

More Light (pt 2)  
UUF

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I want to pick up where I left off a couple weeks ago. I was talking about religion, God and our generalized unease as Unitarian Universalist with religious language and experience. I want to explore this territory with you because I think it is important.

As an ordained UU minister, I'm in a continuous line of people committed to the life and well being of our faith. We are people connected to the past with responsibility for our collective future.

I think this territory is important for the future of Unitarianism Universalism. I think it's important for this congregation and I believe it has importance for each one of us as individuals. If that's not enough, I believe we have a message that helps to heal, which is particularly important in this day and age for the larger society.

Let me begin with a statement of fact. Unitarian Universalism is a religion. We are a religion because our bylaws say we are and the US Government allows us a tax exemption. The bylaws adopted in 1984 and '85 say, in part, "The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes... (you can find it a couple pages before hymn #1 in the grey hymnal.)

Our UUA website says, the most significant increase in numbers for any time in Unitarian, Universalist, or Unitarian Universalist history was between 1948 and 1967. Perhaps One third of the people came through the doors of newly organized "fellowships." The Fellowship Movement is one of the most interesting in all our efforts at evangelism.

A plan was launched in 1947, whereby the American Unitarian Assoc. would grant recognition and offer assistance to groups of religiously liberal laypeople gathered without a minister. Many began in heartland towns where universities were located, reflecting a growing interest among well educated Americans in individualism, humanism, and social activism.

A fellowship was defined as a minimum of ten religiously liberal laypeople who expressed sympathy with the purposes of the AUA, had bylaws, and made an ongoing financial commitment to the AUA.

Munroe Husbands, Director of Fellowship and Associate Director of Extension, noted that many who were first drawn to the fellowships had "developed an antipathy toward the entire religious vocabulary: worship, God, prayer, invocation, benediction." But interestingly, Husbands continued, "slowly the individual divests him- (or her-)self of this negativism, talks out the resentment accumulated over the years, and begins formulating a positive philosophy of religion."

Today opinions vary about the success of the Fellowship Movement, our website tells us. Holly Ulbrich author of *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and its Legacy* writes:

"The positive view maintains that the congregations planted as lay-led fellowship(s) between 1948 and 1967 saved Unitarianism from near extinction and converted a regional religious movement into a truly national one. Along with growing the denomination, fellowships brought innovation, vitality, and lay leadership into a religious community greatly in need of fresh air... At the other end of the spectrum is the view that the fellowship movement spawned small, introverted, even hostile groups that did not want to grow or welcome newcomers, did not identify with the larger denomination, and represented Unitarian Universalism in ways that did not reflect the larger movement's self-understanding."

I want to underscore that our largest growth spurt reflected a growing interest among well educated Americans, in individualism, humanism, and social activism. It's not an accident that until the last few years, UUs per capita, had the highest educational level of any US denomination. I understand Hindus have passed us.

Wikipedia defines religion as "a cultural system of behaviors and practices, world views, sacred texts, holy places, ethics, and societal organization that relate humanity to what an anthropologist has called "an order of existence". It shouldn't surprise anyone that well educated Americans with a strong interest in individualism would place themselves high in the "order of existence"!

Joseph Campbell, among others, traces the derivation of the word religion to the Latin word *ligare*, meaning to "bind or connect", in other words, to bind together. Can you see the inherent conflict between the notion of individualism and binding together?

As UUs, we need to better bind ourselves together if we are to survive. In order to have our voices heard in the public square in support of social justice, in support of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we need to claim religious standing. Otherwise we are just another group with an opinion.

In order to claim our religious voice, we need to come to grips with what Husbands called our “antipathy toward the entire religious vocabulary”. As individuals and as a community of faith we need to divest ourselves of this negativism, we need to talk out the resentment that’s accumulated over the years.

Coming back to the definition of religion, we need to recalibrate our “cultural system of behaviors and practices, world views...that relate humanity to what an anthropologist has called "an order of existence". We need to relocate ourselves within the order of existence, reorient ourselves from individualism to being bound together.

We need to make this shift in order to make room for others who may want to join us; in order to allow others to feel bound together with us.

In order to make this shift in orientation I believe we need to travel two separate paths. One is intellectual, the other spiritual.

Intellectually, we need to let go of the constrictive notion that religion requires “dogma”; which some have experienced as oppressive authoritarianism. If we take a more nuanced view, every religion has a particular set of beliefs. That statement is benign; it doesn’t prompt an emotional reaction.

Ours UU beliefs are named in our Seven Principles. They are grounded in covenant, not hierarchical authority. We don’t refer to our beliefs as dogma. Yet we are a religious body.

Intellectually, we need to be comfortable re-interpreting religious terms such as God or god. As Unitarians, we have already begun that work. We rejected the definition of God as trinity (father, son and holy ghost). We need to go a step farther, as many have already.

My home church minister was fond of saying, “tell me the God you don’t believe in. I probably don’t believe in that God either”. I’ve come to believe in God again. But it required that I let go of the image of a personified male with a long beard, who knew my every thought and stood in judgment.

For me the words Spirit of Life, energy, life force, mystery, universe, cosmos, Holy Spirit, nature are all synonymous with my definition of God. I’m comfortable calling God, Fred! For me, God is the connective tissue of the interconnected web of life. Jews have known for a long time that it’s unnamable, and unknowable.

There’s an important caveat I need to mention. There are times I intentionally use the word God. I use the word God when I want to express extreme awe. There is no other word in the dictionary that connotes such enormity.

The other path to travel in order to relocate ourselves within the order of existence is a spiritual path. There are many spiritual paths. They all serve the purpose of connecting us to our fundamental “being”. The path of the Spirit is experiential, not intellectual or theoretical. You can’t get there from intellect!

Our spiritual selves are separate from our ego sense of self. Spirit knows no evaluative terms. Spirit has no use for good, bad, pretty, ugly, fat, thin, old. Spirit only knows what I call “is”.

The interconnected web of existence has no good parts or bad parts; just a continuous all encompassing whole. Spiritual growth is an increased awareness, an increased experience of our connection with the “all”, the “is”, the mystery of interconnectedness.

I don’t believe Spirit knows emotions. It may know feelings. But emotions are a name we have chosen to place on certain sensations. Some sensations our ego tends to name good, while others are called bad and to be avoided. Some sensations we call happy, others sad.

Our egos are oriented to the external, the outside world. Our egos are all about comparisons. What in the world will make me more or less happy? What will increase or decrease my sense of pain and anguish? What will make me more or less safe?

The world of the Spirit is inward oriented. Nothing in the external ultimately matters. The Buddha says it's all an illusion. It can be said that the work of the Buddhist is to recognize that we are the same as what is external.

I've come to believe a significant part of the role of religion is to humble us. We are humbled when our egocentric selves are diminished in deference to community. We are humbled when we see ourselves as a part of something larger.

Our egos might tell us we are "less than" when we are not center stage, with applause for our insight, quick wit or wonderful attire. Our ego self tells us being humble hides our bigness, makes us less than we truly are.

The exact opposite is true however. Truly humble people are expansive in their gentleness. They're expansive when they make room for others, when they invite others into greater wholeness. Humble people help make a better world by simply being focused on creating a better self.

Humble people are not humble about what they love, about what energizes them. They simply love what they love. And it's that loving of loving that is palpable, touches others, that shines.

Religion has a way of changing us if we are willing. It can deepen our sense of self. It can help connect us to something larger than self. It can bring us face to face with the "is".

Remember our earlier reading:

And a voice spoke to him...a voice neither male nor female, loud nor soft, a voice infinitely kind. And the voice said unto him, "Not my will, but thine be done. For what is thy will is mine for thee. Go thy way as {any other person} and be thou happy on the earth."

May the Spirit of Life be your guide.