Religious Naturalism: A UU Path and a Personal Path

UUs have typically found it easier to describe what they do not believe than to define what they do believe. We celebrate the freedom that comes from our lack of a required creed and often stop there. Yet we also do actively encourage the pursuit of our own individual religious or spiritual truth. Toward that end, the fourth of our Seven Principles is "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." And, as well, we affirm the usefulness and value of six great wisdom traditions, including science and reason but also the spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life. As a result our paths are varied. We find ourselves to be UU humanists, or UU Jews, or UU Buddhists or UU Christians—or mystics, or pagans, or, naturalists. It is certainly not a requirement to adopt one of these paths and, indeed, for many of us, being UU is largely about Sunday services and some degree of community. Others, however, seek a cohesive set of ideas and practices—a philosophy—that makes particular sense to them, in terms of their own character, values and life experiences.

What I propose to do this morning is to describe one of those possibilities, the one that has meant the most to me. This, of course, isn't a path for everyone—we all find our own way—but it does resonate with many UUs.

And, second, I want to share with you how important this Fellowship has been to me in my own spiritual journey. So, a kind of testimonial; and a description of a UU path that might especially appeal to some of you.

First, my own story. Nineteen years ago Liz and I were invited to attend services at this fledgling UU congregation. Almost everything about the service appealed to us. We became charter members and have remained actively involved ever since. For myself a major part of that appeal was the opportunity to work through some questions that had been important to me ever since adolescence.

I was a weird kid who lived too much in my head. I read a lot, was curious about the wider world and wanted to make sense of it all and to understand where I fit in. I was raised as a Methodist and religious teachings were the first systematic set of answers to the big questions of meaning and existence. I've been wrestling with those issues ever since. College introduced me to Biblical criticism and to other religious traditions whether Roman Catholicism or Buddhism. Gradually I became ever more skeptical and drifted away from organized religion. Graduate school and teaching African history encouraged me to see religion in purely functional terms, as a useful social institution, but certainly not the literal truth.

Yet, as time went on I missed the satisfactions of religious community, for myself and especially for my young daughter. I hoped that the liberal theology that presented Christianity in terms of myth and metaphor would satisfy my skepticism. So we joined the First United Methodist Church. I joined the choir, attended adult RE classes, worked for good causes and came to know some very good people. But, ultimately, it didn't work; because of the frustration of trying to translate Biblical literalism into meaningful terms and because of finding too few kindred spirits in the congregation. So once again nothing seemed better than something unsatisfactory, and I was left to my own devices.

Then we found the Fellowship (or, rather, we were invited, I want to emphasize. Sometimes it does make a huge difference.) At the Fellowship I was liberated from the futile effort of trying to make creedal formulas meaningful. I was free to find my own truth. And this congregation has always had its share of truth-seekers and pilgrims. I eventually found myself facilitating an adult RE program called Building Your Own Theology. And, finally, trying to develop lay-led services, I discovered the poetry of Mary Oliver. She, more than any other poet I know, celebrates seeing and appreciating the natural world. Moreover, she unabashedly affirms that seeing and appreciating is right at the center of her spiritual life. Perhaps the first of

her poems I learned of was “Wild Geese.” (A poem I hope isn’t too familiar but which shows you just what I mean.)

Then, in 2006 Liz and I attended the UU General Assembly in St. Louis. While there I found a workshop on Religious Naturalism, sponsored by the recently organized UU Religious Naturalists and found supportive books at the bookstore. And it all made so much sense in terms of my own life experience.

All my life I had spent time poking around in lakes and woods. My Dad taught me to swim and ski when I was about five, to garden ambitiously later on and to go camping whenever possible. To this I added bird-watching while in Africa. But all of these I saw as peripheral leisure activities—to be fit in around “more important” endeavors.

But now, with religious naturalism, I could reconcile my intellectual pursuits with my own lived experience. Instead of trying to see the supernatural as a meaningful metaphor, I could find in nature a fully satisfying empirical truth; and one that was rich in meaning, addressing all those “big questions” that had haunted me for so long.

Before I go on to consider further the content of Religious Naturalism, I do want again to emphasize the role and satisfactions of membership in this Fellowship. I want to emphasize those kindred spirits mentioned earlier. I know I’ve found more in common with this congregation than any other group I’ve been part of. So, more meaning, more community, more commitment, more satisfaction. All I’d ever wanted from organized religion I found here, without a hint of the supernatural.

When we—at last—consider the content of Religious Naturalism we see two complementary qualities. First is a rational, comprehensive worldview. Second, the natural world offers a remarkable degree of emotional satisfaction.

First, Naturalism is a philosophical perspective that denies the existence of the supernatural and maintains that there is only one reality, the natural universe. For naturalists the natural universe is ultimate. It is the ground of our being, that in which we live and move and upon which we depend for our very existence. Naturalists believe in the unity of mind and body—that is, no separate soul. This means there is no life of the individual after physical death. This acceptance of human mortality and transcience leads religious naturalists to focus on this life and to feel gratitude and a commitment to make the one life we have as meaningful and joyful as possible. And since we can’t hope for supernatural help we need to respond to the challenges of life as responsibly as possible and to care for each other. Finally, the story of evolution gives us a way to understand the universe in which we live. (Maybe next year I’ll try a sermon just on evolution.)

But religious naturalism isn’t only about a satisfactory rational understanding. Religion has always had an emotional core. Rationalists have generally been skeptical of those emotions, whereas, in fact, emotions are more and more recognized as a central aspect of being human. And naturalism literally astounds us with its understanding of the universe in which we live. One example is the overwhelming sense of wonder. The unimaginable vastness of the universe and the incredible complexity of life evoke an intense sense of awe and wonder. Though Rabbi Abraham Heschel says that awe is not merely an emotion; it is a way of understanding. “Awe is itself an act of insight into a meaning greater than ourselves.” (repeat?) The fact that there are some one hundred billion galaxies in the universe, each with about one hundred billion stars. And the fact that there are some thirty million species in the world and that all life evolved over billions of years from one celled organisms. How can we fail to recognize the wonder of nature’s majesty, complexity, beauty and power.

One additional, more personal, less abstract, aspect of naturalism is the personal and experiential. One aspect of religion that can give people satisfaction, support, and insight is religious practice. For some

this happens through regular prayer or meditation; for others, it's stopping to smell the roses—literally—along with many other examples.

Appreciating—reveling—in the natural world is a regular, on-going experience for me. It encourages me to be grateful for the life I lead and to be aware of the context of that life. After all, for all but the most recent part of our human past, we have been deeply and intimately connected to the natural world. We have lost much of that connection, at our own considerable loss, and growing peril.

Yet, I don't ever want to be romantic about nature. It can be powerful and brutal—hurricanes, volcanoes. It can seem unfair and even vicious. For example, one species of wasps lays their eggs in living caterpillars, and the resulting larvae eat the living caterpillar from inside out. Nasty! (For Charles Darwin, this species of wasp made a mockery of the Victorian notion of a just and generous god.) Nature is not our friend; it is our context. It is wonderously beautiful and terrifyingly destructive. We may think of nature as the Hindu godhead, that consists of the creator (Brama), the preserver (Vishnu) and the destroyer (Shiva). We are a part of this and subject to it. Life is a gift, with a potential for joy and wonder, but also of terror and despair. And, we must also deal with that ultimate reality, that inevitably we, too, shall die. We can deny that and rage against the coming of that dark night—or, we can accept that death is a natural part of our cycle of life and act accordingly.

Much joy and wonder are there if we are willing to see it. In my own life I try to make the most of it. This, indeed, is my own particular religious practice. A few examples: cross-country skiing at Deerfield Park on a field of new snow, alongside the Chippewa River on a beautiful blue sky day; hiking sections of the Long Trail in Vermont and realizing the gorgeous views from the summit of the 4000 Camel's Hump mountain, after a long hike filled with wild flowers and bird calls; riding my bike through a wetlands on one of the local rail trails, hearing the strange bugle calls of the sandhill cranes and seeing dozens of species of wildflowers along the trail edges; and, finally, a daily tour of my flower gardens at home, watching the new buds emerge and anticipating their particular beauty.

One of my favorite poems is "Peonies" by Mary Oliver. It expresses a sense of what this remarkable natural world means to me and might mean to many of us.

"Peonies" – Mary Oliver

So be it; blessed be and amen.