

Is There a “There” There?

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Doing a sermon like I am doing this morning, a “This is Unitarian Universalism” sermon, I am often reminded of a “Bring a Friend” Sunday many years ago. A member of the Membership Committee, the Sunday before such a sermon was to be delivered, got up and made an announcement to the congregation that if they were new to the church to be sure to attend the following Sunday because, as they stated in front of everyone that morning, “Rev. Josh will be giving a good sermon that day.” It was the way she hit the word “good” in that sentence that elicited a few chuckles. One member of my old Committee on Ministry came up to me at coffee hour and with his tongue firmly in his cheek, suggested that I list in the newsletter which sermons were going to be good, and which ones were not, so that he could plan his Sunday mornings accordingly. It is a practice I have yet to undertake. Here is hoping that this morning is one of the good ones.

I begin today going back a bit further than my well-meaning Membership Committee member. All the way back to my first call to

ministry. This is a story I believe I have told a couple of times here, but bear with me. My call to ministry came in college. I had been a Unitarian Universalist about a year and a half, and I had the zeal of the converted. I was listening to an interfaith dialogue between a reformed Jewish Rabbi and the Unitarian Universalist minister. It was jointly sponsored by our two campus groups who were the audience. When it was completed, the reformed Jewish students and the Unitarian Universalist students carried on the dialogue informally. It was the first time for me to answer the question “So what is a Unitarian Universalist?” rather than being the person asking the question. It was something about the energy in the room that evening, sharing this faith that I loved so much, and feeding off of the passion of my classmates, that I just knew that the UU ministry was what I needed to pursue.

This is the story you have heard before. What I later found out was that not everyone present that night had the same experience or interpretation of how these events proceeded. My friend Mary was raised a Unitarian Universalist, and was also a member of the UU campus ministry. But she hated that night of the interfaith dialogue. So imagine if you will, in the spirit of movies like “Pulp Fiction,” the same scene, the same people, but seeing it all through the eyes of a different character.

Mary listened to the dialogue and participated in the conversation, but to her it was debilitating rather than energizing. She was envious of

the Jewish students that night: their heritage, the symbolism of their ritual, the “weight” of their tradition and how it shaped their lives in meaningful ways. Bear in mind we are talking about Reformed Jews, the most liberal brand of Judaism there is, in Ann Arbor Michigan, one of the most liberal towns there is. But somehow talking to them, Mary felt that her UU faith was shallow and unsatisfying. Now this crisis of faith did not lead to Mary renouncing Unitarian Universalism and leaving the church. In fact, years later I would officiate at her wedding. What I have discovered, however, is that hers is not an uncommon feeling. Amy in this morning’s modern reading, also feels this “ache of a blank theological mind” as Buerhens and Parker put it. Unitarian Universalism does broad very well, but we aren’t as good with going deep. At some point the 101 answer that the Principles and Purposes give you just aren’t enough.

My old seminary professor used to have a quip for this feeling. When someone would complain about not getting enough depth out of UU theology or UU worship, he would invoke Gertrude Stein’s famous saying, “There is no ‘there’ there.” The circle is expansive, we welcome in any and all, but it has no center, so he claimed. Feeling this ache themselves, the UUA’s Commission on Appraisal set out to find the Holy Grail that is the center of Unitarian Universalism. Some of the best and most impressive lay people and ministers devoted over five years of intense study to this question. You can go online at the UUA

bookstore and buy their report, but I will give you the spoiler ending. Basically their answer was, “Yes we have a center, but none of us can say what it is. We just know it when we see it.”

The earliest expedition to find the center of Unitarian Universalism was probably Theodore Parker in The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity. As you can tell from the tone of his sermon, delivered at an ordination service in front of many non-Unitarians and the press, Parker was both radical and extreme in his positions as well as rather fiery in getting them across. Parker starts with the Bible. He was, actually, one of the leading Biblical scholars in America at the time. Parker was one of the few Americans who was aware of a very interesting project happening in Germany. The Germans were doing, what we now call, source criticism: a critical look at the Bible trying to figure out what the original sources were, thereby discovering the oldest, and presumably most authentic, teachings of Jesus. This is the beginning of modern Biblical scholarship as we know it.

But to Theodore Parker, this was intensely personal too. If we can figure out which parts of the Bible actually came from Jesus, then what are we to make of the rest of it? Hence his distinction between the transient parts of Christianity, and the permanent parts of it. The transient aspects were those picked up by other traditions: from Judaism the notion of the Messiah, Roman philosophy gives us the gerrymandered concept of the trinity, from Greek myths the hero story,

such as the case of Hercules who was the son of God, Zeus, and had a virgin birth, from Zoroastrian religion the battle between Ahur Mazda and the evil God in a final judgment of humanity. That which is permanent in Christianity, on the other hand, was Jesus' ethical teachings to love your neighbor as yourself and to forgive others even if they were your enemy. That, according to Parker, is the "there" there for Christianity. It is those parts of the Bible that Thomas Jefferson left in his personal Bible and literally threw out the rest.

Unitarian Universalists from then until now have tried many times to distill our religion down to its core, its center, the "there." The Commission on Appraisal is just the most recent blip in a long history of this conversation. The Unitarians of the late nineteenth century fought like cats and dogs over this. Their issue was, "Can you be a Unitarian without being a Christian?" After decades of rancorous debate, William Channing Gannett published a statement called "Things Commonly Believed Among Us." That satiated our appetite for a while, but even that got out dated. Shortly after the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists there was an argument, I mean spirited debate, on the language of what we now call the Principles and Purposes. They were not gender inclusive. Then someone noticed that they were not inclusive of the various theological positions in Unitarian Universalism: the Buddhists, the Christians, the Humanists, etc... Thus in the 1980s they were recast in the form, basically as we know them now. Last year they

came up for revision, and the argument was back on. You don't mess with our perceived "there" there. Or at least what we consider the core to be.

Given this historical context, A House for Hope by John Buerhens and Rebecca Parker presents an interesting case. There is an Adult RE class going on right now about this book, and so as they do with movie reviews, I will warn you that this is a spoiler alert. If you want to read A House for Hope yourself and draw your own opinions, don't listen. Buerhens and Parker claim that the core of Unitarian Universalism is hope. Hope is both a noun and a verb, it is what you have, but it is also what you do and what you practice. They unpack "hope" and apply it to the classical branches of theology: ecclesiology, anthropology, eschatology, soteriology, and so on. Now if you don't know or particularly care about the sub-branches of theology; that is fine. It doesn't need to be that complicated. You still know the "there" there of Unitarian Universalism: hope.

In reading A House for Hope, something struck me: what if this quest for the core of Unitarian Universalism is ultimately quixotic. Like the affable Don Quixote, perhaps our quest is complicated only in our minds, and in reality it's all much simpler than that. According to Buerhens and Parker, the center of Unitarian Universalism is hope. Great; wonderful; fantastic. Hope. You know it, you love it, and you go out and live it. If you need more explanation, that is fine too. Unpack

“hope” and apply it to what you find in some way. Go deep with the idea of hope, and make it as complex and you need it to be. There are unfathomable depths there to be explored.

Now I don't know if I am completely sold that hope is the center of Unitarian Universalism; it might be. But I am convinced that Buerhens and Parker are on to something here, a new approach to pursue in searching for the “there” there of Unitarian Universalism. Go simple. I think the reason no one has adequately articulated the core or center of Unitarian Universalism is because it is like trying to describe the tip your nose: it's always in front of you, you can feel it's there, but somehow it is hard to get a good look at it. In that sense, the UUA Commission on Appraisal was right.

I arrived at the center of what I believe in college, right around the time I was having interfaith dialogues with my liberal Jewish classmates. My apartment was about a fifteen minute walk to the UU church in Ann Arbor, and so I would often walk to church. It was a particularly beautiful walk this time of year; with the fall colors all around me. Washtenaw Street was lined with two kinds of buildings, fraternities and churches. I never found out if this was in some way intentional. But as I passed the Baptist church a few blocks away from the Unitarians, I saw a particularly vibrant colored tree in their courtyard. Their service would start later in the day, so no one was there.

I paused and just watched this tree for a while. Leaves were slowly and gently falling to the ground. And then it just hit me. How trees breathe in what we breathe out. A leaf falls to the ground and decomposes. It becomes the soil which in turn nurtures the tree's roots so that more leaves can grow. Together these form a perfect whole, a dynamic and mysterious cycle of death and rebirth. That is the same for all of us; without exception. Later the Disney movie The Lion King would sing a song about this: the "Circle of Life." Thich Nhat Hanh would describe an experience very similar to mine that he had with a tree in two of his books, The Miracle of Mindfulness and The Heart of Understanding. That gave the experience a little more credence for me after I read that.

Life is dynamic and mysterious. It is beyond our comprehension. Yet I am not separate from the totality of life itself. You could call that dynamic mystery God if you chose to. Sometime I do. The "there" there for Unitarian Universalism is that elemental; it is that simple. It says go and experience life, reason things out, be in relationship to the world and to people in it, and periodically, say every Sunday morning or so, pause and reflect on the meaning of those relationships and those experiences. The products of your reflections will be your center; the core of what you believe. What is unique about Unitarian Universalism in this, as our friend Emerson would remind us, is that Unitarian Universalism encourages us, nay forces us, to consider all the parts of

life to be sacred, not just the things we conveniently categorize under “religion.” So gardening, art, walking, thinking, spending time with your children or your parents, these all count as religious activities just as surely as praying and Bible study do. Whatever your answer is, it can be as simple or as complicated as you need your beliefs to be. The key is to never stop reflecting and refining your answer.

Part of the problem of that spiritual core to our lives, or to Unitarian Universalism, is that it is so often difficult to put into words. Even preaching about my experience that day by the tree doesn’t capture it. That experience, which is over a decade old, shines down through the years of my life. Words can capture only its outer shell, never how that experience has sustained me and given me vision and hope when I had lost my way. The true core of it is ineffable, unspeakable, and unexplainable in no other way than by living it out. The only way to express the “there” there is to examine how well I have lived by that experience of unity with the universe, and how at times I have failed to do so. The core of Unitarian Universalism as a faith is expressed by your life lived in accordance to your spiritual insights and feelings, not by how many clauses you string together in your elevator speech.

The “there” there of Unitarian Universalism is simple. It is as near to you as your next breath or your heart beat, to paraphrase the Sufis. It is a faith we choose, but does not come to us for free. We must protect our freedom to choose and explore very diligently. We need institutions

to protect this freedom and enshrine it so that it is carried forth into the future for generations to come. And we need liberal institutions who understand life as a dynamic mystery and will add to that tradition rather than merely dust off the busts of Channing, Parker, Emerson, Buerhens, and Doss. This is why we support our local churches, but also the larger movement. Today we are celebrating Association Sunday—supporting the larger tradition of Unitarian Universalism in which we live move and have our being. I know many of you have already given generously to this cause this morning during our special offering.

But I want to ask you to do a bit more. Sort of an addendum to the “renew beyond” spiritual homework you will see in your order of service. Go to the Association Sunday website printed in “This Week at First Unitarian.” Click on that and make a second donation to Association Sunday, only this time leave a comment for them to read. Shoot them an e-mail that contains your elevator speech, your core of what you believe or what you believe the center of Unitarian Universalism is, even if it is to disagreed with everything I have said today. Let them know that your donation is to ensure that just as our religious forebears created Unitarian Universalism for us, we will ensure that future generations will enjoy the same freedom to explore and grow that we have. Let them know that your money is going to ensure that there is a “there” there to Unitarian Universalism.

May you be blessed with the power of insight and understanding.
May we always stand in awe and praise of that mysterious, dynamic
force within the universe called by many names but felt as one breath of
spirit within us. And may your generosity match your blessings. Amen
Blessed Be.