

## What Holds the Center?

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, March 4, 2018

In our worship services for the month of March we will be exploring various aspects of the question “What does it mean to be a people of balance?” There are so many places we could begin with, but in my preparations for this month’s series, it was the happenstance of recent random (and sometimes perplexing) conversations I found myself in – conversations (held within this space) about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist - that led me to this beginning. I was thrown off-kilter in hearing what seemed to me to be some misconception about what UUism is...and isn’t. Which led me to wonder - If we are not clear about **what holds the center** of this faith we ascribe to...how very easily we can find ourselves out of balance in our understanding of who we are as a people of faith and thus likely much less effective in communicating with others what we are all about.

To assist me this morning in exploring **what holds the center, what it is that balances, guides, and connects us as UU’s**, I have chosen to bring the voice of one of the wisest teachers in our tradition (in my estimation) to our pulpit to assist me in this effort. I share with you now a reflection titled “The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology” by the Rev. Rebecca Parker, the former president of the Starr King School for Ministry.

### ***Hear now her words:***

Some among us are asking, “Is there a center to Unitarian Universalism?” Or is it like the old story of blind persons describing an elephant, with a twist:

One of us touches the side and says, “It’s a wall.” Another feels the leg and says, “It’s a tree.” Another grabs the tail and proclaims, “It’s a rope.” But after all our surveying, is the one thing UUs can say for certain is only that there is no elephant?

**Do we have a theological center?** And why are we asking about this? When did pluralism become a problem?

UUism continues to be predominantly white and economically privileged, but as more and more women have entered our ministry and theological leadership, and as we move ever so slowly towards being a multi-cultural, queer positive, multi-gendered, counter-oppressive community, the old order of who is in power at the center has shifted.

There is discomfort with the changing power dynamics: Will it ever end? **Will our religious identity just be ever-expanding diversity without anyone in control?**

In response to this concern, I believe we need to remind ourselves that diversity is a sign of life. When those who have been historically excluded and dehumanized move into community leadership, and the oppressed bring their full voice and experience into contexts where they have been silenced, this is an occasion for celebration, not hand-wringing.

But there is another reason some are asking about what holds us all together, and **if we have a center**. They are not troubled by shifts in old structures of power and privilege. Rather, **they are alarmed by the increasing fragmentation of life.**

Where is the claim of life upon us that can move us beyond individual consumerism into community connection, into **binding obligations** that relate us to something larger and deeper?

### **We are hungry for committed life.**

Where is the freedom that comes from responding to a claim upon us that marks our life with meaning and purpose beyond ourselves? What will allow us to stand against the excesses of consumerism that are dragging the planet toward an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor? And what will empower us to turn around the dangerous disregard for the delicate balances that sustain the earth's ecosystems?

Our search for a **theological center** needs to be understood as a search for the solidarity and obligation that can carry us beyond this moral wasteland and energize our devoted action on behalf of the global community. We might begin this search by re-imagining the way we speak of religious individualism and dissent.

I believe we are right to extol the lone courageous voice that holds out against the follies of groupthink. We celebrate the dissenter who begs to differ, especially when the crowd is gung ho for a course of action that will cause harm to life.

But look just a little closer. Behind the lone prophet who speaks up, there is a group. We celebrate the lone prophet because there is a **we** also present—a whole movement of us who hold to values that are fragile, dissident, and life-giving.

Theologian Rita Nakashima Brock suggests that it is always a mistake to imagine that lone prophets are really alone. When Rosa Parks sat down on the bus in Montgomery to stand up for freedom for African Americans, she was not just a tired woman who acted in isolation. She was the secretary of the local NAACP, a leader known and trusted in the black community. **When she sat down, her community sat down.** It was not her solitary action that instigated a movement for greater justice; it was the hidden solidarity that she embodied and called forth.

Rita Brock says we should think of Jesus this way as well. It is a mistake to see him as an isolated, heroic individual. It is better to see him as the crest of a wave, the sparkling foam breaking brightly from the force of a whole ocean moving and swelling up from underneath.

I sense among Unitarian Universalists these days a deep desire to affirm the ocean that is within and beneath the voices of individual conscience that we celebrate. **What is the name of this ocean that we are?** Let's call it a circle of life.

There is no holiness to be ascertained apart from the holiness that can be glimpsed in one another's eyes. St. Augustine said God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.

This is one thing our faith is sure of: **There is a spark of sacredness in every living being.** When life faces life within the circle of communion we can see the center that is "god" present in our solidarity.

If you have traveled on pilgrimage to Transylvania and celebrated communion with our Unitarian cousins there, you know that they observe the communion ritual by standing in a circle, meeting one another eye to eye.

If we probe **the image of the circle** a bit further, it can give us considerable guidance on the question of what holds us together. Notably, the circle is a boundary; it holds some things in and it leaves some things out.

**Biologists tell us that life depends on boundaries.** The elemental form of a cell—a form essential to life—is an enclosed sphere. Its membrane is permeable. It allows things to flow in and flow out, but it is not indefinite or sketchy.

**What is the membrane—the boundary—around what Unitarian Universalism holds inside?**

When I taught UU theologies at Starr King School this is one of the things we investigated. Based on the study of our history, reading our great theologians, preachers and lay leaders from the past two centuries, it is assuredly possible to identify theological options that lie outside the circle of what Unitarian Universalism embraces.

While we are open to many things, **you can't really believe anything [you want] and be a UU.** There are limits. Unitarian Universalism is not an empty cipher. It is not nothing. It is something. And there are theological options that are beyond the pale. For example:

You can hold a view that there is no God or that God exists. But you cannot hold the view that God is the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens, such that there is no exercise of human freedom. UUism is clear that there is some measure of freedom accessible to every living being, given in the nature of things. **We hold that freedom is a real and essential characteristic of life.**

You can define salvation, healing and wholeness in many ways. But you cannot hold to the view that there will be an ultimate separation of the saved from the damned by which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering. UUism is clear that all souls are of worth. There is no final solution to be had by the privileged protection of some and the destruction of others. **We hold that salvation is universal.**

You can be devoted to a specific religious practice—Christian prayer, Buddhist meditation, or pagan ritual (to name a few). But you cannot hold the view that there is one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places. Not even Unitarian Universalism. **We are confident that revelation is not sealed.** The sacred impulse towards justice, compassion and equity moves in many times and places, in myriad ways that call to us and teach us.

Finally, you can see this world as tragically flawed, wondrously gifted, or both. But you cannot hold the view that salvation is to be found solely beyond this world—in some life after death or a world other than this world. While remaining open to mysteries that may be revealed beyond the grave or in realms beyond what we know at present, **UUism is clear that the ultimate is present here and now,** and can be grasped and experienced, even if only partially, within this limited frame of our mortal existence.

This means we do not hold to a hope that is only attained in the sweet by and by. **We hold that this world, this life, these bodies are the dwelling place of the sacred.**

Within these theological boundaries there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent. But there is also a defining focus: **a devotion to the flourishing of life.** Our sacred circle draws us together in passionate love for life.

And it sets us apart: from religion that supports holy war in service to a God who is imagined as the destroyer of evil-doers; from religion that claims to be devoted to Jesus but regards the poor as insufficiently self-reliant; and from religion that looks forward to the end of this world, welcoming environmental apocalypse and war in the Middle East as signs that this earth is soon to pass away so that an elite faithful can be carried by the rapture into a new heaven and a new earth.

**Our UU circle holds a different heart.** We are devoted to the sacredness of this world, this life here and now. We do not look to a world to come as more valuable than this world.

We cherish our bodies, this earth, this time and place within our grasp. We are devoted to the intimate, intricate and unshakeable reality that all life is connected.

We honor and respect the bonds that tie each to all, that weave us into an inescapable net of mutuality. We vow to care for the interdependent web and reverence our place within it.

We desire all life to flourish, and therefore we resist those social evils and systemic injustices that benefit a few at the expense of many or that allow a privileged existence for some while others have their hearts and bodies broken by exploitation, prejudice, censure, or lack of access to the rights and resources needed for life. **We critique any conception of God that functions to bless an unjust status quo or pass the buck of human responsibility onto divine forces.**

We affirm a covenant among all beings that we honor with our heart, soul, mind and strength. We will do everything in our power to assure that this covenant is not broken. And we seek to connect our circle with other circles of life, to expand into ever widening ripples of influence for good.

**Source:**

<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/challenge-unitarian-universalist-theology/>