

The Three Errors of Unitarian Universalism

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My religious journey has not been a simple one. It certainly hasn't gone in a straight line from point A to point B, or point A to point UU. But, like Parker Palmer, who felt that his life had no direction until he looked back and saw that every twist and turn led up to exactly where he was now, my journey has a striking coherence when viewed in retrospect.

Seen this way, it's clear that I was always searching for a hidden wholeness that embraces all of life from its profound depths to its breathtaking heights. Like we sing sometimes, "There is more love out there and I'm gonna keep on till I find it."

In my search, I've always relied on the critical thinking skills I inherited from my father. So when I took the catechism class that Lutherans expected of their middle school youth, I told the minister that, although I'd learned what he'd taught, it just didn't meet my standards of evidence. I was interested in the questions religion raised, but found their answers unverifiable and their results unrepeatable.

I refused confirmation and left the church, looking elsewhere. The best bet seemed to be in psychology and philosophy. At least they seemed to grapple with the issues rather than closing off discussion with pat answers. It was a fascinating and engaging study but it ultimately remained vague and irrelevant – ideas and speculations about life that never actually engaged its heights and depths in any intimate way.

My first encounter with Unitarianism came just after high school. I made friends with people who went to the local church and encouraged me to check it out. I was impressed with the intellectual nature of the programming. There were fascinating explorations of ideas and philosophies, but since I'd been doing that for years already it didn't seem quite so new and exciting. And since there was no probing of depths beyond the reach of the intellect, it didn't seem relevant to my needs.

So I was fascinated when I encountered Eastern religions. Zen Buddhism seemed to be the answer to an engineer's religious dream: it gave you the tools to test its claims! You could do this, and see if that happens. If that happens, you can try this and see where it leads. Freed from ideology and speculation, I began to taste some of the fruits of the spiritual journey.

But Zen Buddhism seemed as arbitrary and authoritarian as many of the churches I'd already rejected, so it, too, fell by the wayside.

I studied with a number of Hindu teachers, practitioners of Vedanta philosophy and yoga practice. I visited monasteries and ashrams. I learned to concentrate on the divine light within. And I rejoiced in the loving atmosphere of these communities. I was greeted with glowing, welcoming eyes and easy smiles. But it all seemed a bit "woo-woo" for this son-of-an-engineer so I never joined in completely.

I studied Islamic mysticism with Sufis at the Abode of the Message, led by Pir Vilayat Kahn, son of Hazrat Vilayat Khan, founder of the Sufi order in the West. I discovered Rumi, the 13th century founder of the Sufi order. His mystical poetry spoke of an inclusiveness that set aside all judgmentalism. He wrote, "Out beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make sense any more."

Rumi taught that there is a way of being in the world that has nothing to do with what we think and believe – that there is a transcendent reality too joyous and delightful to be contained by language or philosophy.

I continued in this vein, studying here and there, practicing this and that, until I'd pretty much covered the entire known world of religion – and a few areas on the fringe as well. I kept seeking answers that worked for me, and being inspired by those I met who were clearly full of something like the holy spirit – people who exuded love and joy in every moment, to everyone they met.

Eventually I decided that I needed a community, though. I joined the Community Church of Chapel Hill because of its background in civil rights and social justice issues, and because it was completely unaffiliated with any organized

religion. But it turned out had its own issues. It turned out that, in 1990 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the role of a white intellectual civil rights congregation had just about played itself out. Their goals accomplished, they had little to hold them together except their traditions of protest. So they turned inward and argued with each another. A once-vital church had shrunk from 300 to 88 members.

I played a role in nurturing a growing awareness that the congregation needed a renewed vision and sense of its history. We spent several years exploring the options and decided, finally, to affiliate with the Unitarian Universalist Association. It seemed quite different from my Unitarian experience of years before. While Unitarianism had been deeply intellectual but emotionally shallow, Unitarian Universalism seemed to glow with the heartfelt joy of spiritual depth. I remember the scales falling from my eyes as I realized that this renewed religion wasn't based on rejecting anything so much as including everything, which is, after all, what Universalism means! We could be a congregation that welcomed all faiths, respected all beliefs, as long as they led us to share our core values of compassion, nurture, and justice!

I came to see this renewed Unitarian Universalism as the answer to America's need to find a way for a nation with diverse faiths, backgrounds, and ethnicities to come together and celebrate the values they shared, rather than using their differences to drive them apart.

This is a faith that includes Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Earth-centered folk, Taoists, and even secular humanists – a religion of inclusion rather than exclusion. That congregation, revitalized, has grown to more than 400 members today.

But, as I've grown in the faith and experienced many churches and gained perspective on the movement as a whole, I've had doubts as to how it's being lived. Religious leaders from Thomas Jefferson to Diana Eck have said that our religion can be the unifying faith for our American ideals, and yet we haven't grown. Our 160,000 members make us too small even to appear in most surveys of church demographics. What's wrong with this picture?

This is the question that the Rev. Fred Muir, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, Maryland, addressed in his 2012 Berry Street Address to the UU Ministers Association.

Muir said that, “Fundamental to our survival is a paradigm shift, a ‘frame-bending’ that goes deep into the history and character . . . of Unitarian Universalism and its members because it goes to the essence of how we understand and see ourselves and in turn relate to the world at large. . . Fundamental to our future is recognizing that our way of faith – from its ministry to its members – has been supported and nurtured by a trinity of errors leading not only to ineffectiveness but an inability to share our liberating message; which is to say . . . it is losing its vitality and relevance.”

He goes on, “The trinity of which I speak is: First, we are being held back and stymied – really, we are being held captive – by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times;

“Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalism exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news;

“Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, although all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.”

Muir felt that we went wrong in following Ralph Waldo Emerson’s teachings too literally, saying that “I have read enough of Emerson to feel certain that he celebrated the gifts of individuality – the beauty of nature’s differences and diversity, of which humans are a part. We – as a nation and as a religious community – took the blessings and joy of individuality and made it an ideology, made it a theology, and we did a very bad job of making it polity. We went from individuality to individualism and ended where . . . Emerson took us – to the demise of institutional religion.”

Muir points to our first Principle, the respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, which he says has a shadow side. “When used as an expression of individualism rather than an expression of the joy and celebration of individuality, the Principles come dangerously close to sounding like an ideology or

creed. . . There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.”

The second error Muir points out is exceptionalism, which is the conviction “that our way of religion is uniquely virtuous, uniquely powerful, uniquely destined to accomplish great things, and thus uniquely authorized to act in ways to which [we] would object if done by others. . . Whether as a source of pride, personal and community truth, embellishment, clarification or, strangely enough, welcoming – we hear the inflection of Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism . . . by those who are earnestly trying to explain our way of religion to the uninformed. As unique as our experience with Unitarian Universalism may be, it is not the only way. We must stay conscious of how we explain, defend or share lest we come across as elitist, insulting, degrading, isolating, even humiliating to others.”

And then there is the third obstacle: “our allergy to power and authority which often results in its misuse and abuse. Here he quotes Emerson again, who wrote, ‘Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . . .’ And he quotes Benjamin Anastas, “The larger problem has been Emerson’s tacit endorsement of a radically self-centered world view. . . [it’s as though] the sun, the moon, and the stars revolve around our portable chairs, and whatever contradicts our right to harbor misconceptions – whether it be Birtherism, climate-science denial or the conviction that Trader Joe’s sells good food – is the prattle of the unenlightened majority and can be dismissed out of hand.’ ”

Another feature of our allergy to authority is that, although we may reject the authority of others over us, even as a form of a healthy organizational self-regulation, we believe most certainly in the authority of the individual, of ourselves. This leaves us with no clear governance but with authority dispersed among many individuals in charge of various church fiefdoms in a way that actually discourages others from joining in as volunteers.

Fortunately, Muir doesn’t just criticize us; he offers us a way forward. He invites us to replace what he calls the “iChurch” of individualism, saying “that story is over, it has ended; it’s a story that won’t take us where we must go, it is turning

our backs on what we need for a healthy future, which is the Beloved Community, a community of justice, a religion and spirituality that Unitarian Universalism does have as a vibrant and vital part of our history. . . . and this means shaping a [church] that is religious and spiritual, covenantal and experiential, progressive and, yes, evangelical.”

This doesn’t mean we abandon our vital social justice work in the world, but that we come to realize, as Shirley Strong notes, “Many social activists have come to realize there is something missing in the struggle for justice and human rights. We have lost our connection to spirituality, in the sense of being connected to something greater than ourselves – something whose inherent outcome is the creation of Beloved Community.” Others have pointed out that liberalism had lost the moral high ground when it surrendered prophetic spirituality to the religious right.

Carolyn McDade, composer of our beloved hymn, “Spirit of Life,” which we sang just moments ago, explained its creation in this way. “During a time of intense social justice activism, I drove a friend home from yet another meeting. As I stopped to let her out I confided to her how dry I felt – like cardboard years in an attic: The slightest motion of air and I would disintegrate into dust. Even now I remember the despair that image conveys. Finally at home, I moved to the piano. In the dark I sat. . . [and] in singing my heart was freed. There was no plan or expectation in that moment, only a deep and immediate plea by a despairing soul. . . My ardent desire was to stay faithful to the movements I loved, to the people of these movements, their tally of goodness toward a world healthy and just for all. . .” It was from that posture that “Spirit of Life” was prayed; a deep desire, a soul-filled expression for her spirit to be free and healed for the work of justice.

Muir’s wish is that our congregations “must ensure that there are ample opportunities to be religious and spiritual; to support and design opportunities that nurture prophetic spirituality and encourage people to not only have minds on fire, but to keep their souls filled and their spirits afire as well.”

In a culture where our potential members are more likely to be “spiritual but not religious,” than recovering members of other denominations, we need to pay

attention to the needs of the heart and soul as well as the mind. Our history has led us to attract and build a community of crotchety progressive intellectuals who are often suspicious if not dismissive of invitations to spiritual growth. In this way, many of our churches are stuck in a bind like the Community Church of Chapel Hill years ago: they're so committed to hatching ideas and fighting the world that they end up fighting among themselves. Or we're like the old-school Unitarians I met after high school: dedicated intellectuals so committed to the life of the mind that they overlook the needs of the heart.

The way forward, my friends, is not to do better what we've been doing all along; we need to do something radically different as individuals, as a congregation, and as a movement. We need to be a real church, dedicated to the understanding that there is no end of the road of personal transformation. We must undertake the real and hard religious and spiritual challenge within our own hearts and communities before we can expect the world to pay attention. We can make a different world by being a different kind of people.

And we must get over our allergy to the word, "God." I really mean it. Get over it. Whether or not we agree with how it has been used, it is the gateway term in our culture to those depths and connections that are beyond the intellect. We marginalize and discredit ourselves by this attitude. It's as though we all had a really deep and comprehensive understanding of global economics: markets, supply, value, credit, and so on. And because of that understanding we knew that the word, "money" wasn't really what things were all about, so we refused to say the word in our discussions and advocacy. But no one would take us seriously! Money is a very real thing to most people. Rejecting the word would only make us seem irrelevant and weird. So, too, for "God."

If we want to take our place in this culture as a vital and Beloved Community, if we want to attract the "spiritual but not religious" people that comprise the fastest-growing segment of our society, 95% of whom believe in some kind of God, we have to be able to speak the language. Otherwise we consign ourselves to be a refuge for crotchety progressive intellectuals, a group that is shrinking in both size and relevance in the 21st century.

Muir shared a story told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

He says, “Jewish tradition says that the splitting of the Red Sea was the greatest miracle ever performed. It was so extraordinary that on that day even a common servant beheld more than all the miracles beheld by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel combined. And yet we have one Midrash that mentions two Israelites, Reuven and Shimon, who had a different experience.

“Apparently the bottom of the sea, though safe to walk on, was not completely dry but a little muddy, like a beach at low tide. Reuven stepped into it and curled his lip. ‘What is this muck?’

“Shimon scowled, ‘There’s mud all over the place!’

“ ‘This is just like the slime pits of Egypt!’ replied Reuven.

“ ‘What’s the difference!’ complained Shimon. ‘Mud here, mud there; It’s all the same.’

“And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way across the bottom of the sea. And because they never once looked up, they never understood why on the distant shore everyone else was singing songs of praise. For Reuven and Shimon the miracle never happened.”

Muir concludes, “For Reuven and Shimon, they simply couldn’t get past the muck on their feet. We all have some kind of muck on our feet, don’t we? All of those issues and challenges that get in the way of moving forward; . . . Some would say it’s hopeless.”

I don’t think it is. When I recall the earlier days of my journey, I remember learning to concentrate on the divine light within. And how I rejoiced in the loving atmosphere of those communities where I was greeted with glowing, welcoming eyes and easy smiles. And I recall how I was inspired by those I met who were clearly full of something like the holy spirit – people who exuded love and joy in every moment, to everyone they met.

I believe that we can be those people; that this can be that community: an inspiration and refuge to all who hunger and thirst for the living waters of the spirit as they learn to live the love they long for.

May it be so.