

“Together on the Unitarian Universalist Path”

I commend you for plowing through the hymn we just sang, Ralph Vaughan Williams' setting of John Bunyan's words, "To Be a Pilgrim." The root of the word "pilgrim" means "a wanderer, one who goes through the fields." With the stops and starts in the rhythm of that hymn, it may have seemed a bit like wandering through the muddy fields. But if we came to Sunday services only to walk the tried and true, there would be no point in coming!

In fact, one reason I love being a Unitarian Universalist is because I know that among UUs, I will be challenged in my thinking, I will be changed, and I will evolve, even as I am lovingly supported along the way. Whereas most religious congregations gather on the basis of what they know, we gather together because we are seekers, drawn to one another in our common quest for meaning. This Society here at the top of Church Street is a place of pilgrimage, where we find rest, renewal, and a temporary home (as all homes are temporary). Here, we may cultivate a vital spiritual life that includes both rest and restlessness. Faith as we live it embraces certainty and doubt - both are valuable. Faithfulness, for us, is not accomplished in a single leap - it is, rather, a journey of commitment.

This morning I'd like to consider with you the nature of this Unitarian Universalist path we've chosen. If you are new to the path, welcome! Be assured my views are not necessarily the views of the person sitting next to you in the pew. My purpose, however, is not to tell you about my religious views. It is to describe our common orientation as Unitarian Universalists as I understand it. For, as I see it, Unitarian Universalism is not a religion. It is a way of moving through the world, characterized most beautifully by the 16th century Unitarian Francis David with his familiar words:

"Ye need not think alike, to love alike."

In this statement, the nature of the Unitarian Universalist path may be discerned.

Stephen Batchelor writes:

"Imagine a footpath that cuts across a field, passes through a gate into a wood, winds between the undergrowth and trees, emerges onto a heath, climbs out of view towards a distant range of hills....To say it 'cuts,' 'passes,' 'winds,' 'emerges,' 'climbs' is to think of it as something with agency that stands out in its own right. But if you kneel down on the ground and examine it, what do you find? Nothing. The path is just a gap between other things: the human sized space between the grasses in the field and the trees in the woodland.

...The path is a cipher of meaning and purpose. One's 'path in life' is a convenient way of saying what one's existence is for. It sums up all that we value and aspire to. It lets us envision our remaining years as a trajectory stretching ahead on which to realize our hopes.

It enables us to stay focused on priorities. Whereas to have 'lost one's way' is to have lost a guiding vision. Just as the sense of following a path imbues life with meaning, so being lost is linked with aimlessness and despair.

To lose my way is not only to lose a sense of direction but also the freedom to move. A path allows me to walk or run at a steady, rhythmic pace. As soon as I lose it, I find myself struggling through undergrowth, climbing over fallen trees, circumventing heaps of rocks....My relief on recovering a path is that of being able to move freely again. For a path is a space where nothing gets in the way....Space is thus a metaphor of freedom. Instead of seeing a path as a thing on which one walks, imagine it as the space between things that allows one the freedom to walk."

[Parabola magazine, Fall 2004, "The Devil in the Way"]

If a path is the space between things that allows us the freedom to move, both on the earth and in our spiritual lives, then how does Unitarian Universalism create that space?

I would venture to say the creative freedom of our faith is rooted in two fundamental tenets:

The first, from our Unitarian heritage - We affirm the life of the mind. All questions are welcomed, all answers are questioned. Wonder, investigation, thoughtful reflection and common sense open up a path for us as we make our way through a world of confusion. We prefer open-ended discussions to the stop sign certainties that mark the end of a conversation. As Unitarians, we take it as our responsibility to shine our own light, to think for ourselves, and to encourage one another as we seek enlightenment together. Although we may not think alike, we share and take seriously our responsibility to be thinking human beings.

Secondly, our Universalist heritage liberates us from fear with the affirmation of unconditional love. Universalists from antiquity have said that the only possible thing that can come between human beings and the love which is the moving force of the universe, is our own ignorance. In reality, there are no obstructions between ourselves and creative, renewing love. When we become sensibly aware of this love, the Universalists of the 18th century affirmed, our path is revealed; when we know we are loved, we naturally respond and move in harmony with the Spirit of Life animating creation. In this Spirit, we love alike.

As I see it now (and the way I see it may change), these two characteristics - freedom of thought and overarching unconditional love - delineate the Unitarian Universalist path. These qualities create the space for us to journey through this world together.

Of course, the journey of faith is not easy. It isn't always easy to find the right words to speak about what matters to us most, sometimes. For example, if one person's thinking leads them to conclude there is no God, and another person experiences a loving presence they call God, for lack of a better word, there can be jostling on the path. Some folks come to this road through the Unitarian on ramp, and some via the Universalist, and they may feel most at home with their native nomenclature. By whatever route we have arrived here, once we're on this path together, it can be a challenge to truly enjoy the differences we claim to celebrate.

But again, if this path were an easy path, it would not be half as interesting. And in the long run, we are blessed with a richness of experience by virtue of this wide-open road.

Rev. Forrest Church describes various types of pilgrims in his book, *Lifecraft*. These types are not defined by theological orientation or philosophy. Rather, they characterize distinctive ways of approaching experience. I find it elucidating to think of myself and you - my fellow pilgrims - in this way, free and clear of the labels "Pagan," "Christian," "Buddhist," "Humanist," etcetera.

Here, in brief, are Forrest Church's types. Perhaps you will recognize your own style of being on the path, or that of your fellow pilgrims.

First - "The Child" "Rarest of the types, the Child views all creation as enchanted." The Child sees heaven in the mustard seed, and does not harbor cynicism or skepticism. He or she can find good "almost anywhere."

Second - "The Lover," who finds meaning through the human heart. "Often the Lover sets out to search for [Truth] only after experiencing some great suffering....Their own experience makes them more compassionate toward others....To recognize one's own tears in another's eyes can create a human connection that is divine."

Next - "The Champion," The Champion advocates for justice and "has a natural instinct for human rights in the larger, societal sense."

"The Servant" is the seeker who follows the guidance of generations of teachers, and delves deep into religious scriptures (or philosophies), drawing "from a long and proven tradition to help discover his or her way."

"The Dreamer" draws upon imagination to create a mythic depiction of God, or Goddess. Her virtue is hope, as she affirms a colorful world beyond the seen world which gives experience a pattern, rhyme and reason.

"The Mystic" is a loner by nature. He seeks illumination through solitude. The Mystic, says Church, "may draw upon personal powers of intuition or healing to minister

directly to others....The path to God involves self-emptying” so the Mystic may become a vessel for the Holy Spirit.

And finally, Church describes “The Star Gazer.” “Star Gazers ponder the universe to discover hints of cosmic purpose....They ponder bigger things than can be imagined.” They are characterized by awe and humility, and see “all others as one, mysteriously born, fated to die, children of creation, seeds of divine mystery.”

[pages 73-78, Lifecraft: The Art of Meaning in the Everyday]

The fact is, no matter how we may describe ourselves, we are a beautiful, fallible, band of pilgrims on this path together. What greater bounty could there be than to travel this road of life with freethinking folks who endeavor to act in loving harmony? May we all be sensible of the great blessings we enjoy and embody on the Unitarian Universalist path. AMEN