

RENEWING THE SPIRIT
August 17, 2008

When the newly formed Worship Team met together for the first time in July, I proposed a project to the group. I want to explore the Six Sources in sermons during this church year. We are all familiar with the Seven Principles that are part of the covenant of Unitarian Universalism.

However, we are less familiar with the six sources that are an equal part of that document. I thought it would be good for me to stretch myself with this project. And I thought it would be good for you, the congregation, to explore these sources together.

The Worship Team agreed. So, during this church year I will be developing this series. They will be interrupted by other things during the year. I'll probably do an Election Sermon, and the Holiday Season may call for something else. However, you can anticipate that together we will explore some of the possibilities implicit in the second half of the covenant we hold together with all other Unitarian Universalists in the larger Association.

Today, we begin at the beginning with the first source. Let us first look at the document. It is printed in our hymnbook, immediately following the Preface. It begins: THE LIVING TRADITION WE SHARE DRAWS FROM MANY SOURCES:

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 that create and uphold life; ...

Before we even get to the first source, there is a term worth discussing. The Living Tradition... What does The Living Tradition mean in our faith? There is a category of hymns and of readings too, listed in the indices in the back of the hymnbook. We must think it is important to talk and think and sing about The Living Tradition.

The faiths from which we emerged as an institution, Judaism, Christianity, and to a lesser extent, Islam, base their beliefs and teachings on the ultimate truth as revealed in Holy Scriptures. In Islam it is revealed in the Qu'ran, in Judaism it is revealed in the Torah, and in Christianity it is revealed through the life of Jesus, called the Christ, and recorded in the Bible, most specifically the New Testament. And revelation in these faiths is sealed-that is, there can be no more Holy Books. Catholicism also recognizes the importance of their tradition; but they allow no more books or wisdom of ultimate truth.

However, our revelation is not sealed. We do not limit ourselves to one or even two Holy Books. We seek wisdom from many sources, not all of them Holy Books. We include books from other faiths; and we also include wisdom from oral traditions, and the learnings of science. I include the works of Shakespeare, as well as poetry. Our tradition continues to grow, thus we refer to it as living.

This is one characteristic of our faith that makes us different from most of the culture in which we live. Our neighbors, sometimes our family members, may find

it difficult to understand. There are several elements of the first source for which this may also be true.

The first is the emphasis on direct experience. I think, that just as the first of our Principles, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, is the basis for the other six principles; the first source is the basis for the other five sources. As we explore them further, we can hold this possibility in mind, and see if it holds true.

However, the very idea that each person's experience of transcendence, mystery, connection and wonder is a valid source of their faith, and that they can interpret that experience within different religious traditions and languages, is very different from our friends and neighbors of other faith communities, especially those of rigid beliefs.

I'm remembering some of the bumper sticker theology with which we are sometimes assaulted while driving. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it... Someone who puts that on their car will find it very difficult to understand or accept our religion that accepts direct experience as a valid source of faith. We may upset their sense of what is right and true. We may seem dangerous. It marks us as different, and is a critical part of our liberal religion.

When the shooter walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation, no one recognized him. It is most likely he had not been in that specific church before. However, he was not a stranger to our faith. His divorced wife attended UU churches, and both had been to the Southwest UU Summer Institute. They were married by a UU minister. He did not just pick out a liberal church in the phone book. This information has not reached the media, but will inevitably surface if and when there is a trial.

Some ministers and leaders believe that "we", the larger "we" of Unitarian Universalism, were attacked because of our faith, not exclusively because of our perceived politics. If this is true, we had best understand what it is that marks us as "other" in the larger religious culture.

At least part of that, I believe, is this emphasis on direct experience. The first source goes on to specify what kind of experience is relevant. The phrase is transcending mystery and wonder.

Now, most of us can affirm that we experience wonder. We need only look at the star-strewn sky on a clear night, or a photograph of deep space by the Hubble telescope, or a five-foot tomato plant in August that was a tiny seed last March to experience wonder. If we spend a few moments reflecting on one of these, let's say the photograph of deep space depicting a universe many light years away, we will probably experience a sense of mystery.

Perhaps, beyond my lifetime, scientists may find the answer to questions such reflections bring forth. "How many solar systems in that universe? How many planets? What are they like? Is there life on one of them? Is it sentient life?" For now, it is a mystery. Thus, most of us can accept mystery and wonder.

However, that other word, transcendent, what about that? I've known some Unitarian Universalists who get itchy about religious words like transcendence. Transcendence only means feeling a part of a larger whole. It need not refer to a god.

To illustrate I will share with you the Rev. Fred Campbell's theory of how Ralph Waldo Emerson came to his understanding of transcendentalism. Fred served as a consulting minister here a few years ago, so some of you may know that he is a sailing enthusiast. He keeps his boat in Muskegon, and invites me to join him to sail on Lake Michigan a few times every summer. One day he told me his theory.

Emerson's first wife was a beautiful young woman, who died of "consumption" (we know this as tuberculosis) only a short time after they married. She was entombed in the family vault after her death. One biography of Emerson, "The Mind on Fire" begins by telling of Emerson's visit to Libby's tomb before he left for a trip to Europe. She had been dead for two years at that time. Emerson opened the casket and gazed upon her body. He was alone, and never spoke of what he saw.

Then he sailed for Europe, a voyage of about two months. He was alone, and was seen pacing the deck, gazing at the horizon and overhead to the night sky. Sailing is an occupation that reminds one that we are not above nature, rather a part of it, nor are we always in control. One cannot command the winds, only work with them. One cannot always avoid a storm, only take shelter below and pray that the sailors are skillful, the captain wise, and the storm short.

When Emerson reached shore, he visited and conversed with the great minds of Victorian England. He then crossed the channel, and engaged with the intelligentsia of France and Germany. Then he sailed home and wrote Nature in only a few months, thus inspiring the transcendentalist movement centered in New England that heavily influenced Unitarian history.

These are facts from his life. Fred's theory is that Emerson's exposure to the reality of mortality, followed by his immersion in the direct experience of sailing inspired his development of transcendentalism. Emerson said, and said well, that people could have a direct experience of the Divine, or God. (Few people were non-theists at that time.) He told us that we could experience God in the natural world, and that we did not need books and interpreters of books to mediate that experience. He, and those who followed him, devised a theology that still lives in modern Unitarian Universalism.

Our first source not only talks about transcending mystery and wonder, but claims that it is affirmed in all cultures. This is a Universalist claim. Not only do we UUs say that direct experience is valid, we say that it is universal. There are many in our culture for whom this is anathema. They believe that only those who believe the correct words, and practice them a certain way, are beloved of God. The claim to universality is another facet of our theology that others find threatening.

In our faith communities we say that the experience of transcendence is the same; however, how we name that experience differs. Emerson may have looked at the night sky and experienced the mystery and wonder of God. A scientist may experience the same night sky and name that a cosmic wonder explained by the big bang. A native American might explain the experience with a story about ravens and First People. Transcendence is universal. How we explain it is not.

Our first source continues by saying that this experience of transcendence moves us to a renewal of the spirit. How do you experience wonder? What feeds your spirit? Do you lose yourself in music, and emerge from a Bach fugue refreshed and renewed? Do you read a scientist's explanation of evolution, of how mitochondria ended up living more or less independently in the human body, and experience wonder?

I enjoy watching my great-granddaughter, now two months old, learn to return a smile and then initiate one, and I reflect on the mystery of human development and am again inspired. Babies are a universal mystery and wonder.

I am also renewed in a more mundane way when I taste the first tomato of summer. Last weekend I spent with the Heartland District board at one of our quarterly meetings. When I was nearing home I remembered the tomato that was just almost ready when I left two days ago. The last 30 miles I planned my light Sunday supper around that tomato. When I got home I unloaded my car, then went to the garden to find it. Yes! It was ready.

I picked it, an unlovely heirloom that I'd never tasted, and returned to the house, only to discover that I had locked myself out! My helper guy who comes to feed my cat had locked an automatic lock on the back door, and all others were closed tight. I contemplated crawling in a window-briefly, very briefly-then went to my neighbors and called my friend to bring a key. While I waited I watered the tomatoes, and admired the one in my hand. By the time I actually sat down to that light supper, I felt like I had really earned it.

It was worth the effort-from planting the seedling, to fertilizing, to watering, to staking, to watching for wilt and/or insects. That first bite of the first tomato of summer tastes good, but the renewal of spirit comes from the connections with the earth, the seasons, the Mount Pleasant nurseryman from whom I purchased the seedling, to Jim Dealing who told me about him. And it comes from my recognition that I am part of a larger whole that encompasses all of the above and more, much more. I am part of the cosmic whole, part of the forces that create and uphold life, as are you and you and you. Sometimes I call that force God, and sometimes I call it evolution, and I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. Nor do they cover all the possibilities.

The mystery and wonder of life on this beautiful blue-green planet inspired all cultures to try to explain it. I think most of them got a piece of the truth, and none of them got it all. In our primary culture we first explained that force by saying that God or Yahweh made it, and we were fairly specific about how it happened and how long it took. Then we developed the scientific method, and understood more about our world, and we developed theories and studied more and

more. And we thought we grew beyond God. But then a funny thing happened. As we learned more and more, we discovered that life and the planet and the cosmos in which we lived was cuirassier and cuirassier. And some scientists thought that maybe we threw away the idea of God too soon.

Not the old man in the sky with a long beard kind of God, but just the idea of a force beyond what we could imagine, beyond the capability of our language to express. Now there are some scientists and theologians and evolutionists and artists who are engaged in developing a new theology. This theology includes evolution and science to help explain mystery and wonder.

It is a green theology, that sees our Earth, the only home for humans, as an expression of God, or the Divine, or transcending mystery and wonder.

Building a new theology takes a long time, and requires the efforts of many people. It is a worthy effort. It is an effort led by liberal religionists. I encourage you to remain open to its possibilities.

The first source of our liberal religious faith: 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 that create and uphold life.

I believe it to be the basis of our sources, one of the most challenging to traditional religionists.

Let us contemplate its meaning, let us draw strength from its bold affirmation of one of the bases of our faith.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.