

Windows of Faith

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Rev. Nancy J Anderson

Each Sunday when we arrive in this sanctuary we are treated to a vision of harmony... The Trantham windows depicting the symbols of the world's religions, many ways of seeing religious truth, coexisting here in this room. These images serve as a constant reminder that the world's religions provide wisdom and inspiration for our ethical and spiritual lives.

Visitors and newcomers often remark on the windows and seem to be touched by and impressed with the inclusivity they imply. While many do not quite understand the meaning of the presence of these religious images in a Unitarian Universalist church, at the very least they see that all these traditions are given a place of honor.

For us, they are a visible reminder of our openness to the many ways of finding truth and meaning and our commitment to inclusivity within our congregations. As a free faith, we place few demands on our members, but those few, are the essence of who we are as religious people.

We expect not only to speak our own truth and to listen with respect to the truths of others, but we also expect our truths to be arrived at in a responsible manner. We expect acceptance of our various ways of expressing our beliefs, and we expect encouragement in our spiritual growth, both individually and collectively.

We expect our actions to be as responsible as our thinking, and so we work for justice in the world and in our communities.

Our faith is our way of being, and we have learned these ways from the wisdom of the ages.

Individually and collectively, ours is an eclectic faith, "drawing from any and all sources, throughout time and space, from every being, culture and eco-system, to find the resources we need." (Roger Mohr) The bylaws of our UUA remind us how we got to be this way.

The living tradition that we share draws from many sources:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men, which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Jewish and Christian teachings, which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

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.

Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Drawing from so many different sources, our religious way is so theologically diverse, that a single traditional identity is not applicable. Though our roots are in Christianity, ours is not a Christian church. Though Humanism has strongly inspired us, ours is not a Humanist society. Though we have embraced the spiritual teachings of nature based spirituality, ours cannot be classified a neo- Pagan or a Native American group. Though many of our members find meaning in Buddhist philosophy and practice, ours is not a Buddhist ashram. Nor can it be identified exclusively with any other religious tradition.

A few years ago, I gathered a theologically diverse group of folks from our congregation to explore the diversity among us. When asked to name their theology, not one of us was comfortable with the obvious labels. We all wanted to modify those labels to suit our individual sensibilities. I think this is typical of most UUs. The labels just don't fit us as individuals or as congregations or as an Association.

Roger Mohr (in a sermon delivered to the UU Fellowship of Clinton IA on 11/13/05) illustrates how he describes his personal theology.

"I came to be a UU as a hard core, angry atheist, secular humanist. Along the way, I explored neo-paganism, and identified as a pagan for quite some time. Even now, if forced to accept only one label, I would still probably choose pagan, but not because that is my real identity; it's just the one that pinches least. That said, I never have come to a belief in a personal God, and I still trust primarily in human beings to sort their own problems and choose their own destiny. That makes me a humanist. And so begins the list of hyphens: Humanist-Pagan-UU. But my primary spiritual discipline is zazen, seated meditation. I am a humanist-pagan-Buddhist UU. But I also experiment with prayer to the divine, to the Beloved, to God. Humanist Pagan Buddhist-Christian UU. And usually God is a She. Humanist-Pagan-Buddhist-Christian-Feminist-UU. And my own spiritual work at the moment is about trust and submission to the cosmos. And of course, Moslem means "submitted one," Islam means "submission." Humanist-Pagan-Buddhist-Christian-Feminist-Moslem UU. And my theology is actually a form of Mysticism. Humanist-Pagan-Buddhist-Christian-Feminist-Moslem-Mystic UU."

Though we laugh when we hear this litany, we are laughing *with* Mohr, for in his words, we recognize ourselves. No doubt many of you could trace a similar path in describing your own theology. It is to be expected among UUs; after all, when we say we are inspired by the religions of the world, and by various ways of finding meaning, both mystical and scientific, we are bound to develop an eclectic, even patchwork, theology.

That word, patchwork has often meant to be demeaning, something not whole, something old and worn, barely held together. But take a look at the lovely patchwork of the quilts some of our members produce, and you will see a harmony of color, of form and design that creates a whole. The windows that grace our sanctuary are similarly made of many pieces, many colors, yet each is whole, and together they make yet a larger whole statement about who we are as Unitarian Universalists. When the one light of the sun shines through them, they blaze with the glory of the diverse ways of being human, the many ways of being religious.

Those pieced works of art are more infinitely fascinating *because* they are made up of many pieces. Each one unique, each one whole in and of itself, just like our congregations, just like our Unitarian Universalist religious way, just like life itself.

Our religious way includes them all as long as our mission of Love and Justice is upheld in all we do. But our history shows that inclusion takes intention, learning and understanding and the willingness to change.

As Donald Skinner wrote in a 2006 issue of the UU World, “Both the Unitarian and Universalist faiths have had periodic bouts of anxiety about their doctrinal integrity. ...starting as early as the 1840s when the Transcendentalists challenged the “orthodox” Unitarians about the importance of biblical miracles in validating the authority of Jesus.” “By the 1870s, Unitarians were arguing whether a commitment to Unitarian ethics was all that a member—or even a minister—needed to affirm in order to join. At issue was whether a Unitarian church was Christian. By the early 1920s, Unitarians were debating whether a belief in God was a defining characteristic of Unitarian faith. Humanists argued that a belief in humanity was the truly Unitarian doctrine.” “The Universalists argued ... about the extent to which Universalism was Christian in the early to mid-20th century.”

The history of Unitarian Universalism is one of ever widening circles of inclusion, beginning with Christianity and Judaism, bringing in humanism, recognizing the value and inspiration of eastern religions, rediscovering the wisdom of nature based religions.

We have moved through cycles of emphasis from spirituality and rationality, practical to mystical, science to mystery, outward and inward; and yet, we are still Unitarian Universalist, because we are open to learning and growth. We accept the evolutionary nature of our religious way, and we reject drawing circles of exclusion. Having ever been the heretics, we do not wish expulsion for anyone.

We live in a world where walls of exclusion are erected to separate us from one another. And from time to time, as our history repeats itself, we contemporary UUs also succumb to the fear of difference and the desire to define once and for all, who is in and who is out of our circle.

A Powell Davies, wrote more than 50 years ago, “how strange and foolish are those wall of separation that divide us. What can we do to stretch our hearts enough to lose their littleness? Here we are – all of us – all upon this planet, bound together in a common destiny,

Living our lives between the briefness of the daylight and the dark.

Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious flickering flame of life, how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?” (#662 SLT)

Our religious way calls us to reject walls of exclusion and to draw our circle wide.

In the poetic words of Edward Markham:

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in.*

Ours is a religion which gives responsibility to each individual to discover, through their own conscience and experience, what is right and true. To be inspired by the wisdom of a particular religious tradition is a matter of recognizing truth wherever it is found, and realizing that none of us as individuals, and no one religious way, holds all the truth.

When we engage with the world’s religions, we understand that we can be inspired by them, learn from them and even adopt certain practices, if they seem meaningful, without pretending to be someone other than who we are, without relinquishing our personal beliefs, centers of trust or ability to act in faith.

Each of us may take a different path, but we are all here together because we believe in journeying together with our differences. We believe in freedom of conscience AND in the beloved community, the many constituting the one.

We know that there are many ways of seeing. We know that our way is not the only way. To use a metaphor from Forest Church, we know that the light of love and understanding shines through many windows, and to stand in that light is to be part of a prism of beauty and wonder.