

Who Says?

*A Sermon Preached to the First Unitarian Church
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You remember a scene like this from your childhood or your parenthood? Big sister comes out into the yard and says to little brother, "You have to get off the swing now. It's my turn." "Oh, yea?" says little brother. "Who says?" "I say," says the authoritarian big sister, but it does no good. Little brother keeps on swinging. If he was pressed, he would say, "I don't have to do what she says." Given more sophisticated language of his later years he would say, "She has no authority to tell me what to do."

Meanwhile, however, in frustration, big sister has run into the house in tears. Presently she returns. "You have to get off the swing now. It's my turn." "Who says?"...little brother asks the all important question. "Daddy says!" is the triumphant reply. Little brother wavers, then bows to the inevitable. Daddy does have the authority to tell little brother what to do. "Oh yea?" he says. "Well, I'll go ask him!" Off he goes, big sister gets the swing, and woe unto the daddy who was trying to get a little peace.

When pressed by little brother, Daddy might say that he was not, himself, the authority. The principle of family sharing was what guided his decision that it

was big sister's time to play. That's his authority. As an adult, he has figured out who has the authority to tell whom what to do, and why.

When it comes to figuring out who, or what has the authority to tell him what to believe, however, things are not so easy. Most adults have a tough time with that one. We Unitarian Universalists are often those who left churches where people were telling us to follow an authority we didn't think legitimate. When we asked the question, "Who Says?" the answer was inadequate, or even incomprehensible. I still remember my middle-school anguish and frustration when I asked a Presbyterian youth group leader "who says?" and received, in effect, this answer -- "The Bible says that the apostles say that Jesus said that the Bible is the Word of God."

I wasn't old enough to know about tautologies and circular arguments; I just knew that there was something unsatisfying about that equation. So, I gave up like so many of you. For some time it seemed to me that there could be no authority on the matter of what to believe, therefore, I thought I would believe nothing -- nothing except what I have seen and what others can prove they have seen. Very dry. In the end, very unsatisfying and I found I had to find other authorities and learn to trust them. I am still finding, of course, but here is where I have looked.

You see, on the one hand, for Unitarian Universalists, the question, "Who says?" is fairly easy to answer; we give each individual the authority to decide for him or herself. "I say!" is a very appropriate answer here. In this denomination we vest ultimate religious authority in each individual.

It sounds wonderful, and it is wonderful, but it is also hard. Because to say, "I say" is only a start. Given that we, UU's, individually have the authority to determine our own truth, now what? What will you do with your freedom? How will we decide what is true, what is worth believing? Having rejected the much easier route of having others determine what is truth for us, we must each now do the hard work of sorting these things out for ourselves. It is true that not all UU's use their freedom well. It is said that if you ask 3 Unitarian Universalists what they believe they will give you 4 answers. The reason you get four answers from three people is that somebody hasn't done the work of sorting out what they really believe. But if we are to be a religiously serious people, we must each find coherent answers to religion's questions.

In the long run, we have the same possible sources of truth as do other religious people: special revelation, scripture, church tradition, science, reason, personal experience, intuition, and religious community. This is quite a list! We'll sort through it a little this morning; for, having taken authority for our own religious faith, we must also take responsibility...and do it.

Let's go through our list of possibilities again. They fall into three groups. The first group of traditional authorities, UUs have, by and large, rejected. We have rejected them, not as worthless or necessarily incorrect, but as inadequate for us. They are: special revelation, church tradition, and scripture.

Special revelation is the belief that God speaks especially to one individual and that all others should bow to his authority in religious matters. The religion of Islam is based on the authority of special revelation. God spoke to Muhammad, told him something he didn't tell anyone else and that special revelation is contained in the Koran. Similarly, the Jewish prophets and Jesus himself are believed by many, many people to have received special revelations which the rest of us should respect. Sometimes the special revelation theme is overused. When I lived in Columbia, South Carolina we had an old, abandoned high school building to contend with, and at one point the minister of First Baptist Church proclaimed that God had told him that God wanted the First Baptist Church to have that building. He was claiming special revelation. He didn't expect Columbians to agree that it would be good for the city or fair to the community to let the church buy the school, he expected them to give into his demands because of his religious authority to speak for God. But in Columbia, South Carolina they know that one minister's special revelation is not binding on a free society, so the ploy failed.

Unitarian Universalists don't go in much for special revelation as binding on anyone. Perhaps because God never speaks to me in that way, perhaps because it offends my democratic principles to think that God would be so elitist as to tell one person something and withhold it from others, I just can't imagine a God operating in such a manner. I don't think I'm alone. So, as an authority, special revelation is out.

Church tradition is too bound up in the claims of special revelation for me to take it as ultimate. Although there is much admirable thought and wisdom in the tradition of the church, at its heart lie the special revelations of Jesus, Paul, and others. Scripture has the same problem. There is much of value in its library of books, much worth studying and pondering. But I am always aware that I must interpret what I read based on some other principles, and I am always aware that those who claim to base their life on the Bible as Ultimate Authority are, without realizing it, basing their interpretations on other principles, too.

For instance, take "the biblical view of women". One can say that the Bible supports a view of women as secondary to men (because the second creation story in Genesis has Eve created out of Adam's rib); as tainted with evil (because Eve ate the apple); and as unworthy of leadership roles in the Church (because Paul wrote to one specific congregation that women should be silent in Church). One can just as easily say that the Bible supports a view of women as equals of men (because the first account of creation says that male and female were

created both in the image of God and at the same time); as responsible with Adam for the Fall from Eden (because both ate of the apple); and as capable of leadership in the church (because Jesus treated women as equals). Which interpretation do you choose? You choose the one which fits your prior assumptions about the place of women in society.

Having scrapped church tradition, special revelation, and scripture, where can we turn? An easy place, and a traditional place for UUs, is to science and reason. Perhaps we will get some good answers here, something concrete to believe and value. But once again, although these authorities have their uses, science and reason are not entirely adequate for a religious faith.

We UU's tell another joke on ourselves. It isn't, thank heavens, so true of this congregation, but it is very true of others. Here is the joke: Why is it the UU's are such weak hymn singers? Well, it is because they are so busy reading ahead to make sure they agree with the words. This is a cute joke. It is not altogether false, which is what makes it a good joke. But to refuse to participate in singing, which is joyful and uplifting, because one has to read and judge all the words of the song, is a classic example of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Reason has its place in religion...an important place. It is important that our religion be reasonable, that it not contradict the things we observe in the world. It is hard for me to have a lot of sympathy for the creationists, for in many ways

their religion contradicts observable facts about the history of our planet. Nonetheless, a religion which stops at reason and science won't be very satisfying. Further, it is not even scientific.

In the 19th century when it first became fashionable to rely on science as an ultimate authority, it seemed reasonable to do so. In those days, Newtonian principles were giving people a very heady sense of what they could know, since all things seemed to be determined in a very mechanistic way by other things. Laplace said, "If we only knew the position and movement of every thing in the universe, we could predict everything that will happen in the universe from now on." The universe was thought of as being like a huge billiard table. If you know enough about each ball, about how balls bounce and hit each other, and exactly what force is applied by the cue, you can predict exactly what will happen on a billiard table. Someday, it seemed, we would know everything...past, present, and future. It is plausible to think of science and reason as ultimate authorities in this situation, but the situation changed.

The development of instruments and methods to deal with very large things and very small things poked a hole in this 19th century understanding of the universe. Huge things and tiny things don't seem to behave according to the mechanistic "laws of science." Most alarmingly, it was discovered that there are some things that one simply cannot know, not because we don't have fancy enough equipment, but because we just can't. When we discovered that light

was a kind of matter, called a quantum, as well as a kind of wave, it became clear that any time we put enough light on a subatomic particle to see it, the quantum, the particle of light, changed the thing looked at. Now, it seemed that we were more like blind people at a billiard table, who can only discover how the balls are moving by putting our hands on the table, which, of course, changes the whole thing. There is suddenly an edge to our knowledge, and beyond is not simply the unknown, but the Mystery.

This means that science itself tells us that we cannot know all there is to know, even about things, much less about meaning. and that theories about a thing may seem different but may be all true. To truly understand a thing, many approaches are necessary and never is the whole truth discovered. Only the thing itself is the whole truth about it; and the thing in itself can't be completely known.

This is called the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, and what it did for the realm of the very small, Einstein's theories did for the very large, and once again, shrouded the edges of the universe in mystery. It is this mystery which has given scientists a renewed respect for religion. It now seems that science is built not on facts and laws, but on observations and interpretations -- just like theology.

So science and reason, useful as it is, can't be our ultimate authority. What can we turn to? We can turn to our other choices: intuition, personal experience, and religious community.

Intuition can be another religious authority. Intuition is a larger authority than reason alone. Intuition takes into account the emotive side of life, the guesses we must make because we cannot know everything, the common sense of things that can never be proven, and the hunches whose reasonings lie, not in our rational mind but on the edges of the unconscious. One has an intuition that there is some life after death. That intuition cannot be proved or demonstrated, but that does not make it false. It cannot be proved or demonstrated as false, either. It is in another realm. Another person's intuition is that having and raising children will give him all the immortality there is. That is also a statement of belief which can't be proven or disproven. Alfred North Whitehead said that, "Depth is the power to take into account all of the things which cannot be verbalized." It is, among other things, faith in our intuition which gives us that depth.

Who has the truth...the truth beyond magic, as the young prince demanded? Who knows what is actually, objectively, always true? It is a blow to our ego and to our desire for certainty to discover that there are the only truths that are objective and always are not, in the end, very interesting. Math and stuff...very objective, very important, but not much meaning of life there. Like the young

prince, we all have to learn to live with uncertainty, to pick and choose among authorities likes parents and wise ones, and move into our life anyway.

In that moving we must honor our own experience as a profound guide to our faith. I can't tell you how many times one of you has said to me: "I never believed in....fill in the blank: grace, prayer, angels, the supernatural, life after death....but then I had an experience that could only be explained that way, and I had to change what I believed." One person discovered the afterlife in a near-death experience; saw that fabled light and beckoning hand so clearly that they felt they had no choice but to believe. Another found herself "knowing" the instant a beloved relative died, hours before the phone call came. Yet another really felt the prayers of others as she lay in the hospital, or experienced the the essential oneness of the Universe in meditation. These kinds of experiences change our faith, help us grow in faith, and deepen our faith if our minds are open and our hearts willing. On the other end of the spectrum, it is also true that some people never have those kinds of experiences, and the truth for them will be to honor and value this work and the relationships and meaning we create in it, and no one can talk them out of the fundamental reality of their own experiences...and no one should try. Our experiences are only compelling to us.

Religious community can be another source of authority for us. There is wisdom where several are gathered, although there can also be folly. This is not the same thing as letting church tradition be an authority, for community exists in the present and we participate in it, whereas church tradition is all in the past,

and it excludes our wisdom. Although we UU's proudly proclaim that the point to our religion is that we live it all seven days of the week, we gather in churches, rather than doing all our religious business at home, because of a sense that the gathered community can offer us wisdom and strength. The journey of others is of immense importance to us. We pick our community with such care, often breaking dear ties to do so, because we are aware of that importance.

What these things all boil down to, in essence, is that we must depend on our personal experience rather than the experience of others, to tell us what is true and good. So we return to the question of "who says" once again. Who says? I say. My mind, my heart, my knowledge, my perceptions, and my experience. They have led me to a certain faith, and that faith is deep within me because it is so uniquely mine. Your experiences have been different, and so it is not surprising that you have been led to a somewhat different faith. If your faith is truly authentic, truly yours, then, although it seems different from mine there may be some way, in the mystery that is beyond the boundaries of what we can know for sure, that we are both correct.

This understanding of the religious journey is the basis of our congregation. It is symbolized in this mural, which is not a single symbol but a mosaic of symbols co-existing in harmony, the truth and beauty of each complementing and completing the truth and beauty of the others.

It is a rare and precious community which can so profoundly respect individuals and yet be united in purpose. We try very hard to do both things here. It is a rare and precious community which can offer the possibility of real conversation; a real give-and-take, with someone whose experience is different from yours. We work very hard to offer that here, too. It is a rare and precious community which is committed to people rather than to profits, to children AND adults, to newcomers AND oldtimers, to young adults AND senior citizens, men AND women, to the fit AND the hurting, to its own institution AND to the community around it. That kind of openness is only possible to those who can respect the wisdom, experience, and intuition of each individual. That is our goal here and our commission for the future. May we, together and with those who will come to us, meet it with pride, and with joy.