

First Unitarian Church

August 14, 2016

Back in the 80's, my little sister and I were the only Unitarian Universalist kids in our whole town. We lived in a small town, still very much a farm town back then, where most people called themselves Christian.

There were a lot of churches, but none of them UU.

Sometimes, just to be part of the crowd, we'd go with all the other kids to the church that was just outside the trailer park where we lived. Just across the ditch and past Old Charlie's house, they had a vacation bible school during the weekdays in the summer. And vacation bible school had snacks and free loot.

We'd memorize and recite bible verses in exchange for stickers and candy. Verses like:

Luke 6:31 – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Colossians 3:20 – Children, obey your parents in all things.

And confusingly...

Acts 5:29 – We must obey God rather than humans.

Also prescribed for children, Psalm 139:14: I praise you God, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

In the bible, fearful means awe-inspiring and amazing, not scary. But I didn't know how to parse those verses back then, and we weren't expected to.

Learning was a matter of remembering the right words.

In the church I went to on Sundays, the Unitarian Universalist church an hour away in the big city, we also learned about the bible. But we learned stories from other world religions too. We learned about how science added new layers of meaning or new lenses of interpretation to the old stories. One time we searched for the spark of life by dissecting a frog. We couldn't find it, which was indeed awe-inspiring. I think someone's mother must have been a biology teacher, because there is no official UU curriculum for kids that calls for a frog carcass.

We practiced reducing, reusing, and recycling to care for the earth and its creatures. And instead of being told what God is like or even whether to believe in something called God, we sang Spirit of Life. In song we called to the spirit of life to come to us, so we could experience it directly for ourselves, for it to move our hands giving life the shape of justice, and help us always be compassionate people.

“Roots hold me close, wings set me free,” we sang.

That song was new when I was a kid, but it was catching on like crazy in UU churches across the country and it felt like we'd always been singing it. The words were just right for our UU theology.

Roots hold me close, wings set me free sounds like a good metaphor for the way we embrace learning in Unitarian Universalism.

Learning is fundamental to our tradition. We have, historically, walked toward new revelation and learning even when it threatened to shake our very foundations. When our Unitarian ancestors encountered biblical criticism back in the 1800's, and tried reading the scriptures as though they were literature, and not an objective historical record or the exact words of God, they discovered that the scriptures had much to say about themselves that had often been overlooked.

They contained assumptions, contradictions, and literary techniques. They did not—our religious ancestors noted— contain the trinity, nor did Jesus appear to think of himself as God.

They could have disregarded this new information, but instead they accepted it, allowed it to change the church.

In 1841, the gun-toting abolitionist minister, Theodore Parker preached a sermon in which he encouraged people to be willing to let go of religious teachings when new learning enlarges our understanding and makes them obsolete.¹ He quoted Jesus, who said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away." If the true heart of our ancient tradition is so eternal, he said, why do religious leaders tremble whenever a heretic raises a question? As though the faith were about to crumble?

Unitarians and Universalists were still under the Christian umbrella back then. Parker said:

Religious forms may be useful and beautiful. They are so, whenever they speak to the soul... In our present state some forms are perhaps necessary. But they are only the accident of Christianity ; not its substance. They are the robe, not the angel, who may take another robe, quite as becoming and useful.

It reminds me of a story told by the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Imagine you are on a journey, he says, and you have to cross a river. It is slow moving, but too deep to walk across and you need to keep your pack dry. So you build a raft. It takes some time, finding the logs, binding them together with rope. Finally you finish. You get on the raft with your pack, and cross. You arrive at the other side. Do you think to yourself, "I invested a lot of time in this raft. I'm not going to just walk away from it!" And proceed to carry it on your shoulders, across dry land for miles on end? Or do you realize that it has served its purpose, and with gratitude, leave it for another

¹ Parker, Theodore. "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity."
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=etas>

traveler? Your purpose was to get to the shore. The raft was a tool. The raft is not the shore.² Likewise, a teaching is useful only insofar as it helps us move further along in our spiritual journey, closer to truth, to love, to fulfilling our potential as creatures fearfully and wonderfully made.

Speaking in the theology and language of this time, Parker wrote:

the solar system as it exists in fact is permanent, though the notions of Thales (THAY-lee) and Ptolemy, of Copernicus and Descartes about this system, prove transient... So the Christianity of Jesus is permanent, though what passes for Christianity with Popes and catechisms, with sects and churches, in the first century or in the nineteenth century, prove transient also...

some philosophers refused to look at the Moon through Galileo's telescope, for, according to their theory of vision, such an instrument would not aid the sight. Thus their preconceived notions stood up between them and Nature. Now it has often happened that men took their theology thus at second hand, and distorted the history of the world and man's nature besides, to make Religion conform to their notions. Their theology stood between them and God.

Parker went on to say that there is one "true religion" in this universe, but many paths to it. The real religion is not called Unitarian Universalist or Catholic, Buddhist, or Jewish. Those are paths to it. None are perfect.

The point is to worship only what is worthy of worship, and not the teachings themselves. Parker called it God, and he envisioned something more eternal than the human-like deity people have fixated on. You must decide for yourself what to call the highest good in this universe but it will not be called power, money, or ego, and that is the point of all this religion in the first place.

In this church, on this path, we trust in your personal journey of spiritual learning and discovery, realizing that theology has to be of use in your life, and has to resonate in your heart, and that you probably won't know what does resonate with you until you've lived into it for a while.

You won't really have learned it until your living has tested it, so it's okay to grow and change. In fact, you must.

Take the religious value of the "inherent worth and dignity of all people," for example. More than once in this election cycle, someone has asked me what it really means. When we are kids, we are taught that it means being inclusive. As we get older, we are taught to be open-minded. But what does it mean to be open minded

² Hanh, Thich Nhat. "The Raft is Not the Shore" *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake*, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1994), p. 30-33.

and inclusive as adults? Does it mean that anything goes? Do we have to put up with people behaving in ways that are harmful?

As we mature we notice that the concept of inherent worth and dignity is inadequate if it is understood merely as tolerance, and left merely on the individual level. It doesn't make sense to say, each person has inherent worth and dignity, therefore each person can do whatever they want to others. That leads to harm.

Because we honor all people, and we see the big picture, we do not tolerate oppression. And since the oppression of one is bad for us all, dismantling oppression is a way of honoring the inherent worth and dignity even of the oppressor. It is a way of loving from a position of strength.

When we allow a teaching to evolve, we arrive at a deeper, mature theology.

It is valuable for our learning to be tested.

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "Let us imagine a pilot, and assume that he had passed every examination with distinction, but that he had not as yet been at sea." Kierkegaard is talking about the pilot of a ship, not a plane. He died in 1855, fourteen years after Parker preached his sermon, and about fifty years before the first plane took flight. "Let us imagine a pilot," he says:

and assume that he had passed every examination with distinction, but that he had not as yet been at sea. Imagine him in a storm; he knows everything he ought to do, but he has not known before how terror grips the seafarer when the stars are lost in the blackness of night; he has not known the sense of impotence that comes when the pilot sees the wheel in his hand become a plaything for the waves; he has not known how the blood rushes to the head when one tries to make calculations at such a moment; in short, he has had no conception of the change that takes place in the knower when he has to apply his **knowledge** (Kierkegaard, 1941, pp. 35-36).

The Hebrew scriptures—or what Christians call the Old Testament—tell the story of a man named Job. He was a Wise Man: someone who counseled others in the village square, who was revered and respected. Someone who had learned a great deal, and passed that learning along to others. Noblemen and noblewomen hushed and listened when Job was around, the scriptures say, and he counseled widows and the poor, as well. He had a wisdom that people from all walks of life found useful.

Maybe he could be compared to a Pema Chodron or a Thich Naht Han, contemporary teachers who have written popular books about spiritually wise lives. Job was like that, in his own tradition.

But in the story our ancestors tell us about this wise man, like a ship's captain who finds that the wheel in his hand has become a plaything for the waves, Job finds

himself filled with terror and surrounded by darkness. His life falls apart. He loses his savings. His home. His children. His livelihood. All of the things that keep us up at night—he loses not one of them but all of them. He has never had to apply his learning, his wisdom, to his own life at *this* level. Maybe no one has. The story is very dramatic about the swiftness and scale of his losses.

He grieves deeply, tearing at his hair and clothes. Still he acknowledges, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return.” Life is change, he knows. He always knew.

When he loses his health, and is suffering physically as well as emotionally, he curses the day he was born. His friends suggest that he must have done something wrong—in this way they can imagine that they won't suffer the same fate—but Job has been as good as he can be. If his friends were wise, he says, they would just shut up. At least they are sticking around. The rest of the townspeople have distanced themselves from him. In that way, they don't have to confront their own vulnerability, the thinness and fragility of their sense of control over life.

Job's suffering tests his faith in life itself, that life is even worth living. He almost loses all hope in it. He is utterly vulnerable. “My soul is poured out within me,” he says. Why me? Why has this happened to me?

What can he do? Laid low as he is, he cannot fall any further. The days continue, and he is, if not quite hopeful, at least still learning.

What Job learns when his learning is applied to his own life, is what it really means to be small and humbled before his God, which is to say to acknowledge his smallness in the universe.

He stops asking “Why did you do this to me?” And instead asks, “Now what?”

Whatever happens in life, this may be the wisest question of all.

Now what. It is a courageous question. One that leads him into a new life. He moves forward, changed. He is a new kind of wise man now. His wisdom is personal. It was not won easily, but it is as deep as life itself. The story says that his life becomes twice as rich as it once was. We who have lived long enough to grieve know that when this happened, his old life was still with him in his heart and always would be.

We are learning all our lives. Good religion supports formal education, and embraces lived experience and heart wisdom as well. It puts it all in conversation with the teachings from our ancestors around the world, and is not afraid of evolving in pursuit of truth, depth, love, and justice.

This openness has caused some to wonder whether there is any substance to Unitarian Universalism. I understand the confusion. We won't hand you a set of doctrines here, and insist that they are all the transportation you need in your life's

journey. There are not easy answers here. But there is depth, there is wisdom, there is soul here, and there is companionship as your lived spiritual journey unfolds.

I want to share one more thing with you this morning, and then I'm going to close. I want to share with you the words of someone we know who loves learning and who has also been tested. You have not met him personally, but you are connected to him through this church and through your giving.

His name is Nathan, and he is a Unitarian Universalist, and a high school student in Kitengala, Kenya.

He is one of about three dozen students whom we help to get an education in Kitengala each year.

Nathan says that in his school, they take classes in math, English, Science, Kiswahili and Social and Religious studies. In science they study the human body, health, plants, animals, weather and solar systems, water, soil, matter and energy. In social studies they study Kenya and the world; politics, economics, democracy and human rights.

His favorites, he says, are English and Kiswahili. He writes:

This is because I want in future to study law and become a lawyer and then a judge so that I may have an opportunity to administer justice in this present world where the weak and poor are deprived of their rights in the open daylight.

Late last year, he says,

...a lady who was ... stripped by [a] mob at a bus [stop]. The reason given by those who did that heinous act is that she dressed indecently. While people should be encouraged to keep good moral values, it is wrong to break the law in violating other people's rights, under the guise of trying to bring order in society. Contrary to the mathematical formula that a negative + a negative becomes a positive, two wrongs will never make a right. Many of the perpetrators, were reported to have gone scot free. This led to a number of other ... women getting stripped in public places for allegedly dressing indecently up to early this year. I have seen little activity being done to end this but I think if I have the right knowledge as a lawyer, I can do something to that effect.

This sounds like a young person who has a good grasp of inherent worth and dignity, in a country that is being increasingly dominated by religious conservatives. His hands are ready to give life the shape of justice.

Nathan wrote to express his gratitude for our help with his school fees. For many people in this congregation, they seem really modest, only about \$400 per student,

but they are a huge obstacle for most people in Kitengala, who struggle to get by from one day to the next.

Nathan says, "I don't know how things would be by now if it were not for you. Probably, I would not have achieved this much in terms of education. Since you started paying our school fees, I have never been sent back home for school fees and therefore no interruptions have been there in my studies. I want one day when I am grown to meet with you and be able to say thank you in person for all that you are doing..."

I share this with you because we will wire the money for this year's fees this week. A generous donor has already provided \$10,000. If you are able and would like to make a contribution, too, you can do so by scanning the QR code on the back of your order of service, or by visiting the social justice table in the social hall, or in the church office anytime between now and Tuesday afternoon. If you choose to give through the QR code, use the box for "other donations" and be sure to enter "Kenya" as the cause. You can also do this by going to the church website.

Since it began, a total of 84 kids have directly benefited from the funds we provide. 32 have completed high school.

- 17 got direct admission to public Universities in Kenya, meaning they passed well.
- The remaining 15 joined middle level colleges where they pursue different courses to enable them find jobs that will lift them out of poverty.

Many of us see all the oppression and poverty in the world and feel helpless and overwhelmed. Here is a concrete thing we can do, a way to leverage our resources to empower others.

You can also see photos of the children and a letter from one of the leaders in Kitengala at the social justice table.

While you're at it, why not grab a couple of tickets to the social justice auction and dinner happening in two weeks? You can even enter the salsa competition, the kind you dip your chips in, not the dancing kind, and *school* the rest of us in how to make the best salsa.

Wherever you are in your life this morning, may you find comfort when you need it, and companionship, and peace. May you discover what learning there is for you in this moment, whatever it holds. May you be patient with yourself and others. May you love from a position of strength. May you be loved in return.