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UU Theology for the 21st Century: A People of Covenant

“Namaste.” This beautiful greeting from the Indian subcontinent, is derived from Sanskrit. Literally meaning, “I bow to you,” “Namaste” expresses both humility and reverence. For Hindus in India and Nepal, it might best be translated as, “I salute the God within you.” The salutation is often understood to mean something like – “The divinity within me honors the divinity within you.” Author Deepak Chopra has interpreted “Namaste” as “I honor the spirit in you, which is also in me.” And some yoga traditions interpret it as “The light within me honors the light within you.”

The advertised subject for this morning was “A UU theology for the 21st Century.” My wife, Karen, asked me what the topic was, and when I told her, she said, “Gee, I hope you didn’t use the word theology because no one will come.” I know what she meant, but I’m glad to see that you came anyway. Theology is a dirty word to many UUs, as is the word “God.” However, each of us believes something about the nature of life and the cosmos. Many people focus that belief by calling it “god,” by one of the many names for “god.” Many of us would describe it in other ways. I would love to be able to do away with the word “God” altogether. For UUs it complicates matters by stirring up old feelings from earlier religious experiences. We have no agreed-on alternative name, because our beliefs take many different forms. And that’s what I want to talk about today.

It’s tempting for to say that everything we need to know about UU theology is summed up in that greeting – “Namaste,” and leave it at that. But you know me better than that don’t you? On the one hand, it is entirely correct that honoring the divinity within each of us pretty well sums up a beautiful and very workable UU view of the world. On the other hand, there is more to say about this simple and straight-forward concept. Today, and on our next Sunday here in Sonora (April 19th), I want to address two related but distinct ideas to help us to continue to develop our worldview as we move into the 21st Century.

This morning, we are distributing our long-awaited membership directory. Thanks to the Membership Committee, to Lloyd Kramer, and to Craig Mineweaser and Janet Telford for their work in producing the directory. And thanks to Joe Haratani for coming up with the original idea for a picture directory and for pushing it until it became a reality. This directory is concrete evidence of one aspect of our theology that I want to emphasize today. We are a community, and beyond that, we are a people of covenant! Most of us have the notion that religion is primarily a matter of creed – we subscribe to a common set of beliefs, and we honor those core beliefs as defining our identity as a religious congregation. But, as we know, Unitarian Universalists come together from a diverse array of religious, or non-religious, backgrounds, and we follow a diverse array of spiritual paths. Each Sunday, one of us shares his or her individual spiritual journey, as Peggy did for us today. And we can see very quickly that each path is unique, each of us is engaged in discerning for our-self what it is that we believe, and how it is that we live out that belief.

And that's where the idea of covenant comes in. Because there is something that brings us together in community, even as each of us walks his or her own path to the top of the mountain. And that's the crucial point. Rather than formulating a set of creeds, we covenant with one another to honor and to support the individual spiritual journeys that each one of us makes. In fact, our official UU bylaws expressly provide that a UU congregation may not impose a creedal test as a condition of membership in that congregation. Beyond that, we are committed as a movement to honoring and respecting many religious traditions. And, we draw our inspiration from many different sources, including, but not limited to, the holy scriptures of many different religious traditions.

So -- we are more defined by this (holding up directory), than we are by this (holding up a Bible.) For us, revelation is not sealed. We are constantly questioning, learning, exploring. And our view of the world and our place in it changes with each new discovery. We are not locked into teachings that were handed down thousands of years ago, nor to the doctrine that those teachings are the exclusive way to "salvation," whatever that might mean in a given tradition. We acknowledge many different sources of religious teachings and wisdom, including Hebrew and Christian scripture. But, we continue to explore what is holy in many traditions, as we seek, collectively and individually, to grow and to develop in our spiritual lives.

So far as we can tell, over many millennia, humans have pondered the mysteries of the universe they inhabit, they have sought to understand how it all has come about, and they tried to find meaning in their lives. And out of this searching, they have created gods and religions. Walter Kauffman, a university professor of mine long, long ago, expressed this by saying that humans have a need for connection with transcendence that is not unlike our needs for food, clothing, shelter, relationship, and so forth. And one of the ways that humans have sought to explain the universe is through worshipping gods. Before the ancient Hebrews, still older peoples handed down stories about the creation of the universe and about various gods who were active in this creation. Many centuries before the Hebrews, ancient peoples of the fertile crescent, Sumerians had Babylonians, in what is now Southern Iraq, had stories about how the world was created and the role of the Gods in that creation. The Babylonian diety *Tiamat* was a goddess who personified the sea. She was considered the monstrous embodiment of primordial chaos, out of which the world was created. *Tiamat* was slain by *Marduk*, another God, who wanted to become chief among the gods. Marduk sliced Tiamat in half, and made from her ribs the vault of heaven and earth. Her weeping eyes became the source of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Centuries later, the Hebrews also envisioned a world created out of primordial chaos, and a God Jahweh, who took precedence over all other gods (although the people were constantly rushing off to worship other gods anyway). The Hebrews claimed that humans were made in the image of Jahweh. But they very wisely specified that people were forbidden to speak the name of Yahweh, or to make pictures of him. Thus, their god came to be known as the "unknowable," or the "unnamable," or by the Hebrew acronym YHWH, the Hebrew letters that spell Yahweh. And, of course, the Christians built their religion on these Hebrew traditions. Jesus was very much within the Hebrew tradition, of course, as prophet, teacher, healer, social activist, and,

perhaps, Messiah. Islam, in turn, was built on the Hebrew and Christian traditions, viewing Moses and Jesus as prophets, and their adherents as “people of the book.”

Throughout all this, of course, people of these faiths worshipped various versions of a monotheistic “God.” This “God” was alternately loving and punishing, distant and present, and so on. But practitioners of all these traditions imbued their “God” with certain common characteristics. “He” was a personal God, that is, one you could imagine. He looked like us, only more powerful, you could communicate with him, and so forth. Second, this God was worthy of worship and adoration, because he was good and all-powerful. Third, this “God” was separate from our world, above us or beyond us. And fourth, although distant, this was a providential God, that is, a God who was active in the world, here and now. You could invoke God through prayer, and certain results would follow. So, although each of these Abrahamic faiths claimed that humans were made in the image of God, it seems much more likely that it was humans who created God in their image, resulting in this personal, all-powerful, providential God.

How do we square this sort of personal, all-powerful God with the god of “Namaste.” With that sense that the divine, or the light, is present in you, and in me? With the sense of sacredness that exists in the wonders of the natural world; in the animals, the plants, the rocks and trees. With the sense of awe and wonder that we experience when we reflect on the process of evolution that has brought us to this point in history? With the sense of reverence we feel when we experience beauty, when we hear beautiful music, when we look at a beautiful painting. Or, with the reverence I experienced last week when I held our newly-born grandson, baby James, and gazed into his face, as he struggled to focus on mine? The poet Rumi writes:

Like the ground turning green in a spring wind.
Like birdsong beginning inside the egg.
Like this universe coming into existence,
the lover [of the divine] wakes, and whirls
In a dancing joy,
Then kneels down
in praise.

“Like birdsong beginning inside the egg.” “Like this universe coming into existence.” My Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, used to express this sense of awe, this sense of connection with universe, by speaking of “the imprint of a bird against the sky after it has flown.”

This brings me back to the notion that we are a people of covenant rather than creed. Each of us is on a spiritual journey, and our paths may take us in many diverse directions. And yet, in a very real sense, we are also on this path together. We honor the fact that each of us pursues his or her own path. More than that, we offer encouragement, we offer help and support. We are all seekers. But there’s more to the idea of covenant than this honoring of our separate paths. It is through our covenant – through our relationship with one another -- that we are able to experience the presence of divinity in the world – the presence of holiness that the greeting “Namaste” recognizes to exist within you and within me. Dr. Rebecca Parker, UU theologian and president of Starr King School for the Ministry, roots this experience of relationship firmly in the UU tradition. She writes:

Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors . . . saw . . . that heaven was in the quality of the community they created. They placed their faith in the divinity within human beings. "Heaven is in our hands," they said.

If we perceive that there is divinity in each of us when we bow to one another with joined hands that – and I do believe that – then it follows that that divinity is present, all the time. Holiness is all around us – in the ground we walk on, in the air we breathe, but most importantly in the people around us. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, we are unaware of that sacred presence, because we are busy getting on with our lives. But in those moments when we truly gaze into the eyes of another, when we offer our hand to someone out of caring and compassion, when we say "I love you," with conviction and purpose, we open up the possibility of connecting with the divine. We have the opportunity to open our hearts to another person, and when we do so it is possible to experience the presence of what people of another time, or of certain theologies, might call "God." But for many of us, the word "God" conjures up an image of that personal, all-powerful, distant, entity of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions.

The important thing, I believe, is that we have the power to open ourselves to holy presence in the universe. And connecting with that presence awakens us to our better selves; it awakens us to live out of hope rather than fear; it calls us to work for justice for our brothers and sisters throughout the world. In these moments of openness, we find it possible to connect with the transcendent spirit, or power, in the universe that enables us to transform lives, our own lives and the lives of others. That spirit, that power, that love, that transcendent something that we can't define, is ever-present in the universe. In fleeting moments of connecting -- truly connecting -- with one another, we catch fleeting glimpses of it.

Rumi's poem that served as our reading reminds us of the interconnectedness of all things. – I am both the candle and the crazy moth around it. I am the rose, and the nightingale lost in its fragrance. "I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy, the evolutionary intelligence, the lift, the falling away." I am you and you are me, and together we shine with sacred light. Together, we are part of the vast web of all existence. Together, we call on the better parts of ourselves to live lives of courage, humility, and integrity. Together, we have the insight and the power to transform our own lives and the world around us.

Together, we experience the power of love.

Together.

May it be so. Blessed Be. And Amen.