

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE
OF BEING UNITARIAN
MARCH 15, 2015

OPENING WORDS

It's Not Easy Being a UU

~ Charles Magistro

I'm amused by the view that it's easy to be a Unitarian Universalist.

It's as easy to be a Unitarian Universalist as it is to be persistent, courageous, and curious.

It's as easy to be a Unitarian Universalist as it is to search the murky waters of life without sure charts to guide us or any guarantee that we will find a safe port to put down anchor.

It's as easy to be Unitarian Universalist as it is to overcome the natural fear of the unknown and venture forth with nothing to sustain us save our zest for living and hunger for new experience and knowledge.

Our way in religion is not the way of ease.

We are called to be sailors; for many worlds exist waiting to be discovered. And not the least of these worlds are within ourselves.

It takes as much persistence, courage, and curiosity to look into our own depths, to come to terms with the twin mysteries of being alive and having to die, to see ourselves in new and larger ways without being dishonest about our limitations as it [does to] sail thousands of miles into an unknown ocean [in search of] dry land.

STORY FOR ALL

Whistling

~ Elizabeth Partridge

(A boy and his father practice whistling, and then on a camping trip, they wait for just the right time, and the whistle the sun up.)

READING

from *The Case for God*

~ Karen Armstrong¹

These words are excerpted from Karen Armstrong's book, *The Case for God*. In the epilogue, after detailing the great lengths humans have gone to in order to experience a sacred reality, she writes:

We have become used to thinking that religion should provide us with information. Is there a God? How did the world come into being? But this is a modern preoccupation. Religion was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason. ... Religion's task, closely allied to that of art, was to help us to live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve...

Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle. Without such practice, it is impossible to understand the truth of its doctrines. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle...understood that we feel an imperative need to drive our reasoning powers to the point where they can go no further and segue into a state of unknowing that is not frustrating but a source of astonishment, awe, and contentment.

¹ Armstrong, Karen, *The Case for God* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2009) pp.318-330

From almost the very beginning, men and women have repeatedly engaged in strenuous and committed religious activity. ... The point of religion was to live intensely and richly here and now. Truly religious people...want lives overflowing with significance. They have always desired to integrate with their daily lives the moments of rapture and insight that came to them in dreams, in their contemplation of nature, and in their ~~interecourse~~ interactions with one another and with the animal world. ...They sought to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain...They yearned for the courage to overcome their terror of mortality...they aspired to live generously, large-heartedly, and justly, and to inhabit every single part of their humanity. ...[and] they tried to honor the ineffable mystery they sense in each human being and create societies that protected and welcomed the stranger, the alien, the poor, and the oppressed. Of course, they often failed, sometimes abysmally. But overall, they found that the disciplines of religion helped them to do all this. Those who applied themselves most assiduously showed that it was possible for mortal men and women to live on a higher, divine, or godlike plane and thus wake up to their true selves. (pause)

MESSAGE *The Spiritual Practice of Being Unitarian*

This is a sermon I have been writing since I first learned of Unitarian Universalism. It is a sermon that I was actively pondering as I made the decision to become a UU. It is the sermon that was written on my heart as I was compelled, called, to become a UU minister. It is a sermon that I am writing and re-writing every day...as I learn and grow and explore...in all the particulars of my life, in all my interactions with you, and way down in the depths of my personal search for meaning.

I am passionate about this topic, this question, of what it means to practice being a UU. As I sat down to write, I had the unusual sense of knowing what I had to say, and feeling that what stirred inside of me actually needed to be said. I knew what I had to say, but wasn't sure I could articulate it, yet it was easy, perhaps even a foregone conclusion, to trust that this sermon would flow out of my passion, my commitment to this faith.

But as I say, to pin down an answer to this question seems is an elusive task. This sermon could go on and on, endlessly...because it cannot be preached in my voice only, but must be shared through all of the voices that resound through all the years of our religious tradition. And, it must be heard in the voices of those who are to follow, those who have not yet become Unitarian, the voices of the unborn. The beautiful threads one can follow in an exploration of Unitarian praxis are too numerous to count.

Intrinsic to Unitarian praxis is that there is no one way to practice being a Unitarian. Each person finds their own unique expression, their own emphasis, their own way to be Unitarian, and yet there are commonalities and themes that run through all of our individual expressions. There are foundational understandings, found in our living tradition, and in our principles and sources (which next week's service will explore)...all of which influence, some might say determine, what it means to live as a UU.

The non-fiction book club is currently reading "The Soul of Place." In it, the author, Michael

Jones, speaks of ‘inhabiting’ a piano. He tells of the very embodied experience of spreading his arms as wide as possible, and touching the expanse of all 88 keys, and of how he has come to ‘live’ his piano-playing through the practice of feeling the differing weight of his fingers as they fall upon the keys. Embodied piano playing, using ten fingers and one’s whole body to communicate through multiple notes and keys.

Unitarian Universalism is the instrument that we play, yet each of us will play it in a different way, embodying our Unitarian Universalism in our own way. We will not all practice for the same amount of time, or play exactly the same tune, or play with the same degree of finesse or passion. And, we will express ourselves in singularly recognizable ways, even though we are all playing the same instrument, with the same keys, or strings (if you prefer.)

When I first asked myself the question at the heart of this service, the words to a familiar children’s chalice lighting came immediately to my mind. Do you know it? (*We light this chalice, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. We are the church of the open mind. We are the church of the loving hearts. We are the church of the helping hands..*) For me, to practice being a UU is to have an open mind, an open, loving heart, and helping hands. They sound simple, but not one of these three aspirations is easy. In reality, they are nearly impossible to master. They require intentional practice.

To have an open mind is be able to search for truth and meaning while always aware of the tension between certitude and curiosity. It is the balance of being receptive to what is new and foreign, while at the same time holding onto what is most dear. It is to try to know while in the presence of the unknown and unknowable. Yet, in the words of Terry Pratchett who died this week, “The trouble with having an open mind, of course, is that people will insist on coming along and trying to put things in it.” (thanks Ben Wolfe for sharing this.) So, even as we aspire to being open, we still have to do the work of discerning. To practice my Unitarianism, I work at keeping my mind open, and carefully choose what to put in it!

For me, to have a loving heart is to walk in the world open to wonder and mystery. Being open also exposes me to pain and fear, so having a loving heart is let everything touch me in the most tender places. It is to love others, no matter what, as they are. It is to feel compassion for myself...sometimes a great challenge. It is feel a connection with all that is, and to recognize that connecting requires that I share of myself. To love is to practice forgiveness, over and over again. Practicing living with a loving heart is to live willing to be transformed by what I encounter.

For me, to be a Unitarian is to practice willing hands, and this means committing and re-committing to use my hands, my abilities, in the service of life. With my hands, my actions, I take responsibility for my part in working for justice, in the creation of a better world, a beloved community. With my hands, I offer support, I offer time, I offer presence. If my open mind and my loving heart are how I encounter and exist in the world, my willing hands are my way to act in the world.

This trilogy of open mind, open heart, open hands...while I love it...leaves out one critical aspect of being a Unitarian, which for me, is the practice of living in community. This is actually a distinguishing facet of who we are, particularly in the context of religion as

expressed since the Reformation. We are a covenantal faith. We know we don't all believe the same things, but we agree to co-exist together in respect. We expect to have walked, or be walking, different paths, but we still hold one another in love. We know we haven't had the same formational experiences, so we strive to welcome and understand one another. We embrace our diverse talents and aptitudes, which actually makes it possible for us to co-create and share community in fulsome, whole ways. So, for me, to practice my Unitarianism is to keep that covenant front of mind...to welcome all, to respect difference, to affirm our interconnectedness, to seek and work for a just and sustainable world. To walk together in the ways of truth and love...this we do covenant. To walk together.

So today, this is how I best complete that sentence: To be a Unitarian is to practice living in covenant with beloved community with an open mind, a loving heart, and willing hands.

A few days ago, on Facebook, I put to colleagues the same question I put to you a little earlier... "To be a Unitarian is to practice..." Not surprisingly... since we're all playing the same UU instrument, many of those responses were variations of my own (or at least I saw them that way.) But some were substantively different, and I'm also curious about what you had to say.

With your indulgence, I'd like to spend a few minutes sharing and reflecting together on your responses, along with those of my colleagues, with the caveat that they're not here to further explain themselves.

(Earlier in the service, everyone was asked to complete the sentence "To be a Unitarian is to practice...." and to put their answer on a post-it note. Those responses were sorted and shared, along with these responses from UU ministers, without attribution)

- To travel upon this earth with awareness
- To live with purpose
- Living as though you know how 'enough' you really are
- Self-differentiation both personal and congregational
- Proactive optimism
- Translate to understand and to translate to be understood; surrendering certitude and the need to be right in order to embrace right relationship
- Radical Integrity - striving to mind the gap between our theology, values, and intentions, and the moment-by-moment choices we make every single day.
- Forbearance
- Being human, religiously
- Right relationship. UUism at its best is driven by profound humility and active love
- Spiritual growth through compassion, connection, awe, gratitude, forgiveness, acceptance, trust, and commitment.
- Covenant with the whole world
- A commitment to radical authenticity, and loving the hell out of this world.
- Justice, mercy, and compassion, keeping faith with the Spirit of Life.
- Walking humbly, searching openly, loving above all, turning love toward justice. Loving as a way of knowing (maybe as *the* way of knowing?)

I'll offer you two more:

Rev. Forrest Church... answered in spirit, as he is no longer alive, but his words are alive in me... "Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are."

Or, to paraphrase our congregational purpose statement, to be a Unitarian is "to ground oneself in love, to embrace life with wonder and inquiry, to act for a just and sustainable world."

After all of this, you may still be asking, why practice? Why play a spiritual, or religious, instrument at all? Karen Armstrong wrote, as Ruth shared with you earlier, that from its beginning, the point of practicing religion has been to live intensely and richly here and now, that our lives might overflow with significance. Practicing religion helps us to integrate into our daily lives the moments of rapture and insight that come to us in dreams, or in the contemplation of nature, and in our interactions with all that is. Practicing our faith helps us to retain our peace and serenity in the midst of our pain, and to face our fear of mortality. We practice in order to live more generously, more large-heartedly, and more justly...in the fullness of our humanity.

As Armstrong suggests, we will fail, and sometimes abysmally so. But applying ourselves to the practice of our faith is to play the music of life, and to play it together.

Yesterday, I saw a post on Facebook that showed birds sitting on multi-tiered wires... something like musical staff paper. A musician named Jarbas Agnelli transcribed the configuration of where they sat perched to actual musical notes, and then played the music, creating a musical piece composed by the birds. It is quite lovely. Quite lovely.

This is how I see our faith. We sit as individuals like birds on a wire. Yet our intention, our covenant, is to make music together, to sing, and crow, and whistle light into the world. Our intention is to recognize that there is music everywhere, and to affirm that every new insight and contribution adds to the richness of possibility.

Perhaps to practice Unitarian Universalism is simply this...to add your loving and open presence and voice to the choir universal, trusting that the music we can create together is exactly what the world needs.

So be it. Amen.

READING *Why did the UU Cross the Road* ~ David S. Blanchard²

There may be several possible answers to why the Unitarian Universalist might cross the road. Among them: because that's where they were serving coffee; they didn't cross it, they transcended it; or that they only got as far as the middle of the road since they didn't want to take sides. The fact is that we "cross the road" for the same reason the chicken did: to get to the other side.

Getting to the other side isn't always simple. People we love die. We grow and change in unexpected ways. We make mistakes and hurt people we care about, and vice versa.

² From *A Temporary State of Grace, Meditations by David S. Blanchard*, Skinner House Books, 1997

We can find ourselves more alone at times than we think we can bear. And yet, there are times when we are overwhelmed by the beauty of this world or by the blessing of unexpected kindness.

Getting to the other side is made easier when we choose to travel with others. Life in community isn't always easy, but it's the only place we can practice being human. Finding our way to the other side is less treacherous when we listen and learn from those who have made the trip before and who know something about the route: Jesus, Buddha, and Zoroaster; Rumi, Starhawk and Thoreau; Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, and Harvey Milk. Teachers whose living was, and remains, a testament to the sacred dimensions of being human.

We will reach the other side with fewer regrets, and with less baggage, if we have found a way to accept each other for who we are, even as we seek to be who we might become. In community, we are reminded of our ideals, yet it is also a place to confess our limitations and express our deepest hope.

Liberal religion is not "easy street," but what we do have to offer is this: a tradition that affirms human dignity that encourages spiritual growth and discovery, and that is intellectually honest in the face of the complexities of our time. We offer these tools and our companionship so that we might help each other get safely from here to the other side.

*** CLOSING WORDS** *The Light For Everyone Who Comes Into The World*

~ Elizabeth M Strong (adapted)

Reverently I extinguish this symbol of our hope and high intent.

Reverently I entrust this flame to you.

This is the light that is lit for everyone who comes into the world.

Bear this light to others, one by one.

Let the flame go from life to life till all is lit with its warmth.

Tell that the light means wisdom

Tell that the light means kindness

Tell that the light means understanding

Tell that the light means tolerance

Tell that the light means sacrifice

Tell that the light is a vision of a fairer world.

Tell that this is the light that is lit for everyone who comes into the world.

Go in peace. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME