

Embracing Our Theological Diversity

Thirty Spokes share the wheels hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes that make it useful.
Therefore, profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.
(Tao Te Ching, 11.)

Like most organizations, the Unitarian Universalist Association is pretty interested in understanding what is going on within itself. The UUA has a certain need for introspection. To answer that need, we have the Commission on Appraisal, where groups of UU ministers and lay persons work together to study our congregations and members in order to better understand who we are, and where we are going, and also to make recommendations about issues that we need to address. The commissions derive from the Unitarian tradition, beginning with the American Unitarian Association's 1936 Commission on Appraisal report. It is a fine old tradition, and we continuously learn more about our faith because of the reports generated by the commissions.

At this year's general assembly, a new report was issued, titled "Engaging Our Theological Diversity." You might have noticed that the title of this message, "*Embracing Our Theological Diversity*," differs just slightly from that of the report: More on that later. I found the report's findings to be very good news. Alas, the commission itself did not fully share my enthusiasm. But for the moment, let me tell you a little more about the report, and how it came to be.

The UUA has been exploring our relationship with one another, as UUs, through the last three reports. The first of these, released in 1997, was titled "Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity." This report was essentially a look at how we relate together as congregations. We have a congregational polity, which means that the UUA has no authority over decisions that you make as a church. However, the report was concerned that we recognize our interdependence, between congregations and our relationship with the UUA. Early on, congregational polity assumed that congregations would have much closer relationships with one another than we currently do. Interdependence recommended that we emphasize our traditions of covenant and congregationalism, and emphasize those relationships both within and between our congregations.

The next report, from 2001, "Belonging: The Meaning of Membership," focused on how UUs understand their membership in their congregations. The report discussed how we might create theologies to make membership a more meaningful term, as well as a more meaningful experience. And it recommended that we begin to understand membership in terms of a process of transformation, whereby persons move through levels of identification and affiliation, then into membership, and continue in the process of

transformation after becoming members. “Belonging” asserted that being a member of a UU church should be a transformative experience.

The most recent report, “Engaging Our Theological Diversity,” has taken the recommendations of “Interdependence” and “Belonging” to heart. The question that motivates this report is “What holds us together?” You see, the question of why we bother to build a church, or join a church, or belong to a church, or support a church, is not just a question for this congregation alone. It is, in fact the main question our denomination as a whole is asking itself. And it is a big question. But I am very glad to tell you that the commission’s report does indeed provide us with answers. It speaks to the issue of what holds us together. And it also speaks to “Interdependence” concern for our covenantal relationship to one another and to the UU movement, as well as “Belonging’s” concern for a theology of membership. We are held together by our eclecticism, by our recognition of one another as kindred spirits, pilgrims and companions in search of deeper meaning and greater understanding.

Our text today stressed the importance of emptiness, that it is the holes that make a vessel useful. The holes make the object useful. In our faith, it is our lack of a creed, our refusal to be defined by a statement of belief, that is our deepest truth. The principles and purposes are not doctrinal statements. They are general principles that we use as guidelines for our behavior. And even then we do not require acceptance of the principles to act as a barrier to membership. We accept people into membership based on their attraction to and identification with a given congregation. Membership means entering a covenant with one another, per the covenant we have begun to read at the beginning of each service. We affirm our connection and our relationship as described (but not defined) by the covenant statement: That is the basis of membership in the congregation.

We become members because we feel like we belong here, because we feel connected to this congregation in some way, whatever way that may be. We do not judge one another concerning our fitness for membership, or require a formal statement of doctrinal conformity. We leave it to individuals to make those decisions for themselves. You see, our tradition is based on openness. We are founded on the understanding that we all have different points of view, and that what binds us is our respect for difference and celebration of individual freedom to choose. We are the spokes of the wheel, and our lack of doctrines and creeds is what makes us useful.

The latest commission on appraisal report, Engaging Our Theological Diversity, found that lack of doctrinal conformity to be the most prevalent trait of UUs both as individuals and as congregations. You have probably heard me mention the statistics about how different religious traditions are represented within our faith. When asked to label ourselves, about half of us identify as humanists, one in five as pagan, one in ten as Christian. The remaining twenty percent gathers up the various Buddhists, Deists, Mystics, Jews, and whatnot, each with a small percentage of the whole. That information came from the 1997 report, and it was very interesting to me. Few of us are Christians.

And there are real tensions between our various identity groups. Yet each spoke has its role and its place around the wheel of our faith.

What the latest report found was even more interesting, in my opinion. When we describe ourselves, without being asked to identify ourselves specifically as Humanist or Pagan or Christian or whatever, the vast majority of us identify simply as eclectic. We are not just one thing, or one faith tradition. Each of us takes what we find useful from our many sources, and use it as we see fit. We are religious pragmatists. Now, it would be wrong to frame that as a description of all UUs or of every church. There are still many hyphenated UUs, who identify as specifically a Christian UU or a Buddhist UU, and so on. But for most of us, we have so many hyphens, we don't even bother to try to list them all out. And the same goes for our congregations. There are definitely Humanist congregations, especially here in the Midwest, as there are Christian congregations especially down south or in New England. But most of our congregations identify themselves as eclectic, too theologically diverse to permit a single traditional identity.

I will illustrate what I mean. As you may know, I came to be a UU as a hard core, angry atheist, secular humanist. Along the way, I explored neo-paganism, and identified as a pagan for quite some time. Even now, if forced to accept only one label, I would still probably choose pagan, but not because that is my real identity; it's just the one that pinches least. That said, I never have come to a belief in a personal God, and I still trust primarily in human beings to sort their own problems and choose their own destiny. That makes me a humanist. And so begins the list of hyphens: Humanist-Pagan-UU. But my primary spiritual discipline is zazen, seated meditation. I am a humanist-pagan-Buddhist UU. But I also experiment with prayer to the divine, to the Beloved, to God. Humanist Pagan Buddhist-Christian UU. And usually God is a She. Humanist-Pagan-Buddhist-Christian-Feminist-UU. And my own spiritual work at the moment is about trust and submission to the cosmos. And of course, Moslem means "submitted one," Islam means "submission." Humanist-Pagan-Buddhist-Christian-Feminist-Moslem UU. And my theology is actually a form of Mysticism. Humanist-Pagan-Buddhist-Christian-Feminist-Moslem-Mystic UU. And I could go on, but I think you see where I am going.

The exciting thing for me is that I am not alone in this proliferation of hyphens. That's actually the norm for us now, as UUs. We are a people of many faiths, and persons of many faiths. Indeed, that is a central truth of what it means to be a UU. Our principles and purposes also state:

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

What is remarkable in the report is that we have truly begun to embrace that theological diversity, to draw liberally from all of our sources. I think that is a fantastic development! We are beginning to really recognize and explore the vast wealth of our heritage. That is very exciting, in my opinion. We are blessed with access to wisdom, practices and processes from all human cultures; we can look at our experiences through many different metaphors. For instance, Buddhism and Humanism have very different worldviews, but both have something valuable to contribute. By applying them both, we gain a fuller truth, a deeper wisdom. And as we each have different needs and different temperaments, we can draw on a wealth of disciplines to help us in our spiritual development, as well. The wheel is made of many spokes, supporting one another as they press inward together. The more spokes, the stronger the wheel.

Alas, not everyone shares my unfettered enthusiasm. The Commission voiced several concerns, some more legitimate than others, in my opinion. One concern was that we tend to overlook our own UU sources and authors. I think that is true: We do tend to reference literature from authors who are not a part of our tradition. The text I chose for today, is a good case in point: It is Taoist scripture, written by Lao Tsu, in China, in the sixth century B.C.E. But I don't know our own sources all that well. And the truth is, I don't know anyone who does. I am making a project of searching for inspirational UU literature, sending email, asking my professors and colleagues: Let's just say it hasn't turned up much so far. We UUs are good at history and analysis, but we don't seem to have done so much in terms of inspirational or evocative literature. Kind of makes it harder to rely on our own sources. Hopefully, as our new eclecticism bears fruit, that may change.

The report also decries our "exoticism" and "cafeteria spirituality." What that means is that most UUs tend to take what they can use from wherever they find it. To me, that's a good thing, practical and open-minded, so long as it is done mindfully. But the Commission was pretty critical of this approach, without really presenting an argument to support their hostility. The report seems to recommend that we focus on the Christian

tradition, as that is our historical ancestry. I have to say, that seems a pretty weak recommendation to me. As you all know, I do draw from Christian sources, and use some Christian practices; but I can see no good reason to focus my spirituality or my ministry on our Christian heritage. If that was what I wanted to do, I'd go become an Episcopalian or even a Methodist (My mother would be so proud!). And it seems that the vast majority of UUs agree with me. I don't really get why the commission feels a need to scold us for recognizing the wealth we have inherited. I think they need to get with the program and support in our eclecticism as we move into the future. But that's me.

This is a longish message, and I will close in a moment, I promise. But there is one more of the commission's findings that I want to lift up before I close. And I think it touches on the reason the report seems a bit put out with us for our eclecticism. There has been an enormous shift in the temperament of the average UU. You may or may not be familiar with the Myers Briggs temperament inventory. The Myers Briggs sorts people on four continuums: Extrovert/Introvert, Sensing/Intuiting, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving. Depending on which direction one tends, more introvert than extrovert, more thinking than feeling, the Myers Briggs can tell quite a bit about what kind of person you are, how you interact with the world, what you like or dislike. When I was in college, we used to take the Myers Briggs for a party game, then spend the rest of the evening talking about what it meant. Racy stuff, huh? I am an Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceiving type, very inward and emotional, committed to making up my own mind and finding my own path. I really dislike right and wrong, hard and fast answers. For me, broad is the way and many are the paths that lead to salvation.

Anyway, the report points out that four out of five UUs are Intuitives. That's saying something, as in the rest of America, four out of five people are Sensing. We go with gut instincts, and trust our own judgment, rather than relying on external rules and hard evidence. But I think that's been true for as long as there has been a Myers Briggs to measure those things. If you are a UU, you probably got here because you trusted yourself more than you trusted the answers that were offered to you. That's who we are. Nine out of ten of us are converts, or what the report calls "come-inners," folks who left their faith of birth and tradition and became UUs as part of their personal spiritual evolution. What is new is that there has been a very clear shift from Intuitive Thinking types towards Intuitive Feeling types. We used to be a very heady, intellectual faith, with a strong majority of people who tended to emphasize thinking more than feeling, reason more than emotion. But that has changed. At present a majority of us are Intuitive Feeling types. Now this has huge implications, especially given that men and older members are more likely to be thinkers, while women and younger members tend to be feeling. As a movement, we are becoming more emotional, more spiritual, more process oriented. It's not just my preference, or the tendency in this congregation. It's happening in all of our churches, resulting in the decline of the dominance of humanism, a certain degree of alienation for some of us, especially some of our men and elders, and the confusion of our intellectuals.

So this is the conclusion, what I want you to take away from this. Individually and collectively, we are increasingly an eclectic faith, drawing from any and all sources,

throughout time and space, from every being, culture and eco-system, to find the resources we need. I would encourage you to think about your own hyphenations, and to consider your own relationship to our many sources. We are a unique faith, with a special mission and ministry. We are the faith that transcends its self, our history and culture. Our tradition is that we transcend our tradition, evolving always beyond our personal and collective past. And as we become more global and more eclectic, we have a model, and a process that could be of great benefit to the world. Perhaps we are creating a new gospel. But at least, we are liberating our selves and one another from the narrow-mindedness and spiritual poverty of conventional belief.

But there is a caveat. As we rush joyfully into the future, we must be careful that we do not trample the past. And we must beware that as we become more emotional, spiritual, and eclectic, that we do not exclude those who remain intellectual, rational, and specific, and that we continue to honor our traditions of reason and analysis. Let us embrace our theological diversity. And in doing so, let us embrace and support one another, like the spokes in a wheel, whomever and however we may choose to be. But let us leave our center empty; let no one or nothing assert dominance, allow no single faith or identity to define who we are. It is the space we make in our center that makes us useful.

I will close with a reading from Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, - but it will out. That which dominates our imagination and our thoughts will determine our lives and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.

Blessed Be. Namaste. And Amen.

Delivered by Roger Mohr to the UU Fellowship of Clinton (IA), on Sunday, 13 November, 2005.