

*A Path of Sincerity and Wonder*

By Guy Newland, presented at UUFCM Mount Pleasant MI, 3/31/2019

There truly is such a thing as sincerity! The roots of evil are already cut in the invisible world.

Satomi Myodo, Shinto shamaness

Before the great, bright deities, before the spirits, I pray and present my offerings, speaking humbly and with reverent heart. To all the spirits of Heaven and Earth, I gratefully offer my service and ask that you bless me. With great respect, I will follow the way of the spirits so that I may restore my spirit to the path of purity, brightness, integrity and sincerity. Grant that I live with a true and just heart; keep me from harming others and grant that I bear my responsibilities with diligence and sincerity. I will work to serve others and to benefit the world—humbly, reverently, I speak these words.

Shinto daily prayer

Shinto is an ethnic religion crystallized from centuries, or millennia, of Japanese folk traditions. About 1500 years ago, it evolved into an organized religion from deep roots in the lives of early Japanese people.

I don't remember ever hearing about Shinto in a UU service, here or elsewhere. Let's spend a moment on it this morning.

First I want to describe *what Shinto is*, and then talk about *how it is situated among the sources of our own tradition*. Then I will touch on the “dark side” of Shinto, how it came to be misused, and explore how Shinto spirituality and ritual pertain to the first and seventh principles of UUA.

*What is Shinto?*

Shinto is *not* about reenacting or commemorating some actual or supposed events in the past. It is not about a prophet/or a sage/or a savior. It is not well understood as a specific roster of heavenly beings. And it is definitely NOT a tradition about escaping or transcending this world.

The word “Shinto” means “the way of the spirits (*kami*).” The world is brought to life, and then revitalized, by the continuing energy of its original sources. This energy is focused in, and becomes accessible to us, in particular spaces or beings where we sense a kind of power, something noble, pure, and sacred. It is what Rudolf Otto called “the numinous,” the sense of divine presence.

Shinto is thus a name for actions expressing the respect, awe and wonder Japanese people feel toward the vitality of their natural environment: the sea, the islands, animals, the trees, the rocks. The flowers, the thunder, the rivers. The sun. We humans are also alive, we are natural, so we not something *apart* from the kami. We are of the kami. Some humans manifest this more than others, but at the core of our being we are expressions of the kami, whom we might think of as *the spirits of life*.

Often individual *kami* spirits have names and are associated with particular, specialized kinds of power. Tenjin, for example, is the kami to whom one prays for success in intellectual work, schoolwork. One of the most popular kami is Inari—to whom one prays for success in business or agriculture. Inari can be male or female—and is sometimes embodied in foxes. But there are thousands of kami; many have no name known to humans. And like humans, sometimes their attributes change over time.

*Shinto and US*

What does this have to with us?

One of the six sources of our tradition is wisdom from the world's religions; another is earth-centered spiritualities; and a third is “direct experience of 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.” Shinto fits well with all three of these.

Imagine if Native Americans, with all of their disparate cultures, had made contact with Christianity without facing genocide or conquest; and seeing how Christianity had organized itself, created their own loosely organized religion, preserving their ancient traditions. It is a little bit like this.

Japan has 125 or 130 million people; most of them will say that they don’t “believe” in any particular religion; as in modern Europe, religious *belief* is sometimes seen as unsophisticated.

But 80 percent of the Japanese people practice some Shinto rituals in the course of a year. It *is* one of the world’s religions, it is an earth-centered spirituality, and it is about direct experience of the mystery of life.

Like Unitarian Universalism, Shinto has *no creed* and *no sacred scripture*. It does not seek converts. Although appropriated and warped by Japanese imperialists from 1868-1945, over the centuries its heart has lain in a felt sense that purity of the human heart discloses our intimacy with the sources of all life.

### *The dark side*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some Shinto intellectuals began to argue that Shinto was the very essence of Japanese national culture; they promoted the conviction that the Japanese are an exceptional people, uniquely related to the divine sources of all life. At first, this was just an unsuccessful pushback against the dominance of Buddhism.

But in 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry of the US Navy arrived in Japan with a gunboat and forced Japan into unwelcome trade concessions. Aware that the USA and the European powers were using national ideologies, along with steel and industrialization, to build global empires, the Japanese set out to do the same. By the 1870s, the emperor had been declared a divine kami. Shinto had been re-identified as *NOT being an optional religion*, but instead the required ideology of *all* Japanese imperial subjects. Japan launched an aggressive industrial development campaign followed by a series of conquests on mainland Asia.

It is important to remember that Shinto had existed as an organized religion for well over a millennium, and had never before been deployed to justify aggression outside Japan. But in Japan and in the rest of the world, enthusiasm for Shinto has been dampened by its association with Japanese imperialism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *The First Principle—and the Seventh*

Our first UU principle is “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The sense of kami presence can be well understood as an awareness of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, IF you will allow that “persons” are not just humans.

We start out with a clear sense of distinction between the human and the non-human; another clear distinction between the divine (imply supernatural) and the natural; and another sharp distinction between the animate and the inanimate. We are aware that these distinctions won’t always hold up; youtube does well with cases of animals whose behavior strikes us as human-like—and also cases of humans behaving inhumanely. Americans can’t get close to agreeing upon when a fetus becomes human. With artificial intelligence mimicking human behavior and prions (misfolded proteins) operating as a cause of infection, the boundary between animate and inanimate is also in question.

The Japanese rarely worry about these grey areas because they never have set sharp boundaries between *humans, nature, and the spiritual*. They speak of these three while understanding that each is what it is *by way of connection and continuity with the others*. Nature is the activity of the kami; it manifests the presence of the

kami. Humans are also natural. Therefore, at heart, in our deepest identity, humans are kindred to, descended from, non-different from the kami spirits who animate the whole world.

When we are pure of heart, when we are true to our deepest selves, when we are utterly sincere, our lives become kami-like; our activities express our intimacy with all things.

The virtues of sincerity and gratitude are extremely important in Shinto. When we are sincere, then we know how much gratitude is due to all the sources of life, including what we call nature, and our ancestors, and the spirits of life. Deriving from and extending the idea of honesty, the sense of a sincere heart (*makoto no kokoro*) overlaps with our idea of integrity; makoto means wholeness, or completeness, of speech. A total presentation: The whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Often in the Shinto imagination, kami are bright, radiant, pure, and therefore mirror-like. Some ritual practices of Shinto spirituality, such as purification with cold water, are understood as cleansing away dross, allowing our natural spirits to manifest their mirror-like brilliance.

For Shinto, the seventh principle of UU—respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part—is inseparable from the first principle. We know that every person deserves respect and dignity, but this is not because we humans are *better* than rocks or trees. It is because we, like rocks, trees, animals, the sun, and the wind are all expressions of what is fundamentally pure and good. When we deviate from the path of sincerity, we engage with impurity and become alienated from our natural intimacy with others.

Shinto includes ideas about wrongdoing and impurity, but it never includes the idea that any part of the world is fundamentally evil. Trouble is stirred up in the world by the wind, trouble is stirred up in the heart by greed, malice and duplicity, but beneath this cloudy turbulence there is the radiant goodness of sheer life.

### *Thank you—and Goodbye!*

An example of how this way of seeing the world is enacted in Japan is the ritual called “kuyo,” a respectful ritual for saying “thank you, so sorry, and goodbye” to whatever has served you well—that which you respect and yet from which you must part. A much-studied example is the *mizuko kuyo* ritual, where women and their families make offerings of remembrance and respect toward the spirits of fetuses they have chosen to abort.

But it is not just that. An exterminating company might call in a priest to do rituals of gratitude and apology toward all the insects whose deaths have made possible the livelihood of the company’s employees. Broken knitting needles, or worn out bras, dolls that are no longer loved: are these really dead, animate objects? We have benefited from them, we have been in intimate relationship with them, and it is appropriate to say goodbye.

After WWII, respect for the intrinsic worth of things found its way into popular Japanese culture via an emphasis on repairing and repurposing worn out objects. In Japan and to some extent now in the USA, this attitude now competes with Marie Kondo’s so-called KonMari method, in which one de-clutters one’s home of everything except that which sparks joy. Rather than the opposite of recycling, we can think of the KonMari method as another way to take objects seriously as something more than accumulated stuff. We are related to them. Having stuff just to have it is disrespectful; it is better to thank each object for its service and say goodbye. Marie Kondo explains this to her Western audience as a way to cope with guilt:

Giving sincere thanks to an item will significantly reduce or even eliminate any guilt you may feel when you decide that you will no longer have it in your home. I understand that for some people it may seem strange to thank objects, but if you try it you’ll be surprised by its effectiveness.

*We are not weird—they are!*

Most Americans think of religion in terms of what one believes. And while religions have beliefs, they are often diffuse, disagreed about, or unformulated. The idea that there will be a well-formulated set of beliefs, conviction in which will exactly define the boundaries of a religion—this is actually *not* typical of religious traditions; it just happens to be how people think of Christianity.

We know that in UUFCM we are one community; we get together and do certain things on Sunday morning. Part of what we agree about is that it is fine for us to disagree about what is worth believing. We *know* that religions don't have to have a common creed; it is quite sufficient to have a looser framework (like the seven principles, or the Shinto heritage, or a web of folk stories). In fact, this is the most typical situation for the most religions through most of history. In the big picture, strict creeds are pretty weird; they are the outliers.

We aren't.

And:

Even in churches that have strict creeds, many members pay lip service or have grave doubts about some of what they recite. Sometimes people truly believe in their church's creed and find a sense of meaning through this. But not knowing for sure what to believe, and yet still having a sense of spirituality: this is natural and normal.

So: learning about Shinto is a step toward understanding that our creedlessness, and our commitments to intrinsic worth and interconnectedness—put us well inside the mainstream of the world's wisdom traditions.