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Sources of Our Inspiration

Two weeks ago, we began a discussion of the sources -- the wisdom and teachings -- that Unitarian Universalists rely on. Unlike most religions, Unitarian Universalism is not contained in any single book or creed. Rather, we believe that wisdom is found in many teachings and practices -- and not necessarily in those of religious traditions. We also look to the arts -- to music, painting, poetry, and the like. And we look to the lives, words, and deeds of prophetic men and women. I also mentioned last time, that our Unitarian Universalist Association has conducted a review of our adopted principles and sources and has recommended some revisions, in the form of amendments to our bylaws. You can find those proposed changes by going to the UUA website and looking under amendments to the bylaws. But the changes are of emphasis, not substance, and I found it useful to consult both the old and the new in preparing for our conversation today.

I want to continue our discussion by focusing on three more of our sources -- humanist teachings, wisdom from the world's religions, and direct experience of transcendent mystery and wonder. Humanism focuses on the creative power that lies in our human potential. It encourages us to use the brains we have been given and to heed the guidance of reason. It believes in the importance of science as an application of our creative potential and reason, and it encourages us to heed the lessons of science. I happen to like some of the language in the older version, which has been removed in the proposed changes to our list of sources. The older version points to humanist teachings, which "counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." Idolatries of the mind and spirit! That last phrase is important -- it reminds us that there are many false "gods" and that each one of us is capable of becoming unthinkingly attached to a particular world view.

Now, the claim is often made that it is only religion that promotes and instills ethics and values and that enables us to be "good." And this argument goes on to denigrate humanism as promoting a kind of moral relativism. In fact, quite the reverse is true. Humanists see human beings as inherently neither good nor bad, but with the potential to choose the good. Applying their reason, and their knowledge of human nature derived from science, humanists formulate ethical values and standards. These values tend to be centered around peace, justice, and freedom from oppression -- for all people. Rather than living by moral injunctions imposed from on high by religious authority, humanists choose to live by standards that they have critically examined and studied. How much more powerful it is to follow ethical standards that we have chosen, than it is to be taught that we are sinful by nature and therefore must be subject to ethical values imposed by religious authority.

The current fierce struggle within the Catholic Church around the abortion issue illustrates the difficulty of attempting to impose some sort of moral absolutism. Some angry bishops and lay Catholics have castigated Notre Dame University for inviting the president of the United States to address the graduating class. The reason is that the

president believes in a woman's right to choose (although he also believes in reducing the number of abortions by reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies). When we speak in moral absolutes, we lose our ability to recognize that there may be other, perfectly legitimate, points of view. And we lose our ability to listen to what someone else may have to say. It's also interesting to note that there was no similar outcry when the same University invited the last president to speak, despite his zeal to impose the death penalty as governor, and his initiation of a war that would result in thousands of deaths. All religions prohibit the taking of human life, and indeed the Pope had opposed the invasion of Iraq. How is it that we choose to enforce one moral absolute but not another? Moral absolutism may cause us to make fine distinctions that defy reason

And this segues nicely into the next source I want to discuss -- Wisdom from the world's religions. Our new version of the sources includes reference to the teachings and practices of the world's religions. But once again, I like the wording of the old version, which says that we look to other religions, because they inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life. Just as we look to reason and science as guideposts for our ethical stance, we also look to the teachings of other faiths for their wisdom.

Throughout history, humans have expressed their awe and wonder at the beauty and mystery of the world in various ways. Some have called it "God" (by various names), some have worshipped a tripartite "God," some have worshipped a variety of gods who express different qualities. And some, such as Buddhism, have proceeded in a different way altogether – seeking "enlightenment" and "compassion" by working on the self. As a way of expressing our willingness to learn from different traditions, UUs often say that "there are many paths to the top of the mountain." We humans start out seeking for ways to find meaning and purpose, for ways to give voice to our awe and wonder. But I'm not totally convinced that we are all climbing the same mountain. It may be that the followers of various traditions are climbing different mountains. (I'm planning to dig into this issue further next time here in Sonora (June 7th) in a sermon entitled "Many Salvations" [plural]). What we can be sure of is that there are many paths, starting at a place of common aspiration. And we can also be sure that each path has something to teach us if only we can be open enough to learn.

Take the example of Mahatma Gandhi, whose work was firmly rooted in the religious traditions of his native India. Gandhi made it clear that he was unable to accept the claims of orthodox Christian theology:

It was more than I could believe – Gandhi said -- that Jesus was the only incarnate Son of God and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were his sons.

But, Gandhi was nonetheless profoundly influenced by Jesus, and he saw the example of Jesus' suffering as a factor in the formulation of his doctrine of nonviolence. Gandhi went on to say:

Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief make Jesus any more or less of an influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of His teaching and His doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so . . . My interpretation, in other words, is that in Jesus' own life is the key to His nearness to God; that he expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God.

The transcendentalists of the early 19th Century were particularly intrigued by the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. They were also influenced by the European romantics, such as Goethe, Coleridge, and Carlyle. And they began to depart from a strictly Judeo-Christian monotheism. Instead they came to encourage direct, individual experience of the transcendent in its many forms. And this brings us to the third of our sources that I want to discuss today – direct spiritual experience. Or, as framed in our original enumeration of our sources – “Direct experience of transcending mystery & wonder, . . . which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the other Transcendentalists, came to see the organized religion of their time, including Unitarianism, as having become dry and lifeless. In his famous address at Harvard Divinity School, in 1838, Emerson argued that the clergy of his time spoke of revelation as something that had happened long ago, as if God were dead. But he, told the new ministers, revelation is ongoing, and their duty was to make their congregants aware each of them is an infinite soul, and that each of them was connected -- in mind and heart -- with the universe. Rather than preaching morality as applied to the duties of life, they needed to be preaching that humans are beings who are, in his words, “drinking forever the soul of God.”

The Transcendentalists are connected with a range of ideas. But the most important one was their belief that the essence of religion is able to connect with what is transcendent in the universe directly. And this connection of one’s own soul with transformative power in the world, could be, had to be, achieved with the mediation of ministers and priests, religious liturgy, and scriptures of all kinds. These had their uses, to be sure, but not at the expense of direct experience. For many Universalists of that time, and for many UUs today, this direct experience was often found in experiencing nature. This is what would cause Thoreau, for example to write: in *Wildness is the preservation of the world.*” And in that same essay, “Walking,” he would amplify further the idea of finding the transcendent in nature:

We had a remarkable sunset. . . ; I was walking in a meadow, the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, . . . reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest brightest morning sun-light fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees. . . , and on the leaves of the shrub-oaks on the hill-side, while our shadows stretched long over the meadow eastward, as if we were the only motes in its beams.

It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow. When we reflected that this was not a solitary phenomenon, never to happen again, but that it would happen forever and ever in an infinite number of evenings, and cheer and reassure the latest child that walked there, it was more glorious still.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land; till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, so warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in [springtime].

A few weeks ago, we talked about the *Bhagavad Gita*. In that Hindu classic, the god Krishna is serving as charioteer for Arjuna, the commander of an army about to go

into battle. At the climax of the narrative, Krishna appears to Arjuna as pure, radiant energy. To quote again from the text, Arjuna sees:

the whole universe
enfolded, with its countless billions
of life-forms, gathered together . . .
in the measureless, massive, sun-flame
Splendor of its form.

In that moment, Arjuna experiences the transcendent as pure, undifferentiated energy. And this it seems to me is what the Transcendentalists were talking about, and what the drafters of our list of sources were talking about. In precious moments in our lives, we are able to have this kind of direct experience of transcending wonder and mystery, of beauty and joy. Perhaps in moments like that Thoreau described where we are experiencing a beautiful meadow in a perfect sunset. Or perhaps in those moments when we are able to open ourselves to others, out of compassion and love. Or in those moments when we experience our interconnectedness with each other and with the entire universe. This source may not be as apparent as many of the more commonly known ones, but it is perhaps the most important of all.

In this direct experience of the transcendent, of undifferentiated energy in the universe, we are truly alive, we are truly connected with all that is, we have no need – in that moment – to look elsewhere for meaning and purpose.

In those moments of connectedness, we are open to the power of transformation in the universe, which creates and maintains life; and our spirits are renewed, over and over again!!

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