

The Depth Dimension

*Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton, MA
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Today Unitarian Universalists around the country are celebrating our second annual “Association Sunday.” This is a day when we both celebrate our faith tradition and dedicate ourselves to it. To that end, we will take up a special collection after this sermon, offering support for particular programs related to the theme. This year’s theme, “Growing Our Spirit,” is the result of a national survey about our priorities for the future.

The survey found that as a movement Unitarian Universalists are concerned about funding two sorts of initiatives. First we want programs to further the spiritual and theological deepening of lay people. Second, we want programs that promote excellence in our professional ministry.

The money we raise today will be divided evenly between these two priorities. Half will go as grant money to congregations developing programs for spiritual growth and theological education for lay people. Preference will be given to congregations that work together in that effort.

The other half will go to help strengthen our professional ministry. Some of it will go to help current ministers engage in continuing education. As in most fields, there are always new ideas in the world of ministry and it’s good for our clergy to be able to keep up with those trends. Some of what we raise today will go to scholarships for promising theological students, and some will go to help support ministers of color in training and in their work.

In preparing to speak to you today on the importance of growing our spirits through supporting such programs, I’ve found myself reflecting on a quote about the relationship between religion and spirituality. It is a very pithy quote. That is, it’s short but it packs quite a punch.

I first heard it in a speech by the president of our association, the Reverend William Sinkford. It was either at a district gathering or at one of our General Assemblies. In this speech, President Sinkford quoted the great religious scholar

Huston Smith who said that religion is what gives traction to spirituality through history. That struck me right away. I pulled out my day planner and scrawled it down in the margins, knowing I'd want to spend some time reflecting on it on someday. Today is that day.

Religion is what gives traction to spirituality through history. Think about that. These days, you often hear people say that they are spiritual but not religious. On the other hand, you could say some of us are religious but not spiritual! Rather than thinking of religion and spirituality as separate, in this quote Huston Smith sets up a particular relationship between them. It interests me that the relationship he sets up is one of traction.

As a poet and a student of semantics – the aspect of language that is about meaning, I like exploring the origins and meanings of words. So I did that with the main words in this quote. First, religion. The word religion comes from a root that means “that which binds together.” Religion connects us to each other, and to something greater than ourselves.

The second big word in the quote is “traction.” My favorite dictionary defines traction under the root word “trace” which means a mark or impression left by something's passing. It further defines the word traction as the act of drawing (as in pulling, like a horse draws a cart). Traction is part of the word “attraction,” drawing or pulling toward. So far in this quest we have the binding together of traces, or acts of drawing toward.

The third content word in the quote is “spirituality”. Spirituality comes from a root word having to do with breathing, or with wind. That's as close as the ancients could get to something so abstract and unobservable. Since that root word also means “soul” spirituality means all that relates to the unseen sacred dimensions of life that give it vitality.

Religion is what gives traction to spirituality through history. If you start with the root word “trace,” the quote seems to suggest that religion is what binds together the traces or marks left by the movement of spirituality, that unseen sacred dimension of life, over time. Now spirituality doesn't happen in a vacuum, it happens in and through people.

Thus, religion may reflect the collective experience of people living such spiritually vibrant lives that they leave an impression upon the world. That's kind of a cool idea – to live the promptings of one's spirit so vibrantly that it leaves traces on the world. What happens if we look at our tradition in this light - what sort of traces or impressions has Unitarian Universalist spiritual experience made upon the world?

Now unless you teach Sunday School, this is something that most lay people in our congregations might not know how to answer. And of course this points to the need for greater theological education for lay people, so that even those who don't teach Sunday School would have lots of ideas about the traces our spiritual witness has made on our world.

From the point of view of my own theological education I can see the fingerprints of Unitarian and Universalist religious life all over our country. Because so many of our founding parents were Unitarian or Universalist in their beliefs (including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush), our nation's founding documents reveal their religious commitments to justice and equity, and their dedication to freedom of belief.

Other traces our religious tradition has left upon the world include public libraries and public schools through people like Unitarian Horace Mann. Our dedication to education can also be seen in institutions like Tufts University, which was founded by Universalists. A recent contribution to the intellectual life of our planet comes through Unitarian Universalist Tim Berners-Lee, one of the founders of the World Wide Web, which connects people to one another and to the information they seek.

You can see our marks upon the world in the early reforms of our prisons and mental health institutions led by people like 19th century Unitarian Dorothea Dix. We have left our mark upon the world through charitable organizations like the Red Cross. The field of nursing was formed by Unitarian Universalists like Clara Barton and Florence Nightingale.

Men and women in our movement were among those that fought for the abolition of slavery, and later for voting rights for African Americans and for

women. Here in Massachusetts in recent years, our congregations were vibrant leaders for marriage equality.

So if we look at the marks the spiritual leaders of our religion have made upon the world, and continue to make upon the world, we see some common threads. These include educating developing minds, social and political leadership, contributions to the arts, anti-racism and anti-oppression work, and the fair and compassionate treatment of the least fortunate.

Historically, we have acted on our belief in the potential for goodness in every human being by working to build a society where each person has the chance to realize that potential. It seems to me that this is the meaning of justice in our tradition - to make sure each person has a fair and equal chance to become everything he or she can become.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion that binds together the marks our members have made by vibrantly living their beliefs in our world over time. Seminary allowed me to learn how strongly these actions are rooted in the theology of our founders. If we create programs to offer this same sort of theological training to lay people, you all could discover the beauty of our religious roots for yourselves – the theology that gave rise to such glorious acts of justice and compassion.

Some people claim that Unitarian Universalists have no unifying theology, or that “UU Theology” is a contradiction in terms. Having studied our history and especially our theological roots, having contemplated our principles, and having observed the lived and living faith of the people of our movement, I believe that there is a Unitarian Universalist theology.

Ours is a theology of trust in the fundamental goodness and beauty of creation as expressed so richly by Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Ours is a theology that regards our bodies as good and worthy, our world as generate and whole, and the problems of this planet as rooted in humanity’s errors, not in some personification of evil.

Ours is a theology of hope in the possibilities of humanity and our potential for good, as preached by the Universalists, and in the Unitarian line by the Religious Humanists, building on the Transcendentalists.

Ours is a theology that contains many beliefs about the Divine, holding no one belief as normative. However it is important to note that the range of Unitarian Universalist belief about the Sacred is not unlimited.

From early days we have rejected images of the Divine as punitive and authoritarian. Such images of the Sacred are inconsistent with our belief in the basic goodness of humanity.

If we do believe in something we might call “God” it is a loving, compassionate power that calls us to work with it to shape a just world, where every human being can grow the divine spark within into a fire that can transform our world.

Ours is a theology that upholds freedom of belief about the existence and the nature of the Divine. It also upholds freedom of practice – we are free to relate to the Divine however we choose so long as it does not infringe on the rights or the dignity of other human beings.

Ours is a theology that treats Jesus as one among many enlightened prophets, spiritually vibrant souls who reveal to us what it is to be most perfectly human, what it is to live an ethical existence.

Ours is above all else a relational theology - a theology that stresses the radical inter-relatedness of creation, and our selves as beings in that creation. We work to affirm and to promote that interdependent web of existence that may hold for us the place the Divine holds in other religions.

Ours is a theology whose ethics are based on this relationality, that sees “sin” or error as the breaking of a covenant of right relation, and salvation as maintaining of those good promises aimed. We do have a theology, I believe, and it is a good, rich, rooted theology. I’d love for you to have the chance to discover this for yourselves if you haven’t already.

It is in this notion of creating a better world that I see another interpretation of that pithy quote, “Religion is what gives traction to spirituality through history.” Typically, when we think of traction, we think of re-setting broken bones, putting things back in place in a way that ultimately relieves pain and makes right.

What I think Huston Smith meant by this dense and fascinating quote is not just that religion binds together the traces of spiritually vibrant people acting on their beliefs over time. I think he also means that religion draws us out of the chrysalis of self and into relationship with the wider world.

Spirituality is all well and good – but it can be just so much navel-gazing if left to itself. By creating ties between spiritual people, religion gives us a community of accountability that keeps us on track as we deepen and grow our spirits. Without that dimension of accountability, spirituality can turn into a mere exercise in narcissism.

By creating ties of shared history and theology between religious people over time, religion also draws us out of the chrysalis of the present. It gives us a broader context in which to understand our selves and our own times. This perspective can help us to find ways to respond, spiritually and ethically to the challenges and crises of our day and age.

A colleague, Rev. Tom Schade said earlier this week that for him the virtue that can bring us through today's economic crisis is solidarity. If we as Unitarian Universalists hold ourselves in solidarity with one another and with those that have gone before us, we may together see what will be our best response.

If we remember that we are not alone and that our faith has sustained others through worse crises, then we can trust that together we can come up with our own unique religious response. Such a response can help us come through this difficult time not only intact, but stronger.

In keeping with our religious tradition, together we may find ways to make sure that justice is preserved and promoted even in the midst of this crisis. You may have heard before that the Chinese character for crisis includes two characters, one “danger” and one for “opportunity.”

This may be a “teachable moment” in our country, when we can confront the lapses of judgment and the downright injustices that led to where we stand. From what I hear, predatory lenders especially preyed upon people of color, who are now losing their homes in disproportionately high numbers.

We can work to make sure that this sort of institutional racism is brought to light, so that those most hurt by this turn of events find help and hope. I am concerned that homelessness is rising and that many homeless children are not attending our public schools because their parents don't understand that they still have the right to do so, without a home.

Certainly some of us are hurting financially right now, and are living in shock and grief, but I cannot imagine what it must be like to lose one's home. What can we do to help those who are least fortunate right around us? Acting together within and between congregations, we take this crisis as an opportunity to act to create a better, fairer world for the future and to minister to those whose lives are most adversely affected by it.

Any such action we take in these trying times will be so much richer if it is rooted in a better understanding of our theology, in a fuller exploring of our history, and a deeper delving into our spiritual tradition. These sources of knowledge and understanding can act as wells upon which we draw, to sustain our selves in times of trouble and fear. They can support us in the good works we do for those who are in greatest need.

This can be our contribution to the religion that binds us together with those prophetic leaders of the past. A while back I wrote a poem that includes the words, "What will they say of us? What would you have them say?" When future generations look back at us for inspiration in their own times of crisis, what would you like them to say about how we responded? What marks can we, like a phoenix rising, make upon our world?

I cannot answer that question for this congregation, much less our faith as a whole, but I can encourage you with the words of another pithy quote by a favorite theologian. Howard Thurman was an African American minister and leader who said, "Ask not what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive, then go do it... because what the world needs is people who are come alive."

What makes us come alive? Where that passion meets the world's need is where we can do our most effective ministry. Where those two intersect is where we can make our mark, leaving traces for others to follow.

We can weather this storm if we pull together. We can come through this stronger, I believe, by looking for inspiration from our own tradition. After all, Unitarian Universalism is a religion that has given traction to the spiritual lives of great men and women for over 200 years.

By tapping the depth dimensions of our religious tradition – its history, its theology, its spirituality, we may ourselves live such spiritually vibrant lives that we will leave traces upon our world. As so many before us have done, we may as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker put it, help to bend the arc of the universe toward justice. So may it be.