

WISDOM FROM THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS
January 11, 2008

There was an interesting discussion on the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Chatline this week. It was stimulated by the knowledge that the Commission on Appraisal completed their work on recommended changes to our Purposes and Principles. The next step is to take them to the UUA's Board of Trustees, who will either recommend them for adoption to the delegates at our General Assembly next June, or decline to do so.

One sticking point for several ministers is a section that deals with what we generally call "World Religions." Included in the language is a prohibition forbidding cultural misappropriation. That is, we are warned against using forms of worship, including celebrations, that are from another culture, unless we can claim that culture in some way. I will explore this in more depth later. For now, just let me note that this sermon on the third source is far more relevant to current thought and concerns among Unitarian Universalists than I anticipated when I first planned it.

This sermon is part of a series. At the beginning of this church year, I suggested that I explore the six sources of our faith, as enumerated in the Purposes and Principles. We did the first and second, then skipped this third source in December since the influence of Judaism and Christianity are especially present during the Winter Holidays. Now, we return to the third source, which says:

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Compared to the other sources, this is fairly short, worded with admirable clarity. And ethical and spiritual life seems pretty clear. I've had people disagree over where the line between "moral" and "ethical" is drawn, and I've heard some folks say that they don't understand what "spiritual life" means; but most of us probably have a good idea of what is meant by "ethical and spiritual".

So, what do we mean by "the world's religions"? Both Judaism and Christianity are mentioned in the fourth source, so we can assume that "world religions" refers to other faiths. Humanism is specifically mentioned in the fifth source, so that is eliminated. Earth-centered religions are the focus of the sixth source. That still leave a lot of "world religions." And many of them have wisdom, they provide meaning to the people for whom they are truth, and they all have some sort of ethics, and some form of spirituality.

Thus it seems we must exercise selectivity. The major world religions not specified elsewhere in our sources are Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and from the Chinese, Taoism and Confucianism. And there are others, such as Zoroastrianism, which was one of the early Middle East religions that influenced both Judaism and Christianity. However, for today let us concentrate on those that seem to have most meaning for American Unitarian Universalists today; Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam.

Many Unitarian Universalists show a great interest in Buddhism. Religious educators find that when Unitarian Universalist teenagers study religions they tend to be attracted to Buddhism. When many UUs visit the website Belief.net, and take the test that purports to show what faiths are most compatible for our values and beliefs, Buddhism rates right up there with Unitarian Universalism. In this congregation our president is currently participating in an international convocation with the Dalai Lama, and presenting a paper at that convocation.

Many Unitarian Universalists find at least parts of the Buddhist philosophy very attractive. A few of our ministers name themselves Buddhist. One, James Ishmael Ford, is called to a UU church in Florida, as well as recognized as a teacher in the Buddhist tradition. The writings of Thich Nhat Han are influential in our faith, some of them present in our hymnbook. And most of us greatly admire the Dalai Lama, an unparalleled example of moral leadership for the world.

Our president, Dr. Guy Newland, told you about his faith far better than I could. Combined with our general familiarity with its beliefs and practices, I think our time this morning will be better spent exploring the other major world religions.

Our responsive reading this morning comes from the tradition of Taoism, and I would like to use it as a lens to explore how it might contribute to our ethical and spiritual life. Let us review some of the language:

Those who would take over the earth
And shape it to their will never, I notice, succeed.
The earth is like a vessel so sacred that at the mere approach of the profane it is marred.

Most Unitarian Universalists care deeply about the earth, and our larger cosmos. In the early 1800s, the Transcendentalists taught us that the Divine, however, we name it, manifests itself in materiality—the earth and its inhabitants. Ralph Waldo Emerson exhorted Unitarians to visit the forests and observe the stars to experience a connection with the Divine. Centuries earlier Lao-Tse taught that the earth was sacred. We who worship as Unitarian Universalists today often name the Earth as sacred, whether we identify as humanists who care about our environment, naturalists, neo-pagans, --or Taoists.

However, Lao-Tse goes on, in this writing, to deliver an ethical lesson, also relevant to our time and place.

For a time in the world some force themselves ahead and some are left behind.

For a time in the world some make a great noise and some are held silent.

For a time in the world some are puffed fat and some are kept hungry.

For a time in the world some push abroad and some are tipped out.

At no time in the world will one who is sane Over-reach, Over-spend, Over-rate.

Ouch! Ouch, ouch, ouch! It could have been written for January, 2008 American society. At no time in the world will one who is sane Over-reach, Over-spend, Over-rate.

Can you say, Bernie Madoff? Can you say, deep recession? Can you say, global warming? Can you say, credit card debt? Can you say, two wars, draining our wealth? Can you say, financial meltdown, hubris, fat-cats and ghetto dwellers?

How did he know, Lao-Tse? How did he know so much about humans and human nature. We don't know much about him. He is estimated to have lived about 500 years, B.C.E, about the time of Confucius. His essential idea was that humans should live in harmony with each other and the natural world.

He counseled against forcing other people to conform to one's wishes; and, as in this poem, against trying to force nature into what they wish.

Those of us who have studied history are aware of its cycles. For a time in the world some force themselves ahead and some are left behind. Was this phenomenon ever more succinctly expressed? Pax Romana was supposed to last forever. The sun never set on the English Empire. The Twentieth Century was the American Century. And now it is the Twenty-first Century, and, in my humble opinion, is no longer the American Century. It will probably be known as the Chinese Century to future historians.

We learn from the Tao that those who try to impose their will on the sacred Earth violate its sacredness. We learn that those who are on top will not remain that way. And we learn that it is madness to over-reach, over-spend, and over-rate. I can think of no more relevant wisdom for our society.

Our reading this morning was from the Sufi poet, Rumi. Sufism is the mystical expression of Islam. All of Islam emphasizes surrendering to Allah, or God.

Sufis shape their lives around this, concentrating on the expression of love for God. They often gathered in monasteries, they were often hermits-sometimes alternating between the two. They wrote poems, as did Rumi. He also founded the order of Whirling Dervishes, who danced in twirling patterns in order to produce an ecstatic experience of Allah.

In this poem, The Pickaxe, Rumi exhorts us to get out of our comfort zone. If one is to experience the presence of God, one must first deconstruct one's current faith. Underneath, he says, you will find the true, jewel-toned, faith. If you deconstruct the forms of faith you inherited, and search within, truth and spiritual understanding await.

How many of us here were born into the Unitarian Universalist faith? Very few. Most of us grew up in another faith tradition, some of us in none. Most of us had to do some deconstructing of received wisdom. Most of us found Unitarian Universalism as adults. The classic story in our churches is; a visitor comes, timidly, hopefully, needing a faith community, but disappointed in something about the other ones he or she tried. It is my story, and I am sure it is the story of some of you.

When I first visited the First Unitarian church of Jackson, Mississippi, I found Thomas Jefferson on the wall, along with Matisse's print of the multicolored dancers. I found, a Yankee in Mississippi, people to whom I could talk! And I found a faith that did not require me to check my brains at the door. I had already deconstructed the Methodism of my childhood.

Now, years later, I found the faith in which I could explore and express my beliefs, and help me deepen my spiritual life. Is that story your story? Or close to it? Questioning was my pickaxe, the tool of deconstruction. Was it yours? However, I wandered in the wilderness for many years before I found the jewels of faith, hidden from sight.

Let us stay with Rumi and examine our first song this morning, for he is the author of Come, Come, Whoever You Are. The song is an invitation to those who have wandered, who have left, and are now being invited to return. If you attended General Assembly you might have heard it sung with a countermelody, the words also from Rumi: Though you have broken your vows a thousand times..... Repeated underneath the invitation to return.

We are, none of us, as perfect as we would like to be. We aspire to the virtues we admire; things like honesty, faithfulness, kindness, or recognizing the worth and dignity of all people. We vow to practice and uphold these virtues. And we break them all the time. I confess to being a television screamer. That is, I argue, in loud tones, and highly questionable language, with those politicians and newscasters with whom I disagree. I even found myself yelling at Judy Woodruff on the Lehrer Report on PBS.! Nice Judy, thoughtful Judy, usually asking questions, very thoughtful questions, of her interviewees.

At times like these I have to confess that I have failed to live up to my aspirations. Especially that worth and dignity one. I have to recognize that I am imperfect, that I have broken a vow. Thus, I appreciate Rumi's invitation. His understanding of Islam matches our Universalist teaching, that everyone is saved, or has the potential to be. Come, yet again, come, he says. The invitation is there. We have only to accept it.

We can learn from the religions of the world. We are a people who accept learning from more than one source. We find wisdom in the teachings of ancient Asians and modern Indians. I concur heartily with this reading of our source.

So, what is the kerfluffle about the Purposes and Principles, cultural misappropriation and General Assembly? A little background.... When we adopted the Purposes and Principles, which ARE a by-law, part of our governance structure, the language called upon us to review them in 15 years. They are overdue for this review.

The Board of Trustees noted this, and asked the Commission on Appraisal to make this their project. They have done this work, and are now recommending language to modify the Purposes and Principles. They published their result on a website: www.uua.org/coa. They invited comment. Comments have been made, and now they are sending their results to the Board of Trustees, who are charged with either recommending them to the General Assembly for adoption, or not recommending them.

For many years some UUs, mostly some ministers, have been concerned about cultural misappropriation. Because we draw from many sources, are we too quick to adopt certain practices, without fully understanding their cultural context? A classic example is the celebration of the seder. Many Unitarian Universalist churches enact the seder during their liturgical year. Who leads this seder? A rabbi? A member of the congregation who grew up Jewish? The minister? Some of our ministers are Jewish, they are our Rabbis, therefore okay. What about the rest of us?

I had this conversation with some of my colleagues several years ago. I said that, because I now knew that one of my great-grandfathers was almost surely Jewish, and because I studied and was guided by Jewish theology, I felt comfortable leading a seder. I felt authentic doing that. Not all of them agreed that was appropriate.

I would not feel appropriate leading you in a Buddhist meditation. Although I admire the faith, and appreciate its guidance, I am not a Buddhist, nor have I studied it sufficiently to claim authenticity in leading celebrations from its tradition.

Similarly, I would not attempt to lead you in a Native American celebration, nor Ramadan fast breaking meals, nor Hindu dye-throwing celebrations. We UU ministers have to make these decisions.

However, now the proposed changes would place in a by-law a prohibition against cultural misappropriation.

After two paragraphs of prose describing our sources, which includes the words: As an evolving religion, it draws from the teachings, practices, and wisdom of the world's religions; there is a concluding paragraph that reads:

Grateful for the traditions that have strengthened our own, we strive to avoid misuse of cultural and religious practices while seeking ways of appreciation that are respectful and welcomed.

Let me say that I do not share the agitation of some of my colleagues. I think we should be very careful about how we use the spiritual wisdom and practices of other cultures. I think we should wrestle with questions about whether scheduling a celebration from the Hindu, or Buddhist, or Native American tradition is spiritual thievery. On the other hand, this is a by-law amendment, and we should be very careful about what we enshrine in law.

The world's religions are a repository of wisdom from which we can draw. They can help us address ethical questions and deepen our spiritual lives. However, we need to exercise care when we draw from them, so that we do not offend or damage the cultures that gave them life.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.