

Birmingham Lecture

Nurturing Our Faith

The Pluralistic Edge

the Reverend Judith Meyer
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Unitarian Universalists can find our antecedents in the beginning of Christianity, when the early church entertained a variety of interpretations about the divinity of Jesus and the status of his followers. In the early years after the death of Jesus, vigorous debates about the unity of God and the salvation of all souls could have taken Christianity in another direction. Our predecessors argued for unity and universal salvation, reflecting the reality of pluralism among the followers of Jesus. Their promising and fertile affirmations lost out, however, in the struggle for control of the church, which labeled them as heresies and banished them to the margins forever.

Our tradition grew out of these stifled but hardy roots. It bears little similarity – at least in content – to the faith we practice here and now. Yet the tensions and potential that were present three hundred years after the death of Jesus were formative for us and inform our faith today.

Unitarian Universalism still offers a compelling alternative to the dominant view of religion – an alternative that opens minds to diversity and hearts to all humanity. It is simple, in the sense that it avoids unnecessary distinctions and exclusions. And it is sophisticated, because it challenges the mind to grasp pluralism and oneness at the same time. How we understand and practice this faith has a lot to say to our world.

Our pluralistic world view makes us different from other faith traditions. It gives us a defining edge – especially in trying to understand the dizzying realities of today's religious diversity. It also offers a distinctive spiritual practice, grounded in disciplines we cultivate to live good lives.

Joseph Hough, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, has given memorable interviews recently on National Public Radio and in The New York Times, sounding a provocative and timely call to come to grips with the reality of religious pluralism in our world. He spoke as a Christian theologian struggling with his own tradition in the grim but illuminating aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Christians need a "new theology of religions," he said. We cannot make sense of diversity any other way. People have very different ideas about who God is and what God asks of them and how to be a religious community. What this means and how people of diverse faiths should view each other are questions this "new theology" must answer. A pluralistic worldview allows the possibility that different faiths in different cultures each help people to seek what they need – God, redemption, an ethical life. Each path that people follow has its own integrity, its own sense of truth.

These are allowances that traditional Christianity – and most traditional religions, actually – have not been willing to make. Hough observed that Christianity operates by an "exclusionary principle," an assumption that only Christians have received the revelation of God. Though believers may teach and practice tolerance, such tolerance has little meaning if other faiths are seen to have lesser value. A new "theology of religions" would teach that others faiths have wisdom and value too, expressed in diverse ways.

What Joseph Hough wants is something of a breakthrough for Christian thinking about religious pluralism. Relinquish the "exclusionary principle," he says. Recognize that other faiths have their truth too. Learn about them and understand their power.

"There is ample evidence," Hough said, "in the best of the world's religions, including our own, that God's work is effective. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others have been and are being transformed by a powerful vision of God that redeems them with hope and infuses their religious practice with compassion, justice, and peace. Wherever there is peace and movement toward peace, where there is justice and movement toward justice, God is present and working."

Hough's struggles within his Christian tradition are a profound validation of our own. The power of what remains when the "exclusionary principle" is relinquished is what has inspired Unitarian Universalists for hundreds of years. This pluralistic edge is what has made us different from other faiths: now our heretical, intensely humane, and imaginative grasp of the world in all its diversity may finally come into its own.

We have our own work to do, however. As expansive as we have been in embracing religious pluralism, we are not always clear about our own place in it. Although we are rooted in Christianity, we no longer define ourselves in terms of any exclusive faith tradition. The inclusive stance is what matters to us: our sanctuaries are places where we want everyone, of any religious background, to feel welcome.

We are free of the "exclusionary principle." But our openness lacks definition. We have journeyed along for years now, seeking the enrichment of religious pluralism without engaging in a rigorous examination of what makes *us* a unique faith. This is not all bad. Religion is essentially about what resides beyond definition. Human attempts to reduce the wonder of life into something we all understand may miss the point.

But religious pluralism is not by itself, a faith. It is what the world is – and it makes a great deal of difference to the world how we look at it and what we see. But simply to say that all religions are equally good, and all practices and wisdom equally salutary, and all scriptures equally insightful lacks critical judgment and self-definition.

Relinquishing the "exclusionary principle" does not minimize the very real differences there are in the world. Building an inclusive community does not suggest that all religions are all alike. Belonging to a tradition that embraces religious pluralism does mean that our faith is a journey through possibility, a process of discovery that leads us to growth.

Joseph Hough describes faith as "a response to the experience of the presence of God." As a Christian, he is comfortable with these theological terms. Perhaps another way of saying what he means is that faith is a response to the possibilities in life – possibilities that shape us, shake us up, and change us forever.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith today nurtures these life-changing possibilities. We seek them because we sense the presence of God – or if not God, then the power of goodness – in the human capacity to live ethical lives, to change for the better, to participate in creation as a positive force in evolution. We hold out the hope that anyone, of any age, ability, and background, can have access to the life-changing power of goodness and can grow.

This hope has been embedded in our tradition since the beginning, surfacing in various ways, many of them now archaic, but no less relevant in their time. Church historian, professor and minister David Bumbaugh has described the struggle for "the soul and the mind" of early Christianity as the conflict between an ethical religion and a creedal one. Our predecessors argued for an ethical religion, based on character, while their opponents argued for a creedal faith, based on correctness of belief. The other side prevailed, but the original vision of our predecessors has steadily evolved anyway. It is the faith we have today. We choose the path of ethics and character, not creeds and belief. And because we choose and test

our choices by how well we live our lives, we can function in a pluralistic environment without compromising our faith.

We all understand how this works, because we are all already doing it. Some of us may lean towards one tradition or another. We are drawn to the story or the customs or the holidays. Or our family history roots us there, and our identity is tied to it. But none of us defines ourselves exclusively in terms of that tradition. If we did, we wouldn't be here – we would be there.

We choose to stay open instead. We are one part of a whole, where diverse traditions coexist in the common quest for character and a better life. It's an instructive model in a world that cannot seem to find the way to make peace with diversity.

Our faith today has evolved a long way from the early Christian church, and it will evolve into the future. But whatever challenges we face or conditions that change in the world, what continues is our simple affirmation that we do not all need to believe alike to see each other's humanity; and we do not all need to be alike to grow together. Our common quest: to live fully, to grow in character, to give something good back to creation, only gets better when we learn from each other. In a pluralistic world, this is a good place to come down.

How our approach to faith translates into daily spiritual practice is another question we are slow to answer. Unitarian Universalism is a faith tradition that is truly open to learning from others, as generations of children who have taken their religious education with us can remember and attest. They have observed religious rituals on field trips to temples and mosques, they can speak authoritatively about Divali and Ramadan, and they are almost as familiar with stories from the Bhagavad Gita as they are from Doctor Seuss. We have sought to nurture open minds and teach tolerance in our young by immersing them in religious pluralism. We have prepared them well to grasp the complex issues that challenge the world every day.

What we have not done so well is to teach them our own tradition. We correctly assume that our values of openness and tolerance are implicit in these explorations, and we trust that they will guide them safely back home. But we rarely point out that just as other religions have their spiritual practices, ours does too, and we might be hard pressed to say what our spiritual practices actually are.

I recently attended an interfaith meeting in which a Protestant pastor spoke disparagingly of the "tour bus" approach to experiencing religious diversity. "On this side, we have Hanukkah, and on that side, Christmas, and look – coming right up, there's Kwanzaa!" she joked. She wasn't referring to Unitarian Universalism (I'm fairly certain), but I had to suppress the impulse to refute this image of what people think we are all about! Sometimes this is what we think we are all about, too.

And yet, we do have practices of our own, deeply rooted disciplines that constitute a Unitarian Universalist spiritual life. They are distinctive because they are grounded in an approach to faith that emphasizes ethics and character, rather than creeds and belief. They teach us how to live in the world, grow in character, learn from each other, and make a positive contribution to life as it evolves and changes. Yet we are so accustomed to seeing ourselves the way others sometimes do, that we tend to minimize the work, the struggle, and the discipline required to be a Unitarian Universalist.

Our spiritual tradition owes a lot to the Transcendentalists, who brought passion and originality to nineteenth century thought and literature. Scholar David Robinson has renewed our appreciation of the Transcendentalist influence on Unitarian spirituality. His work has inspired Barry Andrews and Roy Phillips in the creation of important resources for Unitarian Universalists today. Their work has taught me that our spirituality is compatible with our pluralism, and grounded in our history.

One Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, captured the ethos of Unitarianism in a characteristically

succinct quip attributed to him on his deathbed. When someone attending Thoreau as he lay dying asked him if he could see the "other side," Thoreau responded, "One world at a time." For all of their interest in the many worlds of religious ideas – and the Transcendentalists were the first to introduce a pluralistic worldview into our tradition – they consistently grounded themselves in the here and now. "I wish to live deep," wrote Thoreau. And he did.

We Unitarian Universalists wish to live deep too, one world at a time, with minds open enough to appreciate new experiences and nimble enough to keep growing. And that is not all. We also wish to have full hearts – capable of giving and receiving love, and of feeling the bonds of human care. We all wish that our lives could make a positive difference in some way – and that when we die, we can rest knowing our work is done. Our yearnings for transcendence take on diverse shapes, from a belief in God to a passion for science; we all yearn, in one way or another. Traditional spiritual practices, such as meditation or contemplative prayer, have given many of us a way to center ourselves within the vast and mysterious experience of being alive. But some of us have no affinity for formal practice; life itself is the practice for us all.

And that is where we all must begin. In Walden, Henry David Thoreau takes on all the different ways in which we make life too complicated and difficult for ourselves. He advocates voluntary simplicity in many areas – work, economy, consumption – and even in spirituality. "I think we may safely trust a good deal more than we do," Thoreau observes.

That simple statement of faith guides us to a spiritual discipline that is embedded in our tradition. We trust life. We do not turn to belief to tell us exactly what we may trust or what benefits will come to us if we do. We go it alone, unencumbered by dogma. We have our freedom, but not the security afforded by a tidy closed system. This is the hard and open path, which takes courage.

Sometimes it takes everything we have to keep up our courage. We do it every day – several times a day. Ask anyone in this room. It takes courage to trust life.

Trusting life is more than overriding our fear of the unknown. It is also an attitude of appreciation towards the gift of life we have received and the world in which we have our being. In another passage from Thoreau's Walden, he recounts a rainy day when he was feeling depressed. "I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature," he writes, "in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me." Even though we face many difficult times, we return to the awareness that life is good. We work to hold on to that awareness, even when bitterness threatens to overcome us or despair throws us a nasty curve. If life is our practice, our spiritual discipline is the will to trust that life is good.

Another spiritual discipline is individual growth and self-improvement. This discipline is also rooted in our tradition. William Ellery Channing, the liberal preacher and mentor to the Transcendentalists, spoke of it as "self-culture." The human capacity for self-searching belongs to our nature, Channing declared, but the fact that we are also "self-forming" is the "ground of human responsibility." We have the capacity and the responsibility to make ourselves better people. Not only that, but "there is more of divinity in it," according to Channing, "than in the force which impels the outward universe; and yet how little we comprehend it!"

Unitarian Universalists today still live our faith by this insight. We understand that life has given us a gift to be developed. The work it takes to grow in so many ways – emotionally and intellectually – is spiritual work for us. There is a moral dimension to development, a responsibility to actualize this divine power and use it to make our contribution to the world. Much of what we might call holy is the strength we find to grow and to change in constructive and healing directions.

Our spiritual disciplines are not all solitary. Having the courage to trust life and the desire to grow are

individual efforts, but another important discipline is rooted in community and our relational values. To participate in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is to undertake the spiritual discipline of democracy.

The democratic process is a rigorous and sometimes wrenching exercise in accepting the decisions and directions the majority elect. And while most of us see our church as a community of likeminded souls, real differences do exist and require us to make choices as a group. How to live with these choices and with each other are the spiritual practice of our community.

Anyone who has been involved in Unitarian Universalism for any length of time, learns the challenges of this practice. We see it locally in decisions we make about our buildings, our budget, and our leadership. For every decision we make, some will disagree. Differences can be painful.

But the discipline of democracy challenges us to stay in community even when a decision does not reflect our preference. We learn to yield our individual position to the will of the majority. We move on together. This is very hard work, and not everyone will choose to do it. But those who do have made an extraordinary personal contribution to the common good and deepened our spiritual life as a community.

The spiritual discipline of democracy teaches us about the very real interdependence in all life. Unitarian Universalism is a relational faith. Implicit in it is the assumption that we "live deep," to use Thoreau's expression, through our bonds with one another. These bonds are infinitely deep, renewable and transforming. They are the spiritual reward of our spiritual work.

"The inescapable network of mutuality," the image that came to Martin Luther King, Jr., as he wrote here in the Birmingham jail, becomes real for us through our own faith tradition. Whether individual or collective, our Unitarian Universalist faith asks us to be present to life and to each other. Our practice is simple, immediate, and real. We take the challenges and the possibilities we meet in each and every day and use them to shape our souls and our faith. We practice a religion of ethics and character, which allows us to function in a pluralistic environment, "one world at a time." The diversity we see in the world and in ourselves stimulates and sharpens our sense of the work to do: the need to know ourselves by living deep. This is why religious pluralism nurtures our faith.

Our Unitarian Universalist practice is rooted in our history, but it chooses the present over the past – and even that choice is rooted in our history. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Why should not we enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not a history of theirs? The sun shines also today. There are new lands, new men and women, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and law and worship."

We have close at hand everything we need to live deep: open minds, yearning spirits, full hearts. We have a community to encourage us and challenge us in the way of freedom. By this practice and on this path together, our souls will grow. Then we give back to life a creation worthy of the great gift life has given us.

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