

“A GARDEN OF INTERDEPENDENT DELIGHTS”**August 7, 2005****The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Rappahannock
White Stone, Virginia****Preached by Guest Speaker
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Alexandria, Virginia**

READING***“A Meeting of Minds”*
from the UUA Meditation Manual In The Simple Morning Light
by Barbara Rohde**

As much as we Unitarian Universalists stress freedom of religion and praise diversity of thought, I suspect it takes most of us a long time to feel comfortable discovering our differences and even longer before we can celebrate them with enthusiasm.

Our initial excitement about our congregations often comes from the feeling that we have at last found people who think like us. When we discover that this might not be entirely the case, we often focus on what we have in common and try to avoid explaining differences that we fear will divide us.

I remember my own excitement when I discovered that “diverse” means “turned in different ways.” The root meaning of the word expresses so clearly the strength we can find in diversity, the way the vision of another can enhance our own. On the other hand, to “divide” means “to force apart.” Because we fear that expressing our diversity will lead to division, we often retreat into silence (or express our own views so forcefully that others retreat into silence) rather than engaging in the genuine dialogue that will enrich us all.

On occasions when I have been able to explore with another person just where we differ, when we have both had the trust – and the time – to tell each other what we have seen and how we have come to understand it, I have found the experience to be energizing and clarifying. My thought is clarified, but the boundaries of my self are also clarified. I am more sure what is the “me” and what is the “not me.” And I have found myself in some way bound to the person who is seeking with me. The person who had seemed to be my opponent has suddenly become my partner.

Over the years I have come to believe that the meeting of minds, in loving argument, as well as common purpose, is both creative and holy.

SERMON

I am a Unitarian Universalist. It is my primary identity as a member of a religious community and a religious tradition. It is my chosen faith, and I believe it is a faith worth living for! I was "born again" into it, that is, I went from a difficult, by-rote participation in a former religion to a deep and transforming commitment into this one. For most - if not all - of the people in this very room, being in this faith is your primary identity as a religious person. You have connections to this movement which are deep and personal, even though some of you may have come from another faith community originally. So whether you were born into it or came later into it, identity *with* this faith is a deeply personal and chosen commitment that *grows* on one.

Most people think that they come to church to *get* religion, but I believe that we come to church to *grow* a religion! I also believe that in a Unitarian Universalist congregation one will find fertile ground. However, the garden they will find is not like the formal English Gardens with their perfectly and carefully pruned topiaries. It is more like one of those wild and bushy perennial gardens, crowded with plants of a wide variety of textures, shapes, colors and sizes, which just keep coming back year after year! The flowers in our garden go by names such as Humanism, Theism, Feminism, Paganism, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Atheism, and Agnosticism - to name but a few! And all of these "isms" - many times - are jostling and crowding one another to seek their place in the sun. "*What we need is a good gardener,*" some of us cry. "*A little snip here, a little snip there . . . where's the weed whacker? . . . I need room to breathe!!*" But, one person's weed may be another person's wildflower, and each flower seeks special attention. This, then, is a do-it-yourself garden, and I believe that in a Unitarian Universalist garden there should be plenty of room for all of us to grow. We are a faith in which we have a plurality of spiritual ways of being. We have a variety of religious experiences and I like that! Because of our different contributions, we all can learn and grow and enjoy!

Unitarians and Universalists originally grew out of Judeo-Christian traditions. Early Unitarians read the scriptures and thought that there was only one God, that the Trinity did not exist in the Bible. They taught that Jesus was a son of God, as *we all* are sons and daughters of God - and that his life was an example of how we too should live. The miraculous birth and resurrection stories meant far less to them than Jesus' urgings to social action and justice - feed the hungry, help the poor, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. Theodore Parker, a 19th century Unitarian, maintained that while the trappings of Christianity were transitory, the essence of Jewish and Christian teachings was immutable: "*Love the Divine with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great first commandment. And the second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.*"

Parker concluded that this teaching from the book of Matthew [Mt. 22: 37-40]:

“allows perfect freedom. It does not demand all people to think alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible to the truth; it does not demand all people to live alike, but to live holy, and get as near as possible to life perfectly divine.”

Another 19th century Unitarian, William Ellery Channing, described Unitarian views on the interpretation of scripture as follows:

“We feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually; to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, [the writer's] true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths.”

The Universalist side of our heritage also grew out of the Christian tradition, and its teachings were also based on scriptural interpretation. The primary tenet was that God is love. The 19th century Universalist, Hosea Ballou, taught that just as Adam had sinned for all humankind, so Jesus had saved all of humankind. Ballou preached that heaven and hell were here on earth and of our own making. He also preached that it was our duty to bring about the “Kingdom of God” here in *this* world and in *this* life. He taught that when we died, we were immediately welcomed into the loving arms of God. For this belief, he was called an “ultra Universalist!” His predecessor, John Murray, and nephew, Adin Ballou, felt that most of us probably deserved purgatory first! They were called “Restorationists” because they believed that *eventually* everyone was restored to God. Today, Unitarian Universalist Christians continue to grow their faith in many of our congregations. . . .some of them are direct descendants; fifth or sixth generation Unitarians or Universalists. Others have grown into these beliefs through their own experience, and have found our garden to be an encouraging place to bloom.

Another root system which feeds our congregations is the Transcendentalist movement. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and their like, overtook the carefully planted 19th century Unitarian garden like a horde of dandelions swept in on the wind! They were themselves Unitarians who had outgrown the faith. Their contemporaries tried desperately to weed them out, but in the end their ideas also took root. Today, many of us cherish their teachings of self-reliance, their mystical understanding of the direct experience of soul with Oversoul, and their love of Nature. It was the Transcendentalists who freed us from the scriptures and made us our own authority.

Emerson said that we could intuit what was right and good without the aid of intermediaries. He believed that our conscience should be our guide. He found the supernatural in the natural; “god” was in Nature and in the world around us - not in any one book or ritual. To experience the divine all we had to do was be open to it. He wrote:

“I can believe a miracle because I can raise my own arm. I can believe a miracle because I can remember. I can believe a miracle because I can speak and be understood by you.”

Thoreau taught us about civil disobedience, and Margaret Fuller was a voice for feminism long before “feminism” actually became a word. Education was of prime importance to these people. Bronson Alcott was a beloved and esteemed educator, although it was the writings of his daughter, Louisa May, which kept the family solvent. Some Transcendentalists became involved with utopian societies, trusting in the *goodness* of human endeavor. While none of their utopias survived beyond the first generation, the Transcendentalist impact on literature, on art, and on our own religious movement continues to flourish today.

The legacy of Transcendentalism has freed us to experience God, and Truth, and Meaning for ourselves. To the rigor of reason, they added the wonder of the direct encounter with the divine in nature and in life. When people scoff and say, “Oh, you Unitarian Universalists can believe anything you want,” I call upon our Transcendentalist roots when I answer, “No, we believe what we *must* because that is what our *experience* tells us is so.” The budding Transcendentalists among us today represent *at least* as many experiences of “God” as there are people in this room. They are activists - responding to a higher authority. They are lovers of nature, readers, writers, artists, and intellects. They are free spirits who often march to a different drummer!

While the philosophy of the Transcendentalists left us wide open to new ideas; the scientific and industrial revolutions changed the face of the Cosmos as it was known at that time. A group of religious humanists, many of them Unitarian and Universalist, wrote the Humanist Manifesto in 1933. In part, they wrote:

“The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. . . . The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by newly increased knowledge and experience.”

Humanism calls us to responsibility for ourselves and the world we live in. Humanists will say that it was not God who created us in God's image, but we who created God in our image. Like the Existentialists, Humanists saw us as totally free of absolute laws and totally responsible for our every action.

In the Manifesto, they also wrote that,

“Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world. . . . We assert that Humanism will a) affirm life rather than deny it; b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from it; and c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely a few.”

Humanists stressed that compassion for the individual, as well as for humanity, *must* be coupled with reason, if we are to take full responsibility for our actions in this life.

The Humanist philosophy grew strong in our faith - but, like other new ideas, not

without a struggle. The established groups fought hard to hold their own places in the garden and to push the Humanists out. But in the end Humanism grew tall providing its own special blossom and shade to the mix. The Humanist movement influenced both Unitarianism and Universalism, but it grew stronger in many more Unitarian congregations than it did in Universalist churches. When the two denominations merged in 1961, the cliché was often heard, "*Unitarians are the Head of the Association and Universalists are the Heart.*" One particular older member of this denomination back in my home church in NYC has asked me on many occasions, "*What do I believe now that I am a Unitarian Universalist that I didn't when I was a Unitarian?*" Well, I don't know what she believes now that she didn't believe then. In our faith, belief is an individual endeavor. We have no doctrine, only - as some of us have noted - "the seven friendly suggestions" represented by our Purposes and Principles. But I can say with certainty that in my own experience, it has been Universalism, for me, which has softened some of the hardened edges of Unitarianism.

When I was studying Unitarian Universalist History and Polity in seminary, it seemed to me that during the 1960's and 1970's Unitarianism seemed to dominate. In talking with former Universalists, I recall an older member saying that he felt that he had lost his identity upon merger. I heard other tales about the acceptance of God-language dwindling (people were actually known to walk out in the middle of a sermon where the "G"-word was used) and the "gentle, thoughtful" sermons being replaced by those of a more pragmatic nature. But in the early 1980's, rumblings began to be heard and a need for more ritual and spiritual uplift began to be expressed. I believe that, in part, the cry for more spirituality is a *re-emergence* of our Universalist heritage and roots. Remember that Universalist theology is grounded in a God of love who brought universal salvation. The early Universalists were evangelists bringing their "good news" to a population brow-beaten by threats of hell and damnation. "*Give them not hell, but hope!*," preached John Murray. I believe that it is this evangelistic spirit which is on the rise today!

I also believe that the Feminist movement within our congregations has had an effect. While I hate stereotypes and will argue that I can be as feeling and emotional as anyone else (and that there are *many* men who seek a stronger sense of spirit), I do think that as women gained acknowledged power in our congregational hierarchies, and as more women established a presence in the pulpit, our movement became more relational in content. The compassion that tempers reason has grown stronger on the balance of things.

Possibly the most telling source of our shift toward a more spiritual expression of our religion is, I believe, generational. In the sixties and seventies, most people who joined Unitarian Universalist congregations were "*come outers*" - coming out of some religious tradition which had hurt them or made them feel guilty because they simply couldn't believe what they were being taught. They came to us angry and hurt. Rituals or language which reminded them of their painful experiences were shunned at all costs. Nowadays, I see new members as "*come inners*" - they are coming *in* to our movement looking *for* something as opposed to running *from* something. Many new members are in interfaith relationships and are seeking a place where they can both be

comfortable. Each person may be looking for some of the rubrics which make them feel at home. Thus, in many congregations we celebrate Hanukkah, Winter Solstice and Kwanzaa as well as Christmas, Passover as well as Easter. We preach about the meaning of the High Holy Days and honor Wesak, the Birth of the Buddha, or the Hindu Divali Festival of Lights. And, we invite guest speakers from a variety of faiths - not only to expand our experience, but also to acknowledge and support the diverse religious backgrounds in our midst. Other new members are coming in from a secular world looking for something more, and they stay because of our message and our communities. They seek the signs which tell them that this is a sacred space - candles, bells, prayer or meditation, silence, beautiful music, traditional hymns and hymns from different traditions. They also need a warm welcome and solid integration into our community where they can find the support they need to cultivate a new faith and to weather the storms of life.

One irony in this shift toward spirituality is that it is often assumed that Humanism is anti-spiritual. I know many Humanists who are among the most spirit-filled people I have ever encountered. Koran Arisian, a former leader of the Ethical Culture Society and the now-retired minister of the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, wrote,

“Spirituality is a potential aspect of life. It's not a given quantum, nor is it to be found in exclusive places. We bring it into existence through the relational dimensions of our being. The spirit when it's unlocked moves us towards others and helps us feel responsible for the well being of the world.”

I think it is important to note that Arisian states that we bring spirituality into existence. Spirituality is not a reflection of the supernatural, nor is it a specific mind-set imposed upon us from outside. Spirituality is a function of being open to the direct experience of the Universe. Spirituality comes from within. It is a “Celebration of Life,” a willingness to touch and be touched on a deep level by the essence of another person, by the human condition, by pain, by joy, by the sound of a musical instrument masterfully played, by the smell of a flower, by the loss of a friend. Spirituality - like religion - is not something you *get* ; it is something you *grow* !

We are a covenanting community, and I take this covenant (implicit for many, explicit for me) very seriously. Indeed, I feel if there is a definitive Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice, I believe it is to be found within our covenant to be together - to try and respect each other, and to try and learn from each other. There is grace and beauty in this. And, I hope this covenanting is something we're all proud of - and maybe even attempt from time to time to keep! So whether you are a Humanist, a Transcendentalist, a Christian, a Jew, a Feminist, an Agnostic, a Pagan, an Atheist, a “come outer” or a “come inner,” you are a part of this Unitarian Universalist garden - this wild and bushy perennial garden, crowded with plants of a wide variety of textures, shapes, colors, and sizes which just keeps coming back year after year. Amidst the pushing and shoving and jostling for space, each one of us is struggling to grow a faith! Whose faith is this? The answer is that your faith *is* our faith! Our Transcendentalist roots tell us that we are our own authority and our Humanist roots tell us that we are responsible. Our Unitarian roots suggest we be rational, and our Universalist roots

suggest compassion. We are well-rooted!! But it is up to *us* to take the traditions and experiences which inform us and create our own hybrid plant.

A personal religion will grow, bloom, lie fallow, propagate, and blossom again and again. It may even mutate into something else that is new and exciting! However your religion develops it will be because of the work *you* do alone and in community. Do you practice loving God - in whatever form you experience it? Do you practice loving your neighbor? Do you feed the hungry, comfort the sick, help the poor? Do you leave yourself open to the experience of beauty and to the recognition of miracles? Do you give yourself time to empty yourself, so that you may be filled with a refreshing spirit? Do you take the time to know yourself? Do you seek community and fellowship? None of these things we can do *for* you. But we *can* provide the garden plot, some germinal ideas and some great company to help you with your exploration. It is *you* who must first prepare the soil to accept the seeds that life sows. Together we will tend our garden. May we bloom and grow forever. . . . and may we help cultivate one another!

(Sung)

"It's in every one of us to be wise.

Find your heart.

Open up both your eyes.

We can all know everything without ever knowing why.

It's in every one of us - by and by - you and I."