

## SPIRITUALITY & JUSTICE IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

### Part 1

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Unitarian Universalism and its predecessor bodies struggled to define themselves. One of the biggest challenges was the ongoing disagreement between those who wanted the religion to be more spiritual, i.e. less political and activist in its overall approach to life and those who saw UUism as essentially on a quest to set a higher moral and ethical standard for dealing with life as shown through ongoing engagement or activism in all the moral questions undergirding the search for justice in the world. This disagreement was often cast as the spiritual versus the activists. Naturally, any time core values of religion are simplified so extremely, the two identified groups tend to become mere caricatures of themselves. Most Unitarian Universalists tend to see the religious obligation of human beings as to seek to make the world better and to understand the world/ourselves/and whatever we might name divine at a deeper level. The Spiritual/Activist distinction has therefore always been flawed, for as in many facets of life, we each fall somewhere along multiple spectrums at any given time.

For a number of reasons within my own history and experience of life and religion, I no longer call myself Christian and less frequently talk about things as spiritual. Though I still value the teachings of Jesus, as well as meditative practices, both Christianity and Spirituality carry more baggage than I often want to address as I prepare sermons to encourage myself and those who hear or read my sermons to live a better healthier life. Just as the Unitarian Humanist Ministers who wrote and signed the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 decided, the necessity of referring to God to answer the mysterious questions of life and to insure the morality of human beings seems to me to be an antiquated and too often destructive notion. Philosophically, the sense of justice and compassion of the Judeo-Christian God seemed somehow inadequate to balance the human carnage of the First World War. Even 70 years past the end of the Second World War, and decades past Korea and Vietnam, it seems ridiculous to declare that God is engaged in this still war-torn world.

A more deistic understanding of God in which God is seen as a watchmaker who started this whole life thing, possibly with a Big Bang, does work considerably better, yet still lacks for an ultimately convincing rationale. Believers in the Judeo-Christian deity, as well as some others might argue that this is where faith comes in and that the existence of God is the first real test of faith. I am more than happy to grant that possibility to those who can take comfort in such an argument, yet the randomness of life does not very well support it.

When I entered ministry as a United Methodist lo these many years ago, and even as I transitioned into Unitarian Universalist Ministry more than 2 decades ago, I was convinced that the quest for meaning was the ultimate goal of both human life and religion. Over recent years, that quest has become more of a background behind my efforts to prepare sermons, minister to those in need, provide resources to committees and boards, and enjoy something of a life outside of my official duties. My experience of life and ministry is that there is never enough time for all that ought to be done, nor is there sufficient energy to engage more actively in that search for meaning which at times seemed so important. And of course, one tends to forget all else when holding one's beautiful grandchild anyway! Perhaps it is all a matter of the seasons of our lives!

Periodically, the call to address Spirituality is made by someone who is seeking a more satisfying spiritual practice or who has become convinced that some kind of spirituality really is the ultimate matter in life. Of course, spirituality is as much the ultimate as philosophy or activism or whatever religious impulse draws us. The Statement of Our UU Living Traditions does not quite enumerate all possibilities, but Eastern and Western religions are cited as sources along with Humanism and human wisdom and earth-centered religions, and surely any number of spiritualities and spiritual practices are suggested within and among our Living Traditions. It would therefore be irresponsible of me to fail to address matters of spirituality at least as frequently as I discuss the activist work of seeking justice. Though, as I mentioned that the matter of spirituality carries baggage for me, as it does for many others, I will endeavor to address some matters specifically spiritual in these three sermons of this

August series. That is not to say that there lacks a sense of spirituality behind most of my sermons even when I fail to mention it by name.

Nor should I fail to mention that those who prefer to speak of matters of justice seeking, activists if you will, find the impetus for their activism as much within our religion as any who would prefer it to be less activist. And though many who might accept the label activist might prefer to speak without reference to spirituality, yet they too feel moved to take action because of their beliefs, their experience, their philosophy, their religion, their spirituality!

Now, since I am addressing Spirituality in the context of seeking to do Justice today, I would like to offer a modern context for the activism of living our spiritual beliefs. The most important context which has been drawing the energy of UUs nationally this year is the question of how we may best support the Black Lives Matter movement. This is where the most recent energy of the quest for Civil Rights for African Americans is focused. At General Assembly we passed an Action of Immediate Witness in support of this movement. Some of you may remember a number of UU programs seeking to address racism over the years, including the Journey Toward Wholeness, the Jubilee World, and others. As I mentioned in an earlier sermon, some of us would have rather declared that All Lives Matter even as we specifically worked to support Blacks and other persons of color who are the object of racism. Just as some of the antiracism programs of our movement have demanded that we all confess culpability for not ending our racism, the single-mindedness of this movement again seems to ignore both our support for and our practice of equality for all persons. Even if I agree that we could probably each do more, I balk at accepting equal blame with all other persons who share the accident of being seen as white. Our support of Black Lives Matter is controversial for some of us because it does not go far enough in calling for justice for all persons who suffer discrimination. As a community spiritually oriented to seek justice and equity for all, this does make a difference.

The Black Lives Matter movement demands that we put aside other injustices to address those stemming from racism against blacks, specifically played out in the shootings of black men by white police. I would prefer to keep alive the hope of justice for all persons even as I support changes in the way that black

men too often are treated. For me, as for many others, this is surely a spiritual and philosophical matter as well as a call for justice through engaged activism, a matter that speaks to the essence of what it is to be human. Racism, especially aimed at Blacks in this country has gone on far too long, and we ought to do all that we can to stop it, but there are also other prejudices which continue to destroy lives. And there are other matters of justice, particularly around economic inequalities that we dare not forget.

In the early days of American Unitarianism in America, the natural religion within the Transcendentalism of Unitarian Minister Ralph Waldo Emerson and the nature-rooted observations of his frequent walking companion, Henry David Thoreau expressed a kind of spirituality that has long inspired many of us. And both Thoreau and Emerson engaged in the quest for justice on many fronts at least in discussion and writings. Transcendentalist Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker, one of the most prominent Boston ministers of his time, pushed even further to engage in the justice issues of his day, keeping a loaded pistol at hand even during sermon-writing due to his involvement in the underground railroad and other efforts to end slavery, and frequently calling for and involving himself in civic actions for a better society.

In the end, neither Spirituality nor activism can be separated from Unitarian Universalism, for they both stem from the core of our religion. It may not be the quiet spirituality of modern or ancient meditative practices that predominates on the spiritual side, nor the overt societal works of justice which are so often divorced from any religious grounding on the more activist side which prevails. Both Spiritual awareness and Activism to bring needed changes are part of our Unitarian Universalist Religion. At times we may each need and engage in more of one than the other, but spirituality and activism are even more deeply entwined in our tradition than in many others, and both are vitally important.

The most profound sense of spirituality that I feel comes to me amidst the big trees, especially the Sequoias and Redwoods, and upon and around the mountains and along the shores of great waters, and in the presence of hawk and eagle, deer and elk and moose, bear and wolf and big cats, whales and dolphins, seal and sea lions, and beneath the sky full of stars and planets.

I have also felt a sense of the spiritual in great cathedrals and mosques and in the ruins of ancient cities. So also have I felt the spiritual in gatherings of people of good will seeking to shape a better world, wearing the UU yellow love shirts, and the shirts of First UU and other Unitarian Universalist congregations. When we gather at General Assembly, there is a palpable energy inspiring us to share our hopes and dreams and to join together to build a better world.

We remain a small religion among giants, committed to accepting and learning from each other and from most of the religions of the world, also committed to taking action for the good of humanity. We have no creed, no doctrine, no dogma, no approved beliefs or spiritual practices, we have only the values expressed in our Principles that call us to work for good and the many traditions which have and do inspire us. We are unique!

We are unique in part because though we welcome activists, humanists, pagans and freethinkers, we also welcome Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus, as well as those who claim many other heritages, beliefs, and practices. We welcome those whose spiritual practices are the most important part of their lives and those who are seeking to join with others working for justice. We welcome those actively seeking to deepen their beliefs along with those who need healing after being ostracized from their previous religious communities for coming out to reveal their true selves. We welcome back those who grew up in UU congregations and those who find in our community exactly that for which they have been looking. We hold many seemingly contradictory beliefs and practices in tension even as we strive to welcome all those who wish to join us. We do not claim perfection or to agree on even the simplest religious questions, but we strive to welcome all persons of good will who seek to tarry in our midst. And we are spiritual, and we are activists, and we are Unitarian Universalists!

So may it always be! Amen!