

Welcome Reading:

Welcome to the world! For is this not part of what it means to be human? We are always born in the middle of stories. The dramas - of our families, our economy, our schools, our government - of our churches - began a long time ago. The patterns of people, ideas and assumptions, especially about authority and division of labor, and the plot line, the direction in which things are moving, or not going anywhere -- All these patterns were set long before we even start to understand what is going on. ~
Rev. Alice Blair Wesley

(The Rev. Alice Blair Wesley is a retired minister and scholar living in Bellevue, Washington. She delivered the 2000-2001 Minns Lectures on the importance of covenants to Unitarian Universalism, and wrote the introduction to the 2008 Skinner House Books edition of *The Cambridge Platform*.)

Story for All Ages:

(As an artist, writer, and teacher J. Ruth Gendler is committed to the transformational potential of the arts. Her book, *The Book of Qualities* is now in its 40th printing, has been adapted as a two act theater piece and translated into German, Japanese, and Chinese. Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, Gendler currently lives in Berkeley, CA.)

Doubt – Doubt camped out in the living room last week. I told him that we had had too many house guests. Doubt doesn't listen. He keeps saying the same thing again and again and again until I completely forget what I am trying to tell him. Doubt is demanding and not very generous, but I appreciate his honesty.

Faith – Faith lives in the same apartment building as Doubt. When Faith was out of town visiting her uncle in the hospital, Doubt fed the cat and watered the asparagus fern. Faith is comfortable with Doubt because she grew up with him. Their mothers are cousins. Faith is not dogmatic about her beliefs like some of her relatives. Her friends fear that Faith is a bit stupid. They whisper that she is naïve and she depends on Doubt to protect her from the meanness of life. In fact, it is the other way around. It is Faith who protects Doubt from Cynicism.

First Reading:

(Judith Walker-Riggs, UU Minister. An interim minister which is a minister hired by a congregation to shake things up after the departure of a long time minister. Interim ministers are a special breed who knows that they are pre-fired the minute they walk into the room. She has been pre-fired by 5 congregations in past 10 years - most recently in El Paso Texas.)

Long long ago, it seemed so simple. The universe was a three-storied apartment house, with heaven on the top floor, full of gods and stars; earth in the middle, full of people and animals and plants; and hell in the basement, full of terrible scary things. God had nothing else to do but sit up there watching us. We were the center of attention. We were his people.

Then came Copernicus. He said that the sun did not move around the earth at all, but was a fixed star. He said it was the earth and us on it that did the moving, and worse, that the earth was just one of the planets that so moved, one among many, and not at the center of anything at all...

In the last few decades, we have been entering a new vision for the universe as radical and revolutionary as the Copernican changeover, and we still have not worked out what it all means, either in theology or in our view of what humanity is and what we ought to do with our lives.

Second Reading:

(Rev. Davidson Loehr, most recently the minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, has a way of phrasing the role of Religion in our lives. Rev Loehr is an expert on liberal religion and can trace its roots back 4000 years. He was also the only UU to serve on the original group of Jesus Seminar Scholars. His view of religion is this:)

We all live out of some center of values. Everybody does. We make a contract with those values and treat them as gods, as our religion. These gods can be anything — greed, power, love, sexual prowess, being really cool - where we focus our attention and intention. And the contract we make with them is the same every time. It's very simple.

The deal is: I'll give you my life, heart, soul, mind, and energy. In exchange I want a life worth living - a life full of integrity and authenticity so that at death I can look back and say, I am so glad that this is the religion I served.

Reflections

I am not a minister and I am not an historian. In fact I have only been Unitarian Universalist for about eight years. However, like the early view of the universe, where the earth was the center of all things, Unitarian Universalism has moved into the center of my existence and I have been “born again”...born into a faith where the mystery, the uncertainty, the sweet/sour riddle of life is not the problem, it's the answer. I live in an apartment building where faith lives one floor above me and my neighbors, and doubt one floor below us and because of where we live – between the two ...we are all saved.

And you just thought I was renting a room from you. For those who do not know this...I actually do live in this building, one floor up. And where I live, between faith and doubt, we are all saved...but don't go raising my rent because of that...

In very simple historical terms, American Unitarian Universalism is about 3 dates, well, 4 actually, 1648 is the first date and if you want to know about that date, you will need to wait until we move our conversation about Unitarian Universalism into the Ballroom, at the end of this service.

The other three dates are 1793, 1825 and 1961.

- In 1793 the Universalist Church of America was formed.
- In 1825 Unitarian ministers formed the American Unitarian Association.
- And in 1961 – the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association consolidated into the Unitarian Universalist Association.

But behind those dates and before those dates are the ever present stories of women and men living between faith and doubt and striving to make sense of their world - trying to, as Judith Walker Riggs puts it: “work out what it all means and what we ought to do with our lives”. So I’m going to introduce Unitarian Universalism by briefly sharing what some of our American ancestors have done with this faith.

In 1793 when the Universalist Church of America was founded it was definitely Christian but it insisted on the peculiar notion, peculiar for that time in America, that God would not damn anyone to hell. This idea was not invented by the Universalist, but they were the first to grab that saving message and reshape the American landscape with it... No one goes to hell. OK...they allowed for some very long years of atonement for some, but no loving God would ever condemn souls to eternal hellfire. This turned Christianity upside down and sideways....Human-kind was no longer intrinsically evil and God would no longer bifurcate existence, dividing us into the saved and the damned. The Universalists set up districts on the frontier...frontiers like Ohio, Kentucky and Alabama - not to serve existing congregations but:

1. to be printing houses for pamphlets, which was the broadcast medium of the day,
2. and a base for circuit-riding ministers.

They did this to spread the word. And it was a popular message. Many congregations blossomed into existence and Universalism was, for awhile, the 6th largest denomination in America. So in the late 1700’s our ancestors gave their lives over to the task of “saving all souls”.

Unitarians in the late 18th and early 19th century, spent their life’s energy on the “Copernican changeover” - that is leading the way toward reconciling religion, the

central organizing element of life at that time with the enormous scientific advances of the day...chemistry, electricity, physics, evolution. When Joseph Priestley was not busy discovering oxygen, he was busy founding Unitarianism in England and advocating for the free and open exchange of ideas. He was busy advocating the toleration of and equal rights for religious dissenters. He was busy supporting the French Revolution. He was also busy getting his house and church burnt down by a mob, moving to the United States and helping to establish Unitarianism here. He is the namesake of our current UU district just south of us, the Joseph Priestley District.

By the early 1800's, William Ellery Channing arose as the primary advocate, and in some ways definer, of Unitarianism. From the pulpit and pamphlet, he gave his life's energy to defending the assertions that God is not divisible by 3, that humans are intrinsically good and not evil and that theological ideas must be subjected to the light of reason. He even postulated that humans have the potential to be like God - a truly heretical statement among the Calvinist forces of his day. His words had a strong influence on the American transcendental movement which, in turn, through Ralph Waldo Emerson, had a strong influence on Unitarianism. So Priestley and Channing championed world views at a time when religion and the scientific method were just beginning their now 200 year-old effort to co-exist. If you remember your science classes, you will recall that the scientific method is, in large part, a way of systematizing doubt. So, for Channing and Priestley too, faith lived upstairs and doubt lived downstairs and they dedicated their lives to exploring how to live between the two.

In the latter half of the 1800's Clara Barton, a self-proclaimed Universalist, brought care and compassion to the front-lines of the Civil War, eventually founding the American Red Cross. She worked alongside Susan B. Anthony, a Unitarian, in the women's suffragette movement. Compassion during war, and woman's equality, along with abolition of slavery, which both women worked for, were a significant portion of their religion of the day. A religion that empowered Ms. Anthony to give 75 – 100 speeches on women's rights every year for 45 years.

During that same period, Olympia Brown became the first female minister to be ordained by a religious denomination and that denomination was the Universalist church. Just as significant, she was actually able to find work as a full-time Universalist minister. Here is a woman who followed her values into a man's world, and kindled a quiet revolution in religious gender equality that burned until - by the spring of 2000 - UU became the first large denomination to have more female ministers than male.

In the early 1900's Rev John Dietrich, a Unitarian minister considered by many to be the father of religious humanism described what the emerging religion among Unitarians was then. And I quote, using the original language which was not sensitive to gender bias at the time:

Humanism in religion is the shifting of emphasis from God to man, making the enrichment of human life...the object of our allegiance and consecration....Man must by his own effort carve out his own destiny.

He continues:

If we live in a great impersonal universe...it matters tremendously how we conduct ourselves, for we are actually the makers of human destiny. We are not simply individuals who have a beginning in life and an ending. We are links in the endless chain of life. To us has been committed all that life has won from chaos in all the ages past. Only through us can that trust from the past be transmitted to the future.

Our chief business, therefore, is to put beauty in place of ugliness, good in place of evil, laughter in place of tears; to dispel error with knowledge, hatred with love; displace strife and contention with peace and cooperation... And somehow, within us, is a voice which urgently calls us to these tasks. It is the life-urge. It is the aspiration after better things. It is man at his best and bravest. It is what many call divine. Some even call it God. In any case, it is religion.

These religious ideas and others like them were sufficiently threatening to religious conservatives of the day as to cause the birth of Christian fundamentalism during the first decade of the 20th Century.

By the later half of the 20th century and into my lifetime, James Luther Adams, the son of one of the itinerant fundamentalist preachers that arose in reaction to religious humanism, set forth what he called the 5 smooth stones of religious liberalism. This is a reference from the biblical book of Samuel where David selects 5 stones from a stream-bed before he goes to meet Goliath. The 5 stones of James Luther Adams are:

1. Revelation is open and continuous. It is available to all through everyday experience, nature, science and the spiritual writings of all faiths and cultures.
2. Relationships are consensual and never coerced. That coming together in community is an act of free will and that the relationships we form within this community must be respectful and safe.

3. The establishment of a just and loving community. That we are morally obligated to work for justice and, equally, to learn how to give and receive love from one another.
4. We deny the immaculate conception of virtue – good things are brought about by hard work done by human hands.
5. Resources are available – both human and divine – that can help to bring about the changes we seek. These resources are a cause for ultimate optimism.

Rev. Matt Tittle of Houston Texas best sums this 5th stone up when he says:

“No matter how tragic life is, no matter how hopeless you feel, the gifts of grace in this world are abundant and demand that we recognize them and act on them...”

This comes close to my personal definition of Unitarian Universalism, which, by the way is always open for revision, I believe UU is a covenantal faith that seeks a just world made whole through love and hope.

So how are other contemporary Unitarian Universalists describing the faith they dedicate their life’s energy to?

From a conversation with Rev. Laural Hallman, one of this year’s candidates for the UUA presidency, I came to understand that faith is what happens in the space between what we have control over in our lives and what we don’t. I can’t control the passage of time, but I can control how I use that time - and faith vibrates in the space between those two statements.

For Fred Wooden, a UU minister in Grand Rapids, our faith is about: “Freeing the mind, growing the soul, and changing the world”.

For UU children all across America right now,

Unitarian Universalists. (Make thumb and index finger of each hand into a "U.")

This is the church of the open mind, (Put hands on either side of the head and open them out.)

The loving heart (Clasp hands over heart.)

And the helping hands. (Extend hands in front of self.)

Together we care for our Earth (Raise hands above the head to form a globe.)

And work for friendship and peace in our world. (Gently grasp the hand of the person on either side.)

For Judith Frediani, the current Director of Lifespan Faith Development at the UUA, our faith comes down to three simple questions. “What? So what? And Now What?”

And for Reverend Peter Morales, our newly elected UUA president, “Unitarian Universalism is the faith of our time. A Faith with astonishing growth potential if we discover how to unleash it.”

We live in troubling times. For many of us here, the election of President Obama was supposed to usher in a time when we could breathe easier – but it has not. For others, perhaps not here, but certainly in other UU congregations, President Obama’s election has caused genuine concern and worry for the future. For these reasons and many more, we doubt our country, we doubt our democracy, we doubt our neighbors, and sometimes we doubt one another.

“Doubt camped out in the living room last week and has brought over too many house guests.”

One of the hardest things we are asked to do by Unitarian Universalism is “keep the faith” and in this faith, as Matt Tittle puts it,

“No matter how tragic life is, no matter how hopeless you feel, the gifts of grace in this world are abundant and demand that we recognize them and act on them...”

As the Welcoming Words reminded us at the beginning of this service, we have been born into the middle of a story... a story about facing the raw realities of life...and still finding hope, still embracing mystery, still celebrating “that existence even exists” and still daring to believe we can improve this story’s plot line. It’s a story about a religion that took the certainty out of life and is striving to learn how to - not just live - but to thrive in that uncertainty...with Faith upstairs and Doubt downstairs and us working toward this new radical, revolutionary vision, what it all means, and what we ought to do with our lives – together. So may it be.

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