

“Congregations as Faith Outfitters”

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July 29, 2012

Call to Gather: #657 “It Matters What You Believe” by Sophia Lyon Fahs

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.

Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children’s days with fears of unknown calamities.

Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

Some beliefs are the blinders, shutting off the power to choose one’s own direction.

Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.

Some beliefs weaken a person’s self-hood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

Reading: Excerpt from “The Cathedral of the World” by Forrest Church (pp. xvi-xvii)

Welcome to the Cathedral of the World.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of grime, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

Because the cathedral is so vast, our life so short, and our vision so dim, over the course of our pilgrimage we are able to contemplate only a bit of the cathedral, explore a few apses, reflect on the play of light and darkness through a few of its myriad windows. Yet, by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning.

A twenty-first-century theology based on the concept of one light and many windows offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring multiple religious approaches, it only excludes the truth-claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the light shines through their window only. Some, as we know from painful recent experience, go so far as to beseech their followers to throw stones through other people's windows.

Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshippers, they conclude that there is no light. But the windows are not the light. They are where the light shines through.

We shall never see the light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the cathedral.

Sermon

Last April I was honored to represent the Steven Point Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in a panel on religion sponsored by the UW Stevens Point Gender and Sexuality Alliance. The experience reminded me once again how awkward we sometimes find it to explain who we are as a faith organization or how we "do" religion. A friend of mine from seminary, who lives in a small town in North Carolina, is often confronted with this question by people who have little knowledge of Unitarian Universalism and can only imagine the worst. My friend has a very sarcastic sense of humor and responds to the question, with the most serious expression he can maintain, "Well in our worship we begin by slaughtering the goat and then we all have sex!" Obviously, he feels humor helps break up the awkwardness of the question before he goes on to explain the vagaries of Unitarian Universalism. I'm sure all of us in the room today can relate to my friend. We probably just don't have the guts to start with his opening comment, or maybe our brains hold us back.

What I want to talk about today is an answer I give to such questions. My answer corresponds to what I think Unitarian Universalism aspires to be, but in my opinion we have a long way to go before we really fulfill that aspiration. I could answer with more confidence if we were already there. But before I give you my answer, it needs a lot of unpacking and ultimately a little faith exploration.

I'd like to start with a definition of religion I picked up in seminary that I find very useful. "Religion is the search for ultimate meaning in life and orientation to one's universe." Because human beings are self-aware, we are innately religious. We can't avoid being confronted with the big questions in life at some point. Why am I here? What is my purpose? What do I want out of life? Is this it? What is immortal and what is finite?

The Pastor from the United Methodist Church on the panel reminded us all that religion is a human construct, meaning humans created the idea of God and the transcendent as a result of their innate search for meaning. I was a bit surprised to hear this come from a Methodist, but I was glad to hear it and it taught me that I don't know as much as I think I do about other expressions of faith. I agreed with her and I do believe this is one of the things Unitarian Universalists can agree on. We descend from a long tradition of liberal religious thinking which

has always believed in critical thought and interpretation of religion. We believe that our sources and traditions were created by women and men in their search for the divine and that revelation is continuous. Or said another way, we don't believe that scripture is the inerrant word of God and its interpretation is forever locked down.

This distinction has very important ramifications. As many of you have heard me mention before, I was raised a fundamentalist and firmly believed that the Bible was given to us directly from God and its meaning was not to be questioned. In my case, my search for ultimate meaning and orientation to the universe was already answered for me. My search was therefore all about how I could change who I was and how I could alter my world view so that it lined up perfectly with the answer I had been given. Think about this in terms of the panel I was on and our discussion of religion's attitude towards gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. In this context it makes perfect sense for a gay man to deny his sexuality in order to conform to the faith he was given. Under such a faith tradition, it is all about the destination. Did you conform before you died?

After taking the UU101 class at our Fellowship before joining, I mentioned to Roger that there was a big misperception by society about our faith. I said Unitarian Universalism is harder than other faiths because the responsibility for the search for ultimate meaning is placed on an individual's shoulders and the scope of the search is vast. Haven't we all heard comments from those outside our faith such as: "Well you can believe anything you want, so that must be easy?" "What kind of a religion just lets you do anything?" "How convenient?" These types of comments probably come from someone whose faith tradition gives them the answers to ultimate meaning and their lifelong struggle is to conform to that answer. We on the other hand believe that the path is customized and the answer is constantly changing as society changes. Sometimes I think we struggle more to find the answers to ultimate questions, than we do to take a stand once we have an answer.

There was another great example from the panel. It included a wonderfully articulate Roman Catholic priest who was very clear about the answer his faith tradition gives him regarding homosexuality. The rest of us represented faiths which have struggled for reinterpretation of homosexuality in light of the conclusions of science and psychology in the mid-20th century. You could discern by my response and that of my Pagan counterpart that our lack of reliance solely on Hebrew or Christian scripture for religious meaning provided us the freedom to consider this question from a broader perspective, resulting in the support of equality much more quickly; for Unitarian Universalism this happened in the 1970s during the gay rights movement. After long and thoughtful searching Unitarian Universalists have decided to promote the inherent worth and dignity of everyone, in all cases, and Paganism lives by the credo do no harm to others or yourself. Because the other faith traditions present on the panel, Jewish, Episcopal, and Methodist, use biblical scripture as their primary source, they have struggled with this question longer or still are not settled about it.

To further unpack my answer to the question how we "do" religion, I'd like to spend the rest of this sermon on our sources. These are the areas Unitarian Universalists reference as our guides on our search for ultimate meaning.

Are you familiar with the list of our six sources? They actually are published following our 7 principles. Let me read them to you.

1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
2. Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

How can we possibly have such diversity among our sources? Do we use them? How can we make more of them in congregational life beyond merely an occasional citation in a sermon, a reading, or a song? Think of the diversity and spiritual richness we would have if we truly embraced all of these equally.

Last year my seminary class was debating the topic "Are We Climbing the Same Mountain?" The source of our discussion was an excerpt from a book by the well-known religion professor and author Stephen Prothero titled *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter*. Our discussion started by considering all the points of view on religion throughout history and representing them visually as a climb up the mountain of Truth – with a capital T. Each felt they had found the highest mountain and the correct path to Truth.

We talked about the modern concept of all religions really being one when they were all boiled down to their essence. I quote from the opening of the essay in which Prothero summarizes the thoughts of Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and others, "...what the world's religions share is not so much God as the Good – the sweet harmony of peace, love and understanding ..." I think this has been very much a normative thought within Unitarianism and Universalism throughout much of the 20th Century. This could be described as alternate paths up the mountain to get to the common Truth. This would be the same concept that Forrest Church uses in his famous cathedral of the world analogy that I read earlier. But Prothero argues that by claiming that all religions point to the same Truth, it dismisses the nuances and depth of understanding from each. We may have a tendency to dismiss them as not worthy of our effort to really understand, if we don't value their distinctiveness.

A post-modern metaphor that works for me is something like Zion National Park. The mountains in Zion are old. They have been worn down over the millennia to the point where many of them are topped by plateaus rather than peaks. I like to think of each of our sources represented by the mountains in the park. In order to limit the appearance of any one source being Truth with a capital T, I prefer the flat tops. To me it gives a sense of equality instead of superiority. By the way, this metaphor does not include volcanos. Just as Forest Church pointed out that there is no room for absolutists who believe their window is the only one, I can't have one mountain erupting and taking over all the others.

We each wander on the mountainsides and may never reach the top. The point is to discover the meaning of the mountain which may or may not lead us to a higher understanding of ultimate meaning. This isn't one of those adventure race competitions we hear about in which you try to scale all the highest peaks on Earth in one year. This is about having the mountains available to you for exploration. In fact, you may often sit on the mountain where you feel most comfortable and look across the valley to the next mountain from a distance.

This is what I feel like we do in our congregations today. Most of our congregations, especially in this part of the country were founded with a strong Religious Humanist tradition. We sit on that Humanist mountain and look over at the Buddhist mountain, or the Jewish mountain, or the mystic mountain, or the Pagan mountain, or the prophetic men and women mountain. We say they are important mountains to us and we claim them as sources but give them only occasional lip service as references in our services.

The parkland around the base of the mountains represents our lives in society. The mountains exist in society and are part of it, but their special characteristic – their height – suggests the possibility of transcendence. I think the role of our congregations is to function as the outfitter in the park. Our role is to outfit our congregants for their trips to the mountains and encourage as many trips as possible. The congregational leadership can think of themselves as trip planners. Every congregation should have at least one spiritual leader. Often that is the role the minister plays, but it doesn't have to be.

So what does this look like practically? Our Sunday services reside in the outfitter lodge and function as the place where the whole community gathers to support each other. This is the common ground where we learn what mountain paths might be out there and find others who may want to explore with us. For example, because it takes me a while to mull things over before I can discover the richness or depth of a subject; I'm a big fan of themes. I really like the way the Fellowship has decided to use themes each month to help us all explore more deeply. I like that it will also include the children's religious education classes so we can explore as families. The new emphasis on small groups should give us all much easier ways to engage each other in conversation and searching. I can't wait to find out what mountains we will explore this coming year.

As I mentioned before, this Fellowship like so many others in the Midwest were founded by Religious Humanists, but we seem to be somewhat unique in how open we are to exploring other mountains. For example, we have several thriving Buddhist meditation groups and we

have an energetic drumming circle which uses Earth-based religious ritual. Every December many of us look forward to the winter solstice services rooted in Pagan tradition, but also our Christmas Eve services focused on the Christian message, which last year even included a Transylvanian Unitarian communion service at midnight. These are just a few examples of exploring the mountains and I'm sure there will be many more as our Fellowship becomes more intentional about exploring different faith themes. Think about other pathways? Would a celebration of Passover or Yom Kippur lead to more consideration of the ancient Jewish teachings? Should the month of April be focused on the spirituality of evolution and science because of Earth Day? Can you envision a series of services dedicated to anti-racism and oppression and incorporate some of the spiritual practices of Gandhi, the Dali Lama, or Martin Luther King Jr. into a service? Each of these examples relates to our six sources and would be designed to help congregants learn about the mountains and be encourage to hike the path either in formal Religious Exploration classes, as small groups, or individually.

This is my concept of the ideal Unitarian Universalist community. To me, then we live up to the ideals of a faith organization whose reason for existence is to support the search for ultimate meaning in our lives and orientation to our universe. Then we are not just sitting on the side of our comfortable mountain gazing out at the world; we are the outfitter supporting our journeys of faith exploration.

Then when someone asks us how we "do" religion, we can say we believe it is essential that everyone nourishes their innate sense of the religious. The search for ultimate meaning takes many paths and we support each other on this journey. Or if you want to use a more familiar vocabulary I would reply, we believe there are many paths to God and we support each other to go deeper on those paths.

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