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5/29/16 It's Not What You Think

People have all sorts of ideas of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist – including we who identify as UUs! What makes us who we are? (Hint: it's NOT what you think!) How do we live this faith we love yet struggle to describe? Let's play and puzzle together in this Auction sermon topic chosen by Patrice Fitzgerald and Richard Leslie.

Reading: Pry me Off Dead Center, Ted Loder

O persistent God,
deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle.

Pressure me that I may grow more human,
not through the lessening of my struggles,
but through an expansion of them
that will undamn me
and unbury my gifts.

Deepen my hurt
until I learn to share it
and myself
openly,
and my needs honestly.

Sharpen my fears
until I name them
and release the power I have locked in them
and they in me.

Accentuate my confusion
until I shed those grandiose expectations
that divert me from the small, glad gifts
of the now and the here and the me.

Expose my shame where it shivers,
crouched behind the curtains of propriety,
until I can laugh at last
through my common frailties and failures,
laugh my way toward becoming whole.

Deliver me
from just going through the motions
and wasting everything I have
which is today,
a chance,
a choice,
my creativity,
your call.

O persistent God,
let how much it all matters

pry me off dead center
so if I am moved inside
to tears
or sighs
or screams
or smiles
or dreams,
they will be real
and I will be in touch with who I am
and who you are
and who my sisters and brothers are.

Sermon

For several years as a young adult, I was in the closet. But not the closet you think! (That's a story for another sermon). I was a closeted church-goer. I was nervous about what my friends would think about me going to CHURCH, so I hid it.

I feared that CHURCH conjured up ideas that were offputting: an all powerful God, scary –or powerful - ritual, prescribed beliefs, and, perhaps most painfully: church meant getting up early on Sunday mornings!

It took me some years to come out of that closet and fully embrace my identity as a Unitarian Universalist churchgoer, and church lover.

My desire to be a closeted church-goer was related to what most people think of when they think of church: creeds and crosses and patriarchal priests, for example— and I didn't want to be associated with that.

Now, I'm clearly out about being a churchgoer! But I still find myself telling people all the time “It’s not what you think!” about church and my ministry. I am not what a minister “looks like” to most people. And this – we, here, in this beautiful and wacky building, without a creed or a shared God or a cross, is not what church “looks like” to most people. That’s because dominant Western Christianity defines religion for most Americans. Dominant Christianity is defined by beliefs about a sacred text, God, and Jesus.

As Unitarian Universalists, we come out of Christian tradition – we use words like church, worship, minister, sermon, hymns, and all of those draw on a Christian foundation. But what defines us is not a creed we must subscribe to about our relationship with God and Jesus. And that's why we get so flummoxed when we try to

describe UUism! We don't fit the dominant cultural framework that's based on a sacred text and certain beliefs.

Instead, what defines us is relationships – with one another, with God (for some of us), with all of humanity and all of the earth; we focus on how we ARE together in the world. We call this relationship covenant – and next week Rev. Sue Phillips, will preach about the claim that Unitarian Universalism makes on us and calls us to.

Within the context of relationships, we draw from many sources of inspiration and faith. Not just the Christian Bible or the Torah, but from a variety of sacred texts, prophetic words, nature, and our own direct experience of mystery. This summer, we'll explore them one by one in a "Six Sources Summer" beginning in July!

Living in a culture where belief and text define dominant religion, it's no wonder that we struggle to articulate what matters most about our Unitarian Universalism! If defining ourselves were a dating status, we'd be the ones to check "it's complicated."

We UU ministers have a pet peeve: we don't like it when people say " UUs can believe anything you want," because it's not true.

Here's a song I use to remember some of our shared beliefs. These words, I believe, were written by Laila Ibrahim, a lifelong UU and religious educator in Oakland. Each year at their summer Chalice Camp, they invite a musician to put the words to music....so here's the tune I learned by my colleague Wendy Bartel:

*It's a blessing each of us was born.
It matters what we do with our lives.
What each of us knows about God is a piece of the truth
And we don't have to do it, no we don't have to do it, no we don't have to do it alone.*

It's a blessing each of us was born – you can't believe that some people are damned and some are saved. We are EACH a blessing.

It matters what we do with our lives. – In some traditions, it "doesn't matter what you do day to day in [your] life, so long as [you] have done the proper rituals and accepted God into [your] heart."ⁱ That's not true for us – how you live matters.

What each of us knows about God is a piece of the truth. You can't be a UU if you believe that you have the only and ultimate truth (even the truth of UUism!).

And we don't have to do it alone. We are in community together, and those relationships matter.

These four statements are one way to explain our faith – they form the container in which we live. We don't all have the same beliefs, but we agree to explore life, affirm beauty and seek justice together.

It's not what you think, it's how you ARE.

"let how much it all matters
pry me off dead center
so if I am moved inside
to tears
or sighs
or screams
or smiles
or dreams,
they will be real
and I will be in touch with who I am
and who you are
and who my sisters and brothers are."

I get to that heart place –where I am in touch with who I am, and who you are, with the music of Taizé. Taizé-style Worship consists almost entirely of repetitive, simple chants with beautiful harmony. There are Taizé-style worship services all over the world – like the one that I led in December that many of you attended. It's meditative with lots of candles, lots of silence, and few spoken words.

Mark Twain said, "Ecstasy is a thing that won't go into words, it feels like music."

Do you know that feeling of going to a place of inner calm and peace that is beyond thoughts and understanding? That is what Taizé-style worship does for me. For 20 years now, I've sought out this worship to help me go to that place of surrender beyond words.

As I was finishing seminary, I had the opportunity to visit Taizé itself. Taizé is a Christian monastic community of Catholic, protestant, and orthodox brothers in France focused on reconciliation among Christians. At any given time, there are several hundred (or sometimes even several thousand) youth and young adults visiting Taizé from all over the world.

How amazing, after all those years, to get to visit Taizé itself! Each day, I got to immerse myself in this musical meditation before breakfast, after lunch, and before bed.

As each evening worship came to an end, the singing would continue. Sitting on the floor of the simple sanctuary, one among the hundreds of us would begin a new chant, and the rest of us would join in. The 4-part harmonies were delicious as we sang over and over and over again. Eventually, the chant would die out, and another would begin. For hours we sat and sang.

“Behute mich, Gott, ich vertraue dir, du zeigst mir den Weg zum Leben. Bei dir ist Freude, Freude in Fülle.”

These memories warm me each time I recall them. I don't resonate with many of the words in Taizé chants – like that one that I just sang – “Keep me, O God, for I trust in you. You show me the path of life. With you there is fullness of joy.” It doesn't fit my beliefs as an agnostic, but the music feeds my soul.

I arrived at Taizé, from Transylvania, where I had visited dozens of Christian Unitarian churches. At Taizé, I was in a tender place of processing my time in Transylvania and in discernment about my own relationship to God, Jesus, and Christianity, & wrestled with theology.

It was in this tender place that I saw a flier for workshop called “Why Christians believe in the Trinity.” My heart sank and I got mad. I might be unsure whether I was Christian, but I was clear that our Transylvanian Unitarian siblings in faith do not believe in the trinity, and they certainly were Christian!

Repeatedly, I experienced dismissal of our Unitarian Christian tradition, and it hurt – especially since Taizé prides itself on creating bridges across different parts of Christianity.

It is this disconnect that causes many of us to leave our faith of origin and come to UUism – to find a place where we can hold onto both faithful practice and careful thought. To find ways to unlock our souls to vulnerability and connection to the sacred AND to be comfortable holding on to what we know about God/spirit/etc.

But even here, in UUism, I can't find a way to escape some of the contradictions. Even now, I write most of my sermons while listening to Taizé worship, listening to chants that don't fit my theology.

Much as we'd rather not admit it, we are all full of contradictions like this.

It turns out that this makes good evolutionary sense. Evolutionary biologists describe early evolutionary biases (we're talking tens of thousands of years ago) that got us here. One such bias is to pay attention to agents – that is, those who survived were those

who overassigned agency to natural events. (Ie, I think it's a lion so I'll run away, even if it ends up just being the wind – better to err on the side of caution!).

For similar reasons, we tend to “over-attribute intentionality to ambiguous phenomena, and to see purpose & design in the natural world.”ⁱⁱ In other words: we have evolved to be superstitious and/or theist at the same time that we've evolved to have strong thinking skills.

Ever since I heard the lecture about this a couple months ago, I've paid attention to my own superstitions: I do knock on wood whenever I say something that I don't want to happen. I don't walk over pennies, because “see a penny, pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.” I lift my feet up when I cross state lines in the car.

In my thinking brain, this is all nonsense. But those evolutionary biases maintain their power – and hey, better safe than sorry, right? Studies show that even scientists who study this stuff still act on similar “superstitions!”

So how do we make peace with ourselves when what we know to be true (in our heads) contradicts practices that feeds us?

Yes, we have rejected the major tenets of dominant Christianity in the US (a God with agency to intervene, the Bible as primary text, correct belief matters). Yes, most of us have in our heads rejected superstition.

And yet, we crave spiritual depth – knowing another soul, going to that heart place – “ecstasy won't go into words – it feels like music.”

Sometimes our thinking becomes a wall that prevents us (or perhaps protects us) from being pried off dead center and into that realness of mattering.

I continue to sing Taizé chants because they feed my soul. This weekend, we ritualize and honor those who died in uniform even as we have protested those same wars. Some of you say the rosary with your prayer beads because it grounds you (even though you left Catholicism years ago).

Ritual [and spiritual practice] is powerful. It touches that place in us that is beyond thought.

That is why so many of you show up here during the week to participate in tai chi, chi gong, Small Group Ministry, meditation, choir, artmaking, drum circle, sing-alongs, and more. Because we all need to feed our souls.

Here in this sanctuary, we seek to exchange powerful ideas AND create ritual that takes us to that soul-opening place beyond thought. We seek to create rituals where you don't have to set aside some part of yourself or what you believe to be fully present.

Last week, our children sat on these steps watching Jonathan and Mia Bleck get dedicated into this community. Our rambunctious, vocal, squirmy kids sat still, rapt as they watched me bless their friends with a rose and a flame....because they felt the ritual significance – of dedicating these children into the care of this covenantal community.

It was beautiful. It was powerful. It strengthened our community.

Our children and youth know how to go to that soul-opening place. They don't worry about who believes what about God, they simply live – opening their hearts to one another, working out their differences (sometimes loudly!), asking profound questions to we which often don't have answers, living and loving this faith proudly and boldly.

May we do likewise.

Let us come out of the closet about our spiritual practices, our places of ecstasy beyond words, our heart broken places.

Let us embrace our contradictions and surrender to that which calls our hearts.

Let us keep thinking AND let us stop thinking.

So that we, too, may simply live – opening our hearts to one another, working out our differences (sometimes loudly!), asking profound questions, living and loving this faith proudly and boldly.

So may it be.

ⁱ Meg Riley, A Candid Welcome, <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/candid-welcome-uu>

ⁱⁱ Andrew Linscott, CBD UUMA presentation on the Bio Cultural Study of Religion, Spring 2016