new was coming into the world and that it would forever change the planet.

And we do have that ability. The flame that emerges from our empty-but-not-empty chalice can be the flicker of a re-enchanting fire that fills the world with new ways of transcending our individual existences and exploring the greater mysteries together. Not as a unified front of “true believers,” intent on converting one another in any way possible, but as a community united in our differences as a model sorely needed in a world torn apart by misunderstanding of some of those same differences.

We are called to re-enchant the world, and we have the spark, right there in our empty chalice to do it.

Blessed be and Amen.

