

Association Sunday: Growing in Spirit: Broad Roads, Spiritual Paths, and Driveways Along The Way

The theme of this year's Association Sunday is "growing in spirit." Taking a look at the history of Unitarian and Universalist associations, we will see how Unitarian Universalism got from the broad road of orthodoxy to what many consider heresy. Have we grown in spirit or thrown that baby out with other bath water?

Introduction

This is Association Sunday, a day we set aside to celebrate the larger association of which we are a part, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

How UUs Became a Herd of Cats

The Universalists and the Unitarians have never done well with organization. I'm not being critical in saying so: I think anyone who has studied the history agrees. Our Association today reflects the DNA of associating in particular ways over the centuries.

The Universalists did a slightly better job in this regard, though the national organization never really jelled, the state conventions did quite well, and acted as the ordination body of the church. The state conventions passed resolutions and generally conducted the business of the denomination. The problem was that business was conducted by those who showed up, and who showed up tended to be a dicey and inconsistent matter. It is an odd but true fact that the Universalists never really knew how many members, or even how many churches, they had in the denomination.

The Unitarian side of the family has an even more of a troubled and confused past. First, Unitarianism arose here in the United States as a movement among the Puritans who had settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Those Puritans had never formed a centralized church structure, being, as they were, very afraid of the control practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and the Presbyterians in the England they had left. Unlike these groups, the Puritans left the power of governance in the hands of each congregation, with only a modicum of cooperation between congregations. They apparently thought that scripture and reason were sufficient guides.

At first, such a structure presented no problems, because the Massachusetts Bay Colony—whatever it's good points—was a theocracy. It was after Puritanism stopped being a state religion that things began to get. . . weird.

The fact is, "Unitarian" was a bad word, and something that a good number of ministers tried to avoid being called, even when they happened to subscribe to Unitarian principles. It appears that at first the ministers who were increasingly opposed—or at least had moved away from—Tinitarianism had little idea that others were following suit. It was only after Trinitarians began attempts to "out" Unitarians that Unitarians even felt any connection to each other, eventually accepting the designation.

In 1825 ministers formed the American Unitarian Association, but, tellingly, the Reverend William Ellery Channing, whose sermon "Unitarian Christianity" had crystallized the Unitarian movement, turned down the offer to be the organization's president. Channing had, after all, used as text for his famous sermons "Unitarian Christianity" 1 Thessalonians chapter five, verse 21: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." It is the ultimate statement of skepticism in the Christian tradition and one that Unitarians have held onto with both hands through the centuries.

And, when the Transcendentalists put in their two-cents worth in during the mid-Nineteenth Century, that organized religion was a thing of the past, well, it's difficult to imagine a group LESS disposed toward organized behavior. The great organizer Henry Bellows tried, throughout the mid and late-19th Century but schism and disagreement was routine.

The situation reminds me a quip by Will Rogers. When asked if he belonged to an organized political party, he answered, "No, I don't belong to any organized political party. I'm a Democrat." The same can be said for Unitarians, and ambivalence toward organization has remained a hallmark of Unitarian Universalism since the merger of the two groups in 1961. To modify the words of Groucho Marx, we UUs don't want to belong to any organization that would have people like us as members.

I don't mean to bore us with history, but I do believe the DNA of an organization reveals its present and the possibilities of its future. AND I haven't forgotten that the topic of this year's Association Sunday is growth in spirit. . .

The Binding Threads

At the height of the theist controversy at the end of the Nineteenth Century, when the Unitarian movement was very nearly torn apart by bickering, the Reverend William Channing Gannett attempted to summarize what he called "Things Commonly Believed Among Us" in 1887:

"We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

"We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

"We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

"We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion;

"We believe in the growing nobility of Man; We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life;

"We believe that good and evil invariably carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil thing success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that no evil can befall the good man in either life or death; that all things work together for the victory of the Good;

"We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all;

"We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life awakes in man the sense of union here and now with things eternal - the sense of deathlessness; and this sense is to us an earnest of the life to come;

"We worship One-in All -- that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man its Ought, -- that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God, -- that Love with which our souls commune."

In this statement you'll notice several things. For one, it contains the seeds of what is now called The Principles. You will also notice how patriarchal, how Christian, and how Victorian Gannett sounds.

But back to the first point: "Things Commonly Believed Among Us" develops a spirit of inclusion rather than exclusion; it develops a spirit of acceptance rather than rejection. It was an open hand offered to the future and The Other rather than a fist. It is a statement that opens to the new.

And herein lies the first sort of SPIRIT our Association encourages. This is the broad road that we have continued to follow, all the way back to the time when Universalists began to fight for religious freedom in this country, and back to the time when Unitarians first began to see themselves as Unitarians. This is the spirit we are committed to fostering: inclusiveness in matters of religious belief. Not because

religion itself needs to be inclusive (clearly it isn't very often!), but because humanity itself needs to be inclusive, and religion needs to serve humanity, not the other way 'round. This is basic to our history.

As the Dalai Lama has said,

My call for a spiritual revolution is thus not a call for a religious revolution. Nor is it a reference to a way of life that is somehow other-worldly, still less to something magical or mysterious. Rather, it is a call for a radical re-orientation away from our habitual preoccupation with self towards concern for the wider community of beings with whom we are connected, and for conduct which recognizes others' interests alongside our own.

The Dalai Lama sounds like a UU. . .

As always with such ideas, this lies at the intersection of the public and the personal. After all, let's ask the pertinent question: What do people form groups FOR, anyway? We want to avoid the dangers of solipsism and subjectivity. By sharing together, we grow.

Spiritual Paths

HOWEVER! We don't learn a lot from patting ourselves on the back, and the fact is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations has a huge weakness, and it is that in the inclusiveness of our larger organization, we tend as an Association to ignore individual spiritual paths. Remember: the title of this sermon is "Broad Roads, Spiritual Paths, and Driveways Along The Way."

We do well with the broad road of inclusiveness. But—and I hope you'll forgive the oddity of the metaphor—I fear that our broad road leaves many Unitarian Universalists, as individuals, in a drive way rather than on a spiritual path.

Now, I want to be fair: I think the small group movement—Chalice Circles and covenant groups—has done good things in this way. We have put some intention toward the problem. And the movement toward having interest groups for various beliefs has helped too. Still, it's a problem: each of us finds ourselves, often, on a spiritual path alone.

The biggest reason for this, I think, is that we, all of us, know that we tend to move around in our beliefs—our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” implies that, rather than choosing a spiritual path and then modifying or ignoring facts that don’t agree with that system, we tend to accept new information and change our thinking with the new ideas.

I’ll use myself as example. I’ve mentioned before my agnosticism. On my spiritual journey, I rejected the idea of a deity which I learned as a child. The concept I learned was anthropomorphic: God was just like a human being, except without human limits.

As a teen, I rejected that idea because the evidence of our world does not, in my thinking, anyway, support such an idea. I just don’t see any evidence that a deity gets happy, sad, jealous, or mad. So, as a young person, I considered myself an atheist.

Later, I learned that we can’t even see certain sizes of waves—both big and little. And I began to ask myself a question: why is it that a creature that evolved to hunt and gather on the savannahs of Africa, why would such a creature have any idea about a deity? We can’t even sense microwaves.

And so I became an agnostic: how can we ever know?

And then I read about pantheism and how we don’t need to anthropomorphize deity: we can just be in awe of this wonderful organism called the universe. And when I think about that—I run down the aisle to the alter and commit my life to pantheism.

And then I read process theology, and learn that perhaps this wonderful universe has a purpose and an intelligence that grows from the organism itself but is larger than that. After all, a computer IS more than the sum of its parts, isn’t it? And I say, Yes! That’s it. And I become a panentheist.

And then I reflect on the Buddhist tradition, which tells us that all such talk is idle speculation that removes us from the real task, which is living well in this moment, right now, which is, after all, the only thing that we will ever have. So I say, yes, Buddha, that’s true.

And then I see the damage that religion does to our community, our nation, and our world, and I think that religion itself is to blame. And I become that fire-breathing atheist again, disavowing all the damage that thoughts about deity does to our world.

And so it goes, round and round. And my spiritual path is a circle. . .

And I'm reminded of the Buddhist priest. One day two of his students were arguing. And the priest went over to see what they were arguing about. And one told his side of the story, and the priest said, "You're right!" and the other student said, "But, master," and told his side of the story. And the priest said, "You're right!" And a third student came up to the priest and said, "But, master, they can't both be right!" and the priest said, "You're right!"

That's the way I feel in my spiritual journey. And I have a suspicion many UUs are in my position. So. It's not always that easy to talk about spirituality among us!

But wait! Ministers can't do that! Well, yes we can, IF we call ourselves Unitarian Universalist. It's true: were I a minister in many denominations, I couldn't get up and say what I've just said. Because there's a creed:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father

And in most denominations, that's NOT negotiable. So put another big plus up there for the Association in the spirituality column. As a Unitarian Universalist, in pulpit or pew, my spiritual path can include all of that today, part of that tomorrow, and none of it next week. And I can start that process all over again—read another book; go on another spiritual retreat. We assume thought and change.

I'm a minister not because I'm convinced of anything, other than the fact that human beings NEED a spiritual component to our lives. We NEED purpose beyond eating and procreation.

I'm not sure WHY we have that need; but the evidence has convinced me that we DO have that need.

It is the INPUT into the spiritual that is the question.

And now back to our Association. We NEED something like the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations visible in this nation and in this world saying what I've just said: Human beings need the spiritual; and there are lots of ways to that goal. Lots of valid ways. That's an important message.

In this we contradict most belief systems. Belief systems that are out there, in the spiritual market place, selling The One True Way and in the process doing a great deal of damage to people who don't know any better.

We propose that multiplicity and diversity are good things. And we propose—as did our forebears among the Universalists and Unitarians—that spirituality is about how we act in the world. That sentiment is summarized in the old phrase “deeds not creeds.” And it is summarized in the old phrase, “an earth made fair and all her people one.” For years we have worked and we continue to work toward that goal as individuals, as congregations, and our strength is multiplied by our wider association.

We are a tiny fraction of the world's population. But we are a fraction that INSISTS upon the inherent worth and dignity of every person; that INSISTS world peace is possible through organizations such as the United Nations; that INSISTS on honoring the interdependent web of all existence. These are vital messages that we as individuals; we as a congregation; and we as an Association bring to the world.

So may it be.