The UU Puzzle

“I want to know God’s thoughts; the rest are mere details”

This phrase was attributed to Albert Einstein and when I first heard this phrase, I saw this is as the ultimate goal of science and of religion and philosophy. I was already attracted to liberal theology when I heard this quote, so I imagined adding an explanation note. The note would be an attempt to leave space for my on-going and ever-changing attempts at finding a working definition for the word “God”.

On a more practical and local level, I would add that, included somewhere in the purpose of religion, philosophy, and knowledge would be to support survival in day to day existence in the human situation.

This human situation I’m referring to is all things associated with being in this world in this human form. In this human form with all it’s joys and wonders and struggles.

I have shared previously that when I first found Unitarian Universalism, I noted that for me it identified the major questions and provided guidance on looking in a variety of places to find answers. Unitarian Universalism also addressed how to be in community while experiencing life and looking for answers. What that meant for me is that I came to embrace my Unitarian Universalist faith as something of great value because it not only affirms the human search for the thoughts of “God” but it
is also seeks to hold us in local community and universal community while we search.

I believe that religion, philosophy, and science should guide me in managing my whole life. The good, the bad, the ugly, the controllable, the uncontrollable, the rational, the emotional, the physical, and of course the spiritual. Unitarian Universalism calls us to integrate different forms of wisdom into our lives. This is where the UU puzzle comes in.

When I refer to the UU puzzle I’m not referring to that puzzled look people get when I tell them I’m a Unitarian Universalist or when I press on and try to explain Unitarian Universalism in 25 words or less. When I refer to the UU puzzle I’m imagining a beautiful picture puzzle that when assembled provides guidance on how to live with integrity. This puzzle has pieces. The pieces are forms of wisdom we bring together to assemble this guide for living with integrity.

The integrity I’m referring to is the wholeness or completeness that occurs when something that has individual parts comes together. When that coming together provides an integration of the individual parts in a way that greater value, function, and meaning is created. The integrity of this UU puzzle is the integration of wisdom into something that brings value, function and meaning to this human situation.
We have a wonderful description of this in our church literature and on the website for this congregation. On the website we describe unbounded spirituality drawn from scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience and ancient tradition.

Unbounded spirituality drawn from scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience and ancient tradition.

These parts provide the puzzle pieces and this unbounded spirituality is the assembled puzzle. The unbounded spirituality feeds the life of integrity that results from integration of wisdom from scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience, and ancient tradition.

Of course, mystery it is also part of the human situation. That final picture is still being revealed and so are the individual pieces. We can imagine this as a picture puzzle that when we assemble the pieces we will have a picture even though we are not yet certain exactly how the finished picture will look and we aren’t certain of the exact number of pieces and we suspect that we may not have them all, yet. That is the mystery.

Associated with this UU puzzle there is a challenge. I have noted a struggle in myself and those around me who are practicing Unitarian Universalism. It seems that we often mistake our encouragement to integrate wisdom as a mere call to
tolerance. We select our preferred beliefs and then we merely tolerate different beliefs and different philosophical points of view.

The danger of this toleration approach is that it may prevent us from looking beyond our preferences and areas of comfort. In terms of the UU puzzle, I can see that the more I favor just one piece, the more I get comfortable with that piece and the longer I will spend trying to make that piece work to fill the spaces I have. I focus on the one piece and spend little time looking beyond that piece for a piece that might be the one that would better fit the need.

Here, I am reminded of the story about a person who goes to a friend’s house and finds the friend walking through the house searching desperately. In seeing this, the person asks the friend: “Can I help you? What are you looking for?” The friend responds: “Yes, please help. I was walking in the foothills yesterday when I saw the most beautiful scarf and I now realize that I would like to find that scarf.” The person immediately asked the friend: “If the last place you saw the scarf was in the foothills, why are you looking here in your home?” The friend replied: “It is safer and much more comfortable here in my home”.

It also seems that this mere toleration approach prevents us from the benefits of a wide range of wisdom.
This reminds me of the popular elephant story. The earliest versions of this are found in Buddhist, Hindu and Jain texts in several variations, but broadly goes as follows:

A group who for whatever reason were unable to visually examine the situation, heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable". So, they sought it out, and when they found it, they touched the elephant but they each remained in the spot where their hands first landed comfortably on the elephant. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said "This being is like a thick snake". Another one whose hand reached its ear, said the elephant seemed like a kind of fan. Another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said: “the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk”.

The one who placed a hand upon its side said: “the elephant is like a wall". Another who felt the elephant’s tail, described the elephant as like a rope. The last felt the elephant’s tusk and described the elephant as being smooth and like a spear.

These people were looking at parts of the elephant like we would look at parts of a picture puzzle or parts of the UU Puzzle.

So, I ask, do we Unitarian Universalists behave like the friend searching for something in the comfort of their home when that something has never been in that place.
Do we behave like the people and the elephant and rely heavily on information from one easily accessible areas of the elephant and never move to incorporate information from those who have examined a different area of the elephant?

The UU puzzle includes scriptures of Jewish and Christian origin but how many of us put greater significance on a more humanist leaning or a more science focus and bite our tongues or tune out when we hear just the beginning of a quote from Hebrew scripture or from one of the Gospels of the New Testament. I am guilty of this!

The UU puzzle includes wisdom from our own personal experience but when we get a strange unexplainable feeling of joy or dread or discomfort, do we respect and explore it, or do we chalk it up to indigestion or some other undesirable condition and look to a scientific explanation. I am guilty of this!

The UU Puzzle includes wisdom from nature centered religions but do we seek to ignore and override nature. Do we negatively affect our climate by putting more value in our ability to simulate day and night with the flip of a switch? Do we simulate a desired climate in our living space with the turn of a knob? I am guilty of this!

So, what would happen if we moved beyond tolerance for those beliefs different than our own.
What happens if we use the UU puzzle as a way to live with more integrity: the integrity that results from fuller integration of wisdom from scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience, and ancient tradition.

This integrity results in the holistic functioning that is inherent in the UU puzzle. Holistic human functioning both individually and in community is most often seen as including 4 interrelated parts of human existence: Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual. Is it more than coincidence that guidance in these areas is provided in scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience and ancient tradition?

When we integrate the different types of wisdom, we create greater capacity to address the challenges of life both individually and in community. We have within our capability thought, emotion, rationality, and faith. This gives us a greater range of responses to the wide range of situations we encounter in life.

When we think of life’s challenges we can see that different types of wisdom are needed for different times and different situations. There are times when multiple types of wisdom should be used.

Unitarian Universalism holds a space for us to live holistically. It holds all that we are. It calls us to make use of the Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual and does not suggest that we weigh any one heavier than the others.
It leads us to developing a life of integrity. It leads us to do this by way of integrating our pieces. It encourages us to search for truth and to perform this search using integrated wisdom.

It gives me great hope that while we are searching for truth, searching to know the thoughts of God, the UU puzzle gives guidance, and when we are struggling with the details of human existence the UU puzzle gives guidance.

I urge you to look deeper into Unitarian Universalism. Look beyond tolerance and take note of the profound words on our website. Those words describe unbounded spirituality drawn from scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience and ancient tradition. These parts provide the pieces of the UU puzzle. This unbounded spirituality is the assembled puzzle. The unbounded spirituality feeds the life of integrity. The life of integrity results from integration of wisdom drawn from these different sources.

This UU puzzle holds space for our Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual selves. In this way, the UU puzzle facilitates something much larger than tolerance for the beliefs of others.

The UU puzzle facilitates living holistically.

The UU puzzle facilitates our having life and having it more abundantly.