

Pluralism, Prayer and Ritual: What's Up With That?

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I vividly recall a pastoral session at a Thai restaurant in which a series of questions from a parishioner, whom I will call Susan, were posed. These questions remain a source of reflection.

I remember sitting with Susan amidst the smells and tastes of fine curries, lemon grass, chicken, and spring rolls as she queried, “What place does prayer and ritual have within Unitarian Universalism?” “Why are we religious liberals often uncomfortable about dialoguing with one another about ritual and prayer?” “Is the yearning for prayer and ritual part of the human condition?”

As I cut into a crispy delight of cucumbers bathed in a light sweet and sour dressing, I listened as Susan shared her upbringing in Catholicism. Prayers, as part of ritual, had provided a rich context for her early spiritual development. She reflected upon a devotional practice which involved representations of Stations of the Cross...one would then walk to the various representations of these last events of Jesus life and offer prayers at each. While this particular Christian practice no longer fits with her theology, she related that she did miss the richness of the ritual...and the constructed opportunity for a sense of prayerfulness.

For the rest of that lunch, we lingered with these questions regarding prayer, ritual and Unitarian Universalism. And I left the restaurant with a lot to ponder and a chocolate dinner mint.

Renowned world religion scholar, Huston Smith, who actually once road in my car, states that there are six features, which appear so regularly throughout many of the world religions as to suggest that they simply may be a part of the human make-up. These six features are: religious tradition (the gifts from past generations), religious theories (questions and attempted answers), wise individuals (those who seem to rise above the crowd and whose guidance is sought in matters of the spirit), grace (sense that reality is on our side), mystery (our finite status within an infinite universe) and ritual.

Huston Smith, , says the following about ritual:

Religion arose out of celebration and its opposite, bereavement, both of which cry out for collective expression. When tragedy strikes or we all but explode with joy, we want not only to be with people; we want to be with them in ways that strengthen our bonds and relieve our isolation, making us more than the sum of our parts. (pg 67, The Illustrated World Religions, 1994, Labyrinth Publishing)

And this creating more than the sum of our parts, in a nutshell, is often the role of ritual. Now religious rituals manifest in various particularities; some focus on the honoring of a deity or multiple deities (Christian Eucharist/Hindu Puja); others may focus on place (Islamic hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca) or setting aside of time (Jewish Sabbath or Holy Days) or some rituals simply mark life's transitions, celebrations, joys and sorrows in a familiar way. There is an African Proverb from the Yoruba (Nigeria), which states concisely, "Let us do it. The way it is usually done. So that we may have the usual results." Thus, ritual can offer the comfort of predictability.

So where does that leave us liberal religious seekers, who embrace religious pluralism, when it comes to ritual and prayer? My observation is that there are certain rituals, with which the majority of Unitarian Universalists are comfortable: the annual Flower Communion Ceremony, weddings, memorial services, new member recognition, child dedications (as long as they don't look too much like a baptism), coming of age ceremony (as long as it doesn't look like a confirmation), joys and sorrows (but the lighting of candles can push some our liberal religious comfort zones) and the lighting of the chalice (which too has its critics). As for prayer, it seems OK to talk about, but not something many UUs often do together.

So what's going on here? I believe *some* Unitarian Universalist are hesitant to engage more deeply with the concepts of ritual and prayer because of two things: One, many UUs are religious refugees from faith traditions in which ritual or prayer or a construct of "god" was experienced as empty, hypocritical, oppressive, or as one's theology changed, was no longer fulfilling. So a natural skepticism and avoidance developed. Secondly, I believe *some* UUs are hesitant to engage more deeply with the concepts of ritual and prayer because some of us (perhaps even a few here in this congregation) are uncomfortable with our theological diversity.

Participating in a theologically diverse community is not easy.

And we have plenty of theological diversity in our UU congregations. Back in 1997 the Unitarian Universalist Association conducted a Needs and Aspirations survey. One of the 38 questions asked participants to indicate their theological perspective. The following percentages were reported from

8,118 surveys returned by Unitarian Universalists regarding their theological perspective:

46.1%	Humanist
19%	Earth/Nature Centered
13%	Theist
9.5%	Christian
6.2%	Mystic
3.6%	Buddhist
1.3%	Jewish
.4%	Hindu
.1	Moslem
13.3%	Other

My guess is things have shifted around a bit since that time.

Now as some of you may be aware, awhile back, a controversy regarding our religious diversity cropped up in Virginia. The controversy resulted in a lot of press from the front page of the Chicago Trib, the New York Times, to a features column in the Wall Street Journal. It seems a few Unitarian Universalists who identify as “believing in God” decided that our faith tradition has strayed too “far from its theistic roots”; they complained that “at least half of Unitarians are atheists” and that many of the clergy are in the same boat. So they have formed the “American Unitarian Association”...I guess, a kind of “believers only” group.

As a result, the Unitarian Universalist Association filed a legal suit. (Please note, the suit was filed not because of theological issues but because

of the use of the name “American Unitarian Association). According to the article in the Wall Street Journal entitled “God, Optional” the suit charged that the name “American Unitarian Association” belonged to the UUA, which was formed in 1961 by consolidating the historic American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church. The Reverend John Buehrens, then President of the UUA, who also once road in my car, said the dissidents were guilty of ‘mischief’ known as identity theft and are using the name to borrow and solicit money.” (Wall Street Journal, *Houses of Worship*, May 11, 2001, Dave Shiflett)

According to the articles writer, Dave Shiflett, one of the complaints from the theistic breakaway group is that while political activists, pagans and atheists find a warm home in UUA sanctuaries, traditional theistic Unitarians, especially Christians often confront open hostility. “And let’s face it” one of them stated, “an atheistic church really is an oxymoron. We think the church should explore the nature of the divine, but it is much more interested in exploring the nature of politics.” (ibid)

Now I have several responses to this article. First, some of the atheists I know are very spiritual people and their views add a rich texture to our religious pluralism; yet, I don’t believe that half of our congregations are made up of atheists. Humanists perhaps. But many of the humanists I know don’t profess to know the definitive answer to the question, “Does God/dess exist?” (which, by definition, an atheist does) They prefer to live within the question...the mystery. Their emphasis is on the here and now, and how to bring more justice, compassion and equality to the world as we experience it. Perhaps some might identify as “agnostics”, and I warn them to be leery

of extremism even in agnosticism. As the tongue-in-cheek bumper sticker reads: “Militant Agnostic: I don’t know and neither do you”

My second response to the article is that there probably are plenty of political activists, pagans, mystics, agnostics, theists who might not describe their experience in UU sm as finding a “warm home in UUA sanctuaries.”

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My third response is one of recognition. I have often heard from UU s who identify as Christian that they do sometimes feel a lack of tolerance regarding their theology within our liberal religious faith. And why is this?

Again, I return to a previous point. The vast majority of our members are religious refugees from other faiths...predominantly Protestant, Catholic and some Jewish. For many of these folks their initial experience with religion was not fulfilling...some found it oppressive, empty or lacking in intellectual depth. So for some, theological language and concepts from these traditions remain somewhat problematic. Let me also add that my work with young adults and other congregation members has revealed a whole other group which is now emerging in our faith communities. Folks who grew up with no religious upbringing, because their parents were reacting against a previous tradition. These folks are often intrigued by ritual and prayer and want to more deeply understand its meaning. (And of course there are many other UU s with experiences spanning the spectrum in between.)

How can we Unitarian Universalists respond to this pluralism of religious experience? (I included a set of dialogical readings in this worship service for a reason). Dialogue. We need to create spaces for dialogue. Particularly interfaith dialogue, which this congregation has been doing in the last couple of years. In fact the board of this congregation, with input from the Social Justice Council, helped sponsor a powerful interfaith dialogue entitled, “Healing Abraham’s Family”.

I also believe our dialogical task begins here at home in our own congregation...As Unitarian Universalists we are invited to use our language in a profound way. If we are going to respect and honor one another in our theological diversity, then I believe we need to have a *depth grammar*. So when we share the word PRAYER, we not only understand it from our own experience or lack thereof, but understand and respect it in the context of this pluralistic religious community of which we are a part. **Respect** for our interdependent web of existence with one another.

Many years ago, I learned from UUCB member Bob Port that the etymological roots of the word “respect” come from the Latin *respectare*, which means to “look at and then look at again.” Which translates in my mind “to spend time with”. So how do we as a religious community develop respect for one another; how do we create a *depth grammar*. We spend time with one another.

And we talk about those things, which are important to us in our spiritual journeys. And we listen. We listen. We hear another’s experience and we “look, pause, and look again.”

About a year ago, I had the honor of facilitating a “Building Your Own Theology Class” at my former congregation. We had some 20 members in the class and our theologies spanned the spectrum... There were those who identified as Christian, as Humanist, as Mystics, as “Other”. There were those who knew how to talk about their theology but not quite how to live it. There were those who knew how to live their theology but not quite how to talk about it. It was an amazing class. (Not just because we had great snacks every week; a major theological necessity in my book!) Because we listened to each other. We created a safe and sacred place to be with one another. A multitude of spiritual beliefs, practices and journeys were shared.

What I remember most clearly from our BYOT class was a very intensive discussion we had about prayer. There were as many different definitions and experiences about prayer as there were people. And the question was even broached, “Do you pray?” Some of us did and some of us didn’t. But we all left there, I believe, with a *depth grammar*, about prayer. We talked about how we prayed. (Some mentioned that they utilized the old UU standby, “To Whom It May Concern). Some of us had a theistic sense and so prayed to something beyond ourselves. Some of us found our gardening to be prayer. Others saw prayer as a therapeutic tool. Others as a mystical one. As each person related their narrative about prayer, it became part of each of our stories and our grammar. We looked and looked again. We listened. And respect was born.

At one of the BYOT classes I read the poem “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. Many of you are probably familiar with this poem. In the

beginning Oliver asks some theological questions, like “Who made the world?”, then she slowly melts into an experience of being with and observing a grasshopper. And not just a casual glance, but *respectare*. She looks and looks again. And shares with the reader the profound sense of her observation. She develops a depth grammar, a sacredness, with the grasshopper.

Respectare. And it was about a year ago, after returning home from teaching a theology class at First Unitarian Society, that the following scenerio unfolded:

I arrived home around 9:30pm. I came in the door and was greeted by our two cats, Sesbania (a dog-like Siamese) and Schnaffers (a sweet, shy Calico). I decided to go upstairs, get my PJs on and then come downstairs and decompress. My family wasn’t home yet.

When I came downstairs, our calico Schnaffers was lying on the floor not breathing. I tried to revive her. She was a healthy 7-year-old cat. I got the vet on the phone, but I knew she was dead. Deborah arrived home. It was a long night. The vet thinks she probably had an undetectable heart condition.

Schnaffers was the cat that always came to me when I cried. It was hard to lose her. That night I called a few of my friends, some staff members, and I heard myself saying through tears to them over the phone, “Say a prayer for her sweet spirit.” I’m not sure what I meant at the time. It was layered. Y’see, these were friends with whom I shared ongoing theological talk and spiritual journeys. We shared a depth grammar.

My hope in my time with you as one of your ministers, is to share a such a journey. Full of theological discussions. The critical mind. The open

heart. So when we need to use theological language the layers will be there.
I pray we share a similar journey.

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?

Who made the swan. And the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean...

the one who has flung herself out on the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

*who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of
up and down...*

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly

Washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass,

How to kneel down into the grass,

How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields

Which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon.?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life.

As Unitarian Universalist, whether we identify theologically as Christian, Humanist, Moslem, Theist, Pagan, Buddhist, Jew, Searcher, Seeker, Earth Centered, Mystic ...or Other...let us learn to share with one another our cherished stories. Let us develop a depth grammar together. Let us look and look again, into one another's eyes, and there see respect. For each journey is a sacred journey. May we rejoice in our religious pluralism. May we rejoice in our Prayers, our Rituals, our Rational approach, our Intuitive approach, our thinking, our feeling, our Meditations, our Silent Reflections, our Hymn Singing, our Candle lighting...our Justice Making, *Respectare!*

For all we cherish. Each other. Our earth. The seas. The skies.
Respectare. Respectare.