

## CONTINUING SEARCH FOR TRUTH AND MEANING

September 3, 2017

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This morning I am feeling a bit of late-summer nostalgia and frankly, a bit anxious.

I am very mindful of Charlottesville, Hurricane Harvey, and North Korea-

--unexpected "guests" at Rumi's table

--unexpected guests at everyone's table!

And yet, we must persist.

Today is the last of our summer worship series....where did this summer go?

And, yet, we must persist.

The theme for our Summer Worship was developed last January, as we prepared for our co-ministers' parental leave. Somehow, it seems so long ago...

And, yet, I will persist.

Have you answered the question that has been the theme for this summer's worship series? --"What Informs Your Unitarian Universalism?"

That five-word question took me back to a take-home exam, as an undergraduate at the then St Joseph College in West Hartford, CT. One of my two required religion electives was a course about Judaism, taught by a professor from Trinity College. I do not remember his question. It definitely had more than five words. It definitely required considerable reflection and synthesis of the entire course content to fully answer that single, brilliant question!

What informs your UUism?...another brilliant question!

Today it is mine—What informs my UUism?

In the process of answering that a question fragments from several of this summer's pulpit guests came to mind: There were more than a few OMG, Oh, My God, moments; This definitely was not the time for wearing masks; In the Buddhist tradition, there was the sense that these words and this good deed will not go to waste, and, perhaps this "bit of rumble will be transformed into gold"; There was the sense of hope as I recalled our Religious Education kids courageously examining all kinds of discrimination this summer; Last week, Rev Heather 's words about embracing our imperfections couldn't have been more timely. Full disclosure, I am not a cradle UU and I do not have Catholic beginnings.

Probably the most unique aspect of my early search for truth and meaning is I was the only member of my family who went to church. In retrospect, it must have been an effort to fill a void that motivated me to accept my sixth-grade friend's invitation to join the Junior Choir at her church. This was the beginning of what would become a long relationship with the Stanley Memorial Congregational Church in New Britain, CT. There is no awareness that I was seeking out organized religion, or looking for God or Jesus at that time. My eleven year old self wanted to sing in the choir.

I grew up in a project in the east side of New Britain, in housing units that today are called townhouses. I knew one of my neighbors went to the Lutheran church; many of my neighbors went to the Catholic church; some of my neighbors, like my family, did not attend church. My Father was a non-practicing Roman Catholic and my Mother's upbringing was decidedly anti-Catholic. Many years later, my older brother, newly engaged to a devote Roman Catholic, would tell our Mother that he was taking classes to become a Catholic. As the story goes, he was encouraged to be the best Roman Catholic that he could be.

At any rate, there I was—in Junior Choir, attending Sunday School and weekly religious education; then in Chapel Choir and Pilgrim Youth Fellowship; completing Confirmation Classes; becoming a member of the church; and in the adult Chancel Choir long after my friend no longer attended that church.

I am certain that I felt reassured knowing “Jesus loves me”; found comfort in the words of the Twenty-third Psalm—“Yeah, though I walk through the shadow of death I will fear no evil for though art with me”. The teachings of Jesus, to love thy neighbor and to help others, were the Good News to me. The multiple wisdom of the Beatitudes from the New Testament sustained me throughout my initial training to become a registered nurse.

The Beatitudes from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are paraphrased as a Response Reading in our grey hymnal---

“Blessed are you poor. The realm of God is yours.

Blessed are you who hunger today. You shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep today. You shall laugh.

Blessed are the humble. They will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful. They will find mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers. They will be ranked as children of God.

...You are the light of the world. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under a bushel but on the lamp stand where it gives light to everyone in the house”.

Even so, I never quite felt as though I fully belonged.

I left that church in my mid-twenties. Mostly aware of being uncertain about the depth of my Christian faith and aware of my inability to fully embrace the concept of the Trinity.

Once again I was unchurched and would remain so for many years.

My first experience with UUism was here at the Unitarian Society of Hartford—at a memorial service for the Mother of a friend—in our chapel on a mid-winter evening in the early 1980s. Rev National Lauriat had never met my friend's Catholic mother. He met with her children for several hours. There was no music at Nat's suggestion. The service was readings and prayer. That service captured the essence of my friend's Mother's life in all of its complexities. I couldn't have described it this way then but I can now—that evening we were all held and comforted by the affirmation and promotion of the inherent worth and dignity of every person (our first principle).

Sometime after that I came to a Sunday morning worship service aware that I was seeking comfort and guidance. There was a time of personal upheaval—significant relationships were coming undone; my profession was changing—developing new paradigms of nursing theory and laying the groundwork to establish baccalaureate education as the entry level for registered nurses. Already a registered nurse, I had begun part-time undergraduate study in nursing at St Joseph College. With this, came personal growth and change.

In those days, it was Betty Arnold's warm smile that greeted me at the Welcome Table. It was Betty Arnold who made my first green name tag. It felt good to be here. There was a sense of familiarity in the worship experience. The sermon messages were often universal themes with occasional references from the Bible. At times, the sermons were confounding. I embraced the idea that there are many paths to the truth. Coffee hour, a UU institution, was not part of my prior church. I shied away from coffee hour for quite awhile. Even so, being here felt right.

In 1985, I became a member. In a pattern that would repeat itself, from time to time I would stop coming to church. Then I would return. During those absences, I did not consider myself unchurched.

Two pivotal decisions broadened my participation in the life of this congregation. The first was accepting a congregation-wide invitation to a leadership weekend retreat early in the ministry of Rev Theresa Cooley. The other was participation in several Small Group Ministries. These were times of fellowship, learning, sharing experiences, working together, and developing relationships. Gradually, Coffee Hour became a part of "doing church" on Sunday morning.

I have been fortunate to be able to attend district meetings, several General Assemblies, and several workshops on worship. More recently, being a Worship Associate and a member of the USH Art Group have deeply enriched my spiritual journey and deepened relationships within this congregational community.

"What Informs My Unitarian Universalism? "...Ultimately it is the seven principles affirmed and promoted by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The seven principles printed inside the order of service cover and in the early pages of our grey hymnal, Singing The Living Tradition.

Let us thoughtfully read, responsively, Responsive Reading #594-Principles and Purposes for All UUs.

"We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We believe that each and every person is important.

We affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

We believe that all people should be treated fairly.

We affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.

We believe that our churches are places where all people are accepted, and where we keep on learning together.

We affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.

We affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

We believe that all people should have a voice and a vote about the things which concern them

We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

We believe that we should work for a peaceful, fair, and free world.

We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are apart.

We believe that we should care for our planet earth.”

Unitarian Universalism requires each of us to define our own truth, to ask our own questions, to find our own meaning and to live out our Unitarian Universalist values. Truly a life-long process whenever we start it. Truly a life changing process. How grateful am I to have found Unitarian Universalism. How grateful am I to be part of this community that supports the continuing search for truth and meaning as I strive to be the best Unitarian Universalist that I can be!

Sue Smolski, September 3, 2017