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We Draw From Many Sources

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition draws on many sources of wisdom. Many of you are aware of our Seven UU principles. But you may not be aware that we also expressly refer to various sources for our living tradition. Today, I want to talk about some of the sources that we draw upon. In two weeks, I want to continue the discussion by referring to some of our other sources of inspiration. This year, at General Assembly, UUs will be voting on proposed new Principles and Sources. If you are interested, you can look up the changes on our UUA website. You will find them under “proposed amendments to the UUA Bylaws.” The amendments change the wording and the emphasis, but they don’t change the substance of either the Principles or the enumerated sources. However, some of the added language is worth quoting:

Unitarian Universalism is not contained in any single book or creed. Its religious authority lies in the individual, nurtured and tested in the congregation and the wider world. As an evolving religion, it draws on the teachings, practices, and wisdom of the world’s religions. Humanism, earth-centered spiritual traditions, and Eastern religions have served as vital sources.

We should also note, however, that Unitarian Universalism is grounded in thousands of years of Jewish and Christian teachings, traditions, and experiences. And this means, of course, that one of the sources we draw on is The Bible. We don’t look to any scripture – including the Bible – as “normative.” Nor do we accept the Bible, or any other source, as exclusive authority. How then do we look at the Bible? As we know it today, the Bible consists of Hebrew scripture dating back to the period between 2,000 and 3,000 years ago. The much shorter New Testament consists of a number of books that were written in the 100 years or so at the beginning of the common era. During the 19th Century, scholars began to look at the Bible as a work of literature rather than just as a work of divine revelation, and this scholarship forms much of our thinking today. The Bible is a long book that was written by many different people, over many centuries, for many different purposes. It contains a great deal of wisdom and beauty. It also contains much that no sensible modern person would accept. It contradicts itself in many places, and it tells stories about many different versions of “God” that are often conflicting.

When we place the Bible’s teachings in historical, sociological, literary, and related contexts, we find our interest in it renewed, seeing it as a work of great literature. The stories of the Bible contain many of the foundational myths of civilization. Abraham, Moses, the prophets, the Hebrew kings, the stories about Jesus of Nazareth. And then there are beautiful, and sometimes subversive works such as the long erotic poem, Song of Songs, the story of Ruth and Naomi, the Book of Job, and of course, the many stories about the life and teachings of Jesus. These are stories about the rise of a few tribes of shepherds into a movement that would change the world. And to understand the civilization we inhabit, we need to know these stories. Let me give you an example: Bob Dylan; 1963; Highway 61 Revisited:

God said to Abraham, “kill me your son!”
Abe said “Man you must be puttin’ me on!”
God said “No!”
Abe said “What?”
God said “you can do what you want Abe, but
the next time you see me comin’ you better run!”
Abe said “where you want this killin’ done?”
God said “That way, out on Highway Sixty-one.”

The story of Abraham and Isaac is just one of thousands of seminal passages in the Bible. Some have interpreted it as showing how devout Abraham was, because he was willing to sacrifice Isaac as God commanded. Others interpret it as demonstrating that Abraham was right to listen to another divine voice and not to kill Isaac. And so it is with so many passages in the Bible. People have debated their meaning over the centuries, and they find meaning for modern life in these ancient stories. So yes, the Bible is one of our sources of inspiration as UUs.

Our tradition is enriched by the creative power of the arts, and this is another source we draw from. Where would our tradition be without the beautiful music we share on Sunday mornings. Throughout the centuries, we have turned to our reason for guidance, and we have learned from the lessons of science. But music, and the arts, speak to a different part of us. Music takes us into another realm altogether – a world full of beauty and mystery, a world of joy and sadness. When we hear a great piece of religious music – Handel’s “Messiah,” for example, or Mozart’s “Requiem” – we can’t help thinking of the inspiration that led to the creation of such beautiful, soul-stirring music.

Our own hymnbook – “Singing the Living Tradition” – contains a whole range of music from ancient Christian hymns to modern secular music. Many of us, for example, love the 19th Century Christian hymn, “Morning has Broken.” Our UU anthem, “Spirit of Life,” was written just some 25 years ago, but it captures the spirit of Unitarians and Universalists that has spoken over the centuries. Modern-day troubadours, such as Jim Scott and Jason Shelton continue to create hymns and songs that stir us. And we include songs from the hearts of African-Americans longing and struggling for freedom. Modern songstress Holly Near wrote “We are a Gentle, Angry People,” to mark the assassinations of George Moscone and Harvey Milk in San Francisco, and it now appears in our hymnbook as no. 170. And so on, and so on. Music feeds our individual and collective souls; it is an essential part of who we are.

Similarly, we turn to works of poetry and literature gathered from the world’s sacred and secular traditions. Wisdom speaks to us just as much when it comes to us from the brush of a painter, the pen of a poet, or the musical score of a composer, as it does when it comes to us from the Bible or some other source of religious teachings. We are open to beauty wherever it appears. In the works, for example, of the Persian poets, Rumi and Kabir and Tagore, from Bengal in India. In the writings of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau of 19th Century America. In the words of 20th Century poets, such as e.e. cummings, and our own Mary Oliver. We find inspiration in the words of poets and writers, as well as in the words of holy books. Rumi, for example, writes:

An invisible bird flies over,
But casts a quick shadow.

What is the body? That shadow of a shadow
of your love, that somehow contains
the entire universe.

And Mary Oliver writes:

To live in this world you must be able
to do three things:

To love what is mortal;
To hold it against your bones knowing
Your own life depends on it;

And, when the time comes to let it go,
To let it go.