

## READING FOR SESSION 2

Philosophy has been described as a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. Theology has been described as a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there—but finding it!

What have we found? We Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on our theological diversity. But when does diversity so dilute us that we cease to become a cohesive and coherent religious community? This issue is explored by the 2004 Unitarian Universalist Association Commission on Appraisal. What holds us together theologically—if anything?

Clearly, it is not unanimity of belief, adherence to a single creed or dogma. Some say that this church serves the best theological potluck supper in town—a veritable smorgasbord of spiritual delicacies. Where else can you find such a theological Noah's Ark? Sitting side by side in the pews are atheists and theists, agnostics and pantheists, pagans and Christians, humanists and deists, and feminists and rationalists, along with those who refuse to be labeled or simply create their own labels. Yet here we are, gathered under a single roof, in a single worship service. Why are we here?

Is there or is there not a theological core that holds this disparate and pluralistic movement together? There may not be any single theological statement that ties us into one movement, but the radical openness with which we approach the spiritual quest is a unifying element. We can learn from the richness of our diversity. This diversity has been expressed in innumerable classes of *Building Your Own Theology*, which is not intended to be a debating society in which theists try to convert humanists, or vice versa. It is an educational forum, a small group ministry in which we share our stories, appreciate those of others, grow in our own faith, and give thanks for the opportunity to do so.

In more traditional churches, theological quandary is individual. In many creedal communities there are people who say the creeds but do not believe or hold differing opinions of them. But in our tradition, the quandary is institutional—different opinions are the norm. We expect and encourage religious diversity; we are quite comfortably—well, not always comfortably—multi-theological. We walk together before the immensities, sharing our imperfect wisdom and our incomplete answers.

I know there are people in many congregations who love the ritual and rhythm of more traditional services; those who long for the so-called “smells and bells” of a highly-liturgical church but who cannot bring themselves to accept what is required of them there. Our service feeds their intellectual appetites, but they remain liturgically hungry. “There is not enough spirituality for me,” they say. But when asked to define what they mean, they often lapse into puzzled silence.

But for others, the lighting and extinguishing of the chalice create a cognitive dissonance; it challenges their rational faculties. They don't come for hymn singing and they can hardly endure the preliminaries that precede the sermon. “There is a little too much spirituality, not enough rationality here,” they say. When asked to define their uneasy feeling about spirituality, their response is often puzzled silence.

And, of course, into this mix walks an unsuspecting innocent, a trying-to-please-everyone leader of worship—if one dares use that term—the minister. And he or she wonders, “How can I meet the diverse needs of these people? How can I, how can we, hold ourselves together? What is a theological mission statement that will satisfy everyone?”

One argument is that our theological glue is history—a discernible theological and historical tradition without which we simply would not be. We can look back to early church fathers like Origen, a third-century theologian who argued for a kind of universal salvation for all souls, or to Arius, who proclaimed a primitive unitarian position in a fourth-century debate over the trinity. Both were condemned as heretics. Our heretical roots are deep in Christian church tradition.

Our flaming chalice reminds us of this tradition—it symbolizes the light of truth, the warmth of community, and the fire of commitment. Its shape suggests the communion cup of John Hus, a fifteenth-century Protestant reformer who wished to democratize the Catholic church by having laity and clergy drink from the common communion cup. For his heresy he was burned at the stake in 1415. Followers subsequently identified themselves with a flaming chalice sewn into their clothing to commemorate his martyrdom and democratic spirit. The chalice also represents the

Grecian lamp of wisdom, which celebrates Socrates, the man who dared to ask, and other poets and philosophers whose names are beyond telling. We cherish the wisdom of prophets down through the ages from every age and tradition.

The circular shape of the chalice symbol comes from the Universalist side of our heritage and reminds us that we are ultimately one faith inclusive of all creatures, great and small. Faith for the global village takes universalism not only as a theological mandate for religious inclusion of all seekers but also as an ethical mandate to defend the dignity and worth of all people. The circle symbol also represents Einstein's concept that, ultimately, space is curved—thus linking the cosmos and human beings.

When we light the chalice, we are not merely scratching a liturgical itch or adding a bit of warmth and light to our celebration; it is not just an aesthetic act. It symbolically illuminates our part in a rich and courageous tradition that goes back centuries, if not millennia. If we truly realize what we do when we come together—what forces we release, what traditions we join, what memories we share, we would, as Annie Dillard suggests, all have to wear our hard hats to church—so powerful are the resonances if we take our participation seriously.

Some will argue that it is not the specifics of our faith that bind us in one religious community but the give and take of our theology—the exchange of deeply felt convictions. The method is the message. And there is truth here; we do build our own theology in a fairly distinctive way. Yet in an age where theological discourse is couched in very definite and substantive tones, it seems hardly enough to say that Unitarian Universalist theology is about agreeing to disagree agreeably.

Conrad Wright, one of our great historians, suggests that what holds us together is not that we believe together but that we walk together. He suggests that what binds this group of congregations and their people is not a common belief but a covenant to walk together into the mysteries, fully respecting diversity, relishing the opportunity to learn from one another, and vigorously discussing the issues that confront us. Instead of saying, "We believe together," we say, "We covenant together," promising to walk together in spiritual matters. We have chosen to walk together, in the words of Maxwell

Anderson, "in a world where the lights are dim and the very stars wander."

So it is that each Sunday we open the offertory section of our liturgy with the words, "As a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we covenant together . . ." followed by one of our seven Principles or one of the six Sources, affirmations that have been created not by an ecclesiastical council of denominational elders but by a long process of conversation in each of our congregations—a lively experiment in democratic religious community.

What is our theological core? What binds us together? I think each of several suggestions hints at the source of our unity: The richness of our diversity and the lively conversation it creates among us, our rich tradition of freedom in faith that evolves as the human race evolves, and our sense of covenant—a mutual promise to walk together not in unanimity of belief but in unanimity of intention to live the religious life.

However, the answer to our query still eludes us. While each of these rational reasons explains something of why we create a liberal religious community, the answer lies in something much more mystical, subjective, elusive, and experiential than any of them.

What holds us together is a very curious sense of being on an adventure of the spirit without a known destination. The song "The Journey Is Our Home" speaks to this feeling: "We move in faith, making love our creed, as we follow—the journey is our home."

Many new Unitarian Universalists have said that when they entered one of our churches for the first time, they had a strange feeling of being at home at last.

I am inclined to say that it is this feeling that holds us together—not reason, spirituality, history, or diversity, though all these contribute, but the feeling that we are on a journey together. Our theology is the result of the tough and tender experiences of life. It is not something determined by the church councils of old, even if reinterpreted; it is not something bound between the covers of any book; it is not the result or argumentation. It grows out of the warp and woof of human experience—the collective experience of the human race to which we are heir, the collective experiences of our fellow religionists over the years, and our own experiences—the events that shape who we are; the questions that are paramount in our

lives. What really holds us together is less ideological than narrative. It is our stories intermingled with the stories of others and the collective story of humanity.

During the 1994 UUA General Assembly, the Reverend Carl Scovel, minister emeritus of Kings Chapel Church in Boston, delivered the Berry Street lecture. Carl is a devout Unitarian Universalist Christian, and he spoke of what he called "The Great Surmise":

At the heart of creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. . . . Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. "Too much of a good thing," said Mae West, "is wonderful." Sound doctrine.

The Reverend Deane Starr, Scovel's good friend of thirty years and an agnostic and iconoclast, responded to the lecture. He disputed this "good intent," saying he found conflict and a cosmic indifference to humanity at the heart of creation. Deane, the humanist, found his sense of ultimate community with nature, not God, although he did not much distinguish them. Then this rational humanist stunned the assembled audience by leading "In the Garden," a hymn seldom heard among us. It had been part of Starr's pietistic upbringing, the feeling for which remained with him: "I come to the garden alone when the dew is still on the roses. . . . and he walks with me and he talks with me." Deane led the astounded ministers in singing it—most of them knew it! It was a strange but powerful moment.

Then Starr transfixed the assemblage again with this revelation:

My third son, Paul Michael, died of AIDS on December 31, 1992. I was positive that never again could I experience joy; I would have been content simply to find some release from anguish. I wondered whether I could find that relief by a return to the religion of my youth. Perhaps I could find comfort, once again, in the arms of Jesus. So I attended a little fundamentalist church in Naples, Florida. It didn't work; I left the service as deeply in pain as when I entered it.

That evening, I took a sunset cruise out into the Gulf of Mexico. The sunset was unbeliev-

able! The entire sky, from horizon to horizon, was aglow with color: reds, purples, pinks, and golds. Then the colors faded and that indescribable deep, deep indigo of late twilight filled the sky. The boat turned around to head back to Naples. There on the eastern horizon was a full and glorious golden moon.

With the tears streaming down my face, I realized that even though my son's being had been scattered, he remained a part of this awesome beauty. We can never contain the beauty in which we live and move and have our beings, but whether we live or whether we die, we are contained within this beauty.

Carl Scovel, reflecting on the experience, writes, "That gave me a new angle on Unitarian Universalism. It's a community where Christians give the lectures and humanists lead the hymns."

This story illustrates why we are here. It points to our genius, being radically open to human experience and to each other. That is the way we create unity of spirit among diversity of belief. Where else can you find a devout Christian and a passionate humanist, whose very understanding of the nature of ultimate reality differs so sharply, sharing such a common depth of human experience? Our theological core is experiential, not ideological. It is the highest common denominator of the tough and tender experiences of life. It is the sense that we are the meaning makers. Our clear religious message is that we can create a religious community without doctrinal conformity. We build the road as we go. The journey is our home.

In the love of beauty and the spirit of truth, we unite for the celebration of life and the service of humanity. Amen. Shalom. So be it!