

Love the Question
Delivered by Rev. Margie King Saphier on June 12, 2005 at
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According Rev. Davidson Loehr of First UU Church of Austin TX, Unitarian Universalism is dying and has been for the past 43 years. He attributes the eventual demise of Unitarian Universalism to our movement becoming a political one, and no longer being a theological one. Loehr claims that the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism “come from the secular culture and secular values of America’s cultural liberals, whether these liberals had a religion or not. ... In the midst of a religious vacuum,” Loehr goes onto assert, “the ministers who promote the 7 principles exalt the social and political profile of the seekers rather than the depth or ontological power of the religious center, .. resulting in the seekers being very pleased with themselves.” In other words we are becoming narcissistic navel gazers. Loehr goes on to say to avoid this spiritually sterile fate, UU’s need to claim our theological heritage. UU’s need to ask hard religious questions, such as “What’s worth believing?” “Are there profound truths about life that makes demands on people of character whether we like it or not?” I say to Loehr that the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism ALONG WITH THE FIVE SOURCES do ask the hard questions and ask for action as well. The Principles and Sources challenge each one of us to determine what is worth believing.

But Loehr is not the only one who challenges UU’s about their faith identity and development. A few years ago Sheldon and I attended UU Ministers’ Association Convocation in Birmingham , AL. In a somewhat similar vein as Loehr, Rev. Daniel O’Connell expressed his concern that Unitarian Universalism promotes great deeds without solid theological grounding. According to O’Connell, when asked if UU’s “have a basic belief that undergirds religious life, the answer often is “we believe and live as life matters.” Although I cannot

argue with this statement, I have always found it rather arrogant; because it does not recognize that all religions stress that one should live their life as it matters.

While teaching the Religious Education middle school curriculum Neighboring Faiths this past year, Loehr's and O'Connell's arguments came back to me. As I thought about these charges, the more I felt these charges had more to do with living in a predominately Judaic Christian country; than a lack of UU identity and lack of faith development. In the Abrahamic traditions [Judaism, Christianity and Islam], hybrid faith is often criticized, because it is perceived to be a blasphemy against the one true God, who is the sole source of revelation. Hybrid faith, a word phrase I coined, draws on the wisdom of other religions. It is also believed that to have depth in one's faith, one needs to delve deeply into only one tradition. It is true that spiritual eclecticism [or syncretism] has its risks of being superficial, but it can also afford the opportunity for one's spiritual quest to become enlivened by the truth and wisdom found in many traditions.

When studying other religions, I have observed that UU adults, as well as youth, identify with one or more of the religions being studied. This is why we often hear a UU say, "I am a Christian UU, or Jewish UU, Buddhist UU and so on." Or if you have met my husband, he will tell you, "I am a UU Jew Bu." It is my belief these hybrid faith seekers remain Unitarian Universalist because they ardently believe in freedom of thinking and the respect for reason that is inherent to the tradition of Unitarian Universalism. In Eastern religious traditions hybridization of faiths is far more common. In Hinduism, it is recognized that there are many paths to the Absolute. Jesus is considered one of the many avatars [or God Incarnate] that God sent to be on earth. In many Asian countries, it is common to find people who bring Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Hinduism or Confucianism to different areas of their life. Unlike the three Abrahamic

religions, Eastern religions and Unitarian Universalism do not claim they have the absolute truth instead they believe that “revelation” is continuous.

So what is the theological grounding of Unitarian Universalism, when there is no requirement to profess the existence of god? Personally I turn to three covenants. The first covenant is the Principles and Sources of the UUA that we recited during opening words. I believe that the Principles have sound theological foundations when **we remember to ground them in the five sources.** The second is also found in the Living Tradition, # 471 by L. Griswold Williams. The first three lines speak most profoundly to me.

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest for truth is our sacrament
And service is our prayer.

Love is explicit in this covenant, as are the quest for truth and service. This trinity of love, quest for truth, and service is implicitly about expanding our perceptions to be more inclusive, to expanding our reality to becoming a larger reality - not a larger reality that is constant but a larger reality that is continuously revealed.

The last is the covenant we say here at UFPC:

As a free fellowship of this historic church
We unite to lift our hearts and open our minds to a larger reality;
To accept, support and encourage one another;
To seek the wisdom in all religions;
To cherish and sustain the web of life;
And to strive for justice, compassion, and peace.

These three covenants answer the question, “What’s worth believing?” Together these covenants express the passionate commitment to free religious quest that is

at the core of our faith. The religious quest is continually expanded by practicing compassion and acts of loving kindness, by seeking the wisdom in all religions, by striving for justice, compassion and peace.

“Are there profound truths in Unitarian Universalism about life that makes demands on people of character whether we like it or not?” I answer “YES.” The profound truth is our perceptions limit our vision and experience of a larger reality. The on-going passionate religious quest for truth as understood within Unitarian Universalism helps us shed these self-limiting perceptions. These glimpses, whether visual or experiential, often call us to action.

A few months ago while visiting my sisters in New Jersey, we attended a Sunday service at the UU Society of Cherry Hill. Rev. Ed Lane, who was the first minister to serve Chin its early history and who is now retired and lives in Wellesley, MA, was preaching. Ed stated, “Faith is trust in the unknown. So love the questions! Live the questions, so you can live your way into the answers.” This is a **THEOLOGY OF BECOMING, A THEOLOGY OF BEING.** Ed illustrated this understanding of a larger reality always becoming, always giving continuous revelation by telling a story, which is as follows:

There once was a group of children playing a game called, “Finding God.” They found God in rainbows, in the rain, in sunshine, in an act of kindness, in compassion. They saw God in the flowers, in birds, in animals, in mountains. They even saw God in each other. All these things were like pieces of a puzzle that fit together. But some pieces were blank. The children looked and looked for the missing pieces, but they were nowhere to be found. When the children asked why some pieces were blank, God replied, “That is my mystery – because I am never static. I am always evolving.”

Now there is a problem with this story. The problem is the word "God" and the pronoun "I," as God uses it in the story. As soon as these nouns are used, the concept of God, or the larger reality becomes concretized, the mystery is no longer evolving and is no longer a mystery. The larger reality has just been down-sized to reality and the quest for truth has become limited. We need to remember the mystery is always greater than its name.

In this country, in this day and age, when it comes to understanding God, people are often like the little girl who was in class drawing a picture. The teacher came to the girl's desk and asked her what was she drawing. The little girl responded that she was drawing a picture of God. The teacher responded, "Oh, Honey, don't you know, nobody knows what God looks like?" The little girl looked up at the teacher and firmly replied, "They will when I'm done." This attitude of "knowing" God and what God wants is the basis of all fundamentalisms. Just an aside - Ed Lane suggests that when religious liberals speak with fundamentalist about God, the appropriate reply is "I don't disagree with your God, Jesus or Allah, but I am afraid of your actions in the name of God."

In contrast, the core of Unitarian Universalism is the "passionate commitment of free religious search," a commitment to the on-going process of becoming and being.

The core of religious liberalism depends on the principle that "revelation" is continuous; and meaning is an on-going process that is always evolving.

How do UU's cultivate faith? When Rev. John Hickey of the UU Urban Ministry preached here a few months ago, he described Unitarian Universalism as "Love over creeds, while full heartedly embracing our interdependence." He also suggested that "the spiritual practice of Unitarian Universalists is full engagement of the world." Although I agree with John, I need to add a word of

warning, because if we do not turn to the five sources, our full engagement of the world can become based solely on the secular culture and secular values of American liberals.

Sheldon, Michelle Walsh, our ministerial intern who will be joining us in September and I are very excited about developing opportunities for you to explore and deepen your faith. Religious education is not for children only. One of the constant needs we hear expressed from the congregation is that you, the adults, want more religious education and opportunities to explore different spiritual practices. From what I hear from the participants in Sheldon's class *Building Your UU Theology*, not only are they exploring their faith and beliefs, but the class has become a community of spiritual learners. One of our goals for next year is to create more communities of spiritual learners.

To conclude, I am going to read David Wolfe's words about his experience as a spiritual learner studying the *Neighboring Faith* curriculum. "From Rocky and the other Buddhist's, I learned that if you lead a good life, you will be rewarded in another life after you die. I learned that every living thing has a soul that should be respected - an important idea behind re-incarnation. I learned that you should not be afraid to follow what you believe in and to always find love in your heart for everybody, not just family and friends. I also believe in love and kindness is what we all should do, and the world would be a better place if more people lived like that."

Thank you David for your concise and to the point faith statement.