

“The Faith That Chooses Us”

Choice is an important value for Unitarian Universalists. One might say it's almost a sacred precept.

Faith for us is not so much an heirloom handed down from previous generations as a matter of living more intentionally here and now. Few of us were born into this tradition, and even those who were reared as Unitarian Universalists had to make a conscious decision at some point to embrace this religious movement as our own rather than as a birthright simply handed down from our parents.

You might be a Jew or a Catholic out of habit or family history. But you have to choose to be a Unitarian Universalist, not necessarily abandoning your past, but now allowing it to define you either. Ours is religion where we define ourselves. We hammer out our own beliefs, write our own credos, build our own theology, pursue our own personal path rather than following in the well-trodden paths that others have walked before.

When we consider our children, we recall the words of William Ellery Channing, who said that the great aim in religious education is “not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own,” not to indoctrinate them with pre-digested answers but to arouse their own questioning and spiritual hunger. We teach them how Iranians celebrate the New Year and native people make prayer sticks and what the Buddha taught, but want them to make their own choices and form their own convictions when they finally grow up. That's what growing up means, not just maturing physically but developing the inward compass that allows you to set your own direction in life.

And when it comes to social witness, Unitarian Universalists have gone on record supporting reproductive choice for women and end-of-life choice for the terminally ill. In wartime, our congregations have been havens for conscientious objectors who believe that military service should be a matter of individual discernment rather than forced conscription. We went from defending inter-racial marriage in the 1950's and 60's to gay marriage in the 1990's, but in both cases the logic was the same, that one's choice of mate is a profoundly private decision, beyond the regulation of church or state. Personal predilection, not the government censor, should determine what we read and the opinions we're allowed to express. As liberals, we cherish the autonomy of the individual.

Perhaps that's why one of the most popular guidebooks to Unitarian Universalism is a volume titled *Our Chosen Faith*. There we're reminded that the word “heresy” comes from a Greek root, *hairesis*, that means to choose. From the earliest days of the Christian empire, when the church under Constantine began to assemble the trappings of worldly power and pomp, there were some who chose not to cooperate with the new world order, who challenged the powers-that-be, just as Jesus had challenged the status quo in his own time. They were mavericks, our forbears, who insisted on doing and saying things their own way rather than sticking to the prepared script. Though our beliefs may have evolved beyond those early Christian beginnings, we still hold that any

genuine spirituality has to be freely embraced, not imposed by the deadening hand of external authority.

And so the theme of our annual fund raising campaign this year is “The Faith We Choose,” acknowledging that the strength of this congregation is the strength we decide to give it. Our effectiveness as a voice of conscience in the community, our ability to equip children with the skills they need to operate intelligently in a morally complex world, our capacity to touch lives through study circles and small group ministry and music and worship: all of these depend choices we make about the allocation of our resources of time and talent and money.

And yet there is an important sense in which the faith we live by is not a matter of choice or personal preference or individual decision. There is a sense in which religion or spirituality—whatever you want to call it—is not an option that we select so much as a life-transforming encounter with realities not of our own choosing. As my friend the Reverend Dick Gilbert once said, “I didn’t think my way into religious living so much as I lived my way into religious thinking.” We’re drawn to faith as a result of the unpredictable but unavoidable mishaps and mis-steps of human existence, when we thought we were headed down one road—toward our chosen destination—and find ourselves flung headlong in the other direction, or toward entirely unexpected dimensions that open us to new modes of being.

That was the case, for example, for a thirty-two year old man wandering the streets of Chicago. He had just been fired from his job. His daughter, only four years old, had died recently of spinal meningitis. He had begun to drink and had no money. Everything in his world seemed to be breaking apart. According to his own account, “Finally I reached a point where I found myself saying ‘Am I an utter failure?’ If so, I’d better get myself out of the way. But I said to myself, ‘You do not belong to you, therefore you do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You belong to the universe.’”

At that point something strange happened. “I was on Michigan Avenue, about three or four blocks south of the Chicago River, right across from the Wrigley Building, when suddenly I found myself in a sort of sparkling kind of sphere ... And I heard a voice, such as I had never heard before, saying ‘From now on you need never await temporal attestation to your thought. You think the truth.’ I couldn’t believe I was not touching the ground and that I was hearing this extraordinary thing! It was after that I started writing feverishly. I said, ‘I think I must write everything down, because I was thinking the truth.’”

And it was also in that year, 1927, that I was inspired by the birth of a new child, Allegra ... I said, ‘I’m really going to give the rest of my life to this new young life.’ I pledged, both to the daughter who died and to the daughter now born, that I was committing myself to humanity.”

By now you’re probably wondering, “Who was this guy?” Certainly not one of ours, you’re thinking, because Unitarians aren’t supposed to hear voices, are we? We’re a

people whom the psychologist Abraham Maslow described as “non-peakers,” not ordinarily given to religious raptures or conversion experiences. The Beacon Hill lady who, on being told of the need to be born again, replied, “Why should I be born again? I was born in Boston!” was of this type. And when a worshiper in one of our New England congregations some years ago became so excited by the minister’s remarks that he began to holler “I got religion,” he was reportedly approached by an usher in a coat-and-tie who whispered, “Please say you didn’t get it here!”

But religion is not something we get so much as an inexplicable force that gets us, as it got Buckminster Fuller that day, hovering on the brink of suicide. From almost total breakdown he went on to become one of the great creative thinkers of the twentieth century. “In 1927,” he said, “I resolved to do my own thinking and see what the individual, starting without any money or credit—in fact with considerable discredit, but with a whole lot of experience—could produce on behalf of his fellow men and women.” Out of the chaos of a life in which all his dream lay shattered, there emerged a new life as inventor, architect, environmentalist, visionary.

And his UU connections were impeccable. Bucky was the grandson of Arthur Buckminster Fuller, a Unitarian clergyman who happened to be the younger brother of renowned Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. Her own life story includes a turning point just as profound as the one her grandnephew experienced a century later—a singular moment when she nearly lost it all and in the same instant found entrance to a larger, more abundant life.

Margaret had been reared primarily by her father—although “trained” might be a better word for it. Sparing with affection, he recognized his daughter’s superior mind from early infancy and drilled her incessantly, testing the limits of what one mind could absorb: Latin, Greek, Italian, French, metaphysics and philosophy. Margaret excelled under this academic regimen, but as womanhood approached she realized the scholarly attainments that so pleased her papa were not likely to endear her in the same way to any other man. Domesticity and spinsterhood were the equally depressing prospects open to a woman such as herself. And by the time she reached adulthood, Margaret had fallen into a deep depression. Her male friends were finished with their education and heading toward careers in law, medicine, and the church. But her own outlooks were bleak. On Thanksgiving Day, 1831, she recorded in her journal: “I felt within myself great power, and generosity, and tenderness; but it seemed to me as if they were all unrecognized, and as if it was impossible that they should be used in life. I was only one-and-twenty; the past was worthless, the future hopeless.”

She was pondering all this, walking in the woods, and had seated herself near a pool of water, when “Suddenly the sun shone out with that transparent sweetness, like the last smile of a dying lover, which it will use when it has been unkind all a cold autumn day.” Illumined in that golden glow, she was unexpectedly lifted up out of herself, out of her skin, out of her ordinary consciousness, as she records:

I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of

circumstance; that it was only because I thought self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the All and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God.

Like the casement of a seed that splits open when exposed to sun and warmth and light, the shell of Margaret's individual ego seemed to be stripped away, as an energy not her own poured in. And from that point on, she began to unfold and blossom. She became the editor of the Transcendentalist literary magazine, *The Dial*, writing essays on feminism that would appear in book form as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. She worked as a journalist for the New York Tribune, investigating prison conditions and treatment of the insane, then as a foreign correspondent traveling to Europe where she fell in love and had a child with an Italian revolutionary, fighting for the creation of a Roman Republic. Margaret is perhaps best known for her exultant exclamation, "I accept the universe!" To which Emerson's friend Thomas Carlyle drily replied, "Gad, she'd better." But accepting the universe for Margaret was no philosophy of shallow acquiescence or weary resignation. Rather it meant a hearty embrace of all that life had to offer--tears and blood and love and passion--an unqualified "Yes" to her own birth and death and all that lay between.

This was Margaret's faith. Not a faith she chose, but one that illumined and enlightened her as she sat alone and hopeless in the woods. And this was also Bucky's faith, not one he arrived at through rational deliberation, but one that brought him to an understanding that "You have no right to eliminate yourself. You belong to the universe," as he stared into the cold waters of Lake Michigan. To use traditional religious language, you could say that each of them was saved, brought from the pit of desolation and despair into all the richness and ripeness of and infinite possibility of living ... hoisted up by some impetus larger than themselves.

Perhaps hearing voices is rare (or maybe not). But most of us, I suspect, have experienced moments that rise above the ordinary--moments of communion and connection where an otherwise drab and dull existence seems tinged with grace and grandeur.

And this is what our faith is all about, rescuing life from cynicism, redeeming it from crassness, saving souls, although not in the narrow and restricting sense in which too many churches use that phrase. Many of us were reared in denominations where being saved meant taking communion every Sunday, or reciting the creeds, or confessing a laundry list of nit picky sins. Mark Twain ridiculed that kind of religion a century ago when he defined *faith* as "believing what any darned fool knows ain't so." That kind of faith is more concerned with obedience and conformity than with changing hearts or freeing the spirit.

But that is not our faith, not the one we support with our dollars, and not the one we celebrate this morning. Religion for us is not about tithing. Not about dogma, not about ritual or living up to other people's expectations. Rather, religion for us is an openness to the mystery that sustains and upholds life. It is a sense of kinship with the cosmos. It

is an invitation to bolder dreams and more generous action. It entails radical affirmation. Our faith thrives on Bucky's motto, "Find something useful to do and do it!" Unitarian Universalism is self-transcendence expressed in service to the world.

This is not only the faith we choose, but also the faith that chooses us.

