

All in the Family

Given 4/15/2012 by Robin Mitchell

Meditation Reading

We are a Religious Community

- In the experience of worship, we gather to contemplate the mystery of God, interpret the wisdom of religion, and explore the insights of science. Our purpose is to awaken our sense of the sacred and renew our resolve to transform ourselves and our world.
- As human beings, we all emerge from the same Source and share the same Destiny. As a community of faith, we make shared commitments and offer mutual support. As individuals, we each bear responsibility for our own beliefs and actions.
- We practice a discipline of gratitude, by which we acknowledge our utter dependence on the people and world around us, and we practice an ethic of gratitude, by which we accept our obligation to nurture others and the world in return.

The Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City

Presentation

My sermon this morning has what they call a "back story" in the movie business. At the auction last year I bought the naming rights to a Rev. David sermon, so to speak, where I'd get to choose the topic for one of his sermons. And when the time came, our worship theme for the month happened to be "religious authority", which fit perfectly because I had been wondering about the authority we accord to other religions. Our hymnals have (altered) versions of songs from other faith traditions; our ministers stand with clergy from other religions at demonstrations and protests; I had just heard Rev. David quote from the Torah and from a Christian theologian in his sermon the week before; the UUA's statement of our sources includes "wisdom from the world's religions" and specifically "Jewish and Christian teachings", and I was wondering, why? How is it that we accord other religions this kind of respect and authority when we don't accept their core beliefs? How can we do this and still be true both to our own faith and to our understanding of theirs?

I thought this was a great topic, but I got a little tongue-tied when I tried to explain it to Rev. David and he ended up delivering a sermon on the beauty and inspiration that he found in sacred scripture, which was lovely in its own right but didn't really address my core question. So this morning we're all facing the consequences of my failure to communicate: me, because I had to actually sit down and write the sermon that I'd been hoping to outsource on the cheap, and you because instead of hearing it from the horse's mouth you're getting it from the, um, other end of the horse.

I'm still hoping to hear Rev. David's answer someday, but here's mine in one sentence: We are all one large family, so we stand with other religions because that's what family does, and we listen respectfully to their stories because they're our family stories too.

And what is it that makes us all family? First, we're all members of the same species – like them, UU-ism is a religion and this Fellowship is a religious community. This is not something we have always acknowledged, and there have been reasons for that. Some of us have come here for refuge after unsatisfying or even abusive experiences with other religions, or after seeing some of the ugly political uses of religion, and have perhaps reacted a little too broadly. And the dictionary doesn't help things any; one definition says that religion is a "set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency ... often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs." That certainly doesn't sound like us, but it's a culturally blinkered definition that also doesn't sound like Buddhism, or Taoism, or Confucianism, or any other religion that doesn't follow the Western pattern of God-worshipping.

But our meditation reading a few minutes ago suggests another definition – everything in it talks about what we do together, not what we believe together. It says that we, like people of other religions, have chosen to be in a community that supports our spiritual growth through ritual, stories, teaching and shared experience. And we, in turn, contribute to that community because we believe in extending that same support to other people and in making the fruits of our growth manifest in the world. Although we UU's do this in our own unique way, it is the same thing all those other religions are also doing.

This definition distinguishes not so much between religious people and atheists, as most definitions do, but between religious people and individualists. Being on a personal spiritual quest is wonderful – there are no committee meetings, no pledge drives, no emails asking you to contribute something to the fundraising auction. But it is also a rather limited and transient thing. You may improve your own life and inspire people around you, but you're not building any institutions that will take that inspiration out into the world and on into future generations. And we are all here this morning, rather than being at home meditating or doing Yoga, because we all recognize this at some level.

And we're here this morning in this beautiful amphitheater because our founders, fifty years ago, aimed at more than their own personal growth; they committed themselves to building a community that was here waiting for us when we needed it. And if this Fellowship is still here fifty years from now, still inspiring its members and still working for justice in the larger community, it will be because those of us here today have made that same commitment. This is a noble calling, and we should be proud of belonging to the family of religions, not apologetic or conflicted about it.

But if being in the same species makes it possible to be family, it is lineage that makes it reality. And here again, we are family. It is historical fact that both Unitarianism and Universalism developed within Christianity, which itself developed from Judaism. But the really important thing is that while we have outgrown the doctrines of our Judeo-Christian origins, we were never forced to disown them. When they became too limiting for us we moved beyond them, just as any healthy child eventually outgrows her room in her parents' house and moves to her own place which she furnishes according to her own taste. She does this not because her parents failed her, but because they succeeded; because they succeeded in rearing a capable, independent adult. And we chose to grow beyond the Christian story not because it ever failed us, but because it inspired us to wider horizons.

What we now consider our unique values – our love of reason, our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of humankind, our passion for justice – are all things we inherited from our Christian parents. Almost two hundred years ago, the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing gave a famous sermon called “Unitarian Christianity” where he spoke about exactly these things. He said that there was no book that demanded a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible, and criticized his orthodox brethren who, as he said, despite Christ’s warnings invented creeds for the church and expelled people living virtuous lives for the crime of thinking for themselves. That was anathema to him just as much as it is to us today.

As a Unitarian Christian he rejected the idea that our nature is inherently sinful, that we require God’s salvation. In words that a UU today might speak (except perhaps for their sexism), he said “We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, in conscience, or his sense of duty ...” Indeed, God had to prove himself to us as much as we to God – Channing said “We cannot bow before a being, however great, who rules tyrannically. We respect nothing but excellence, whether on earth or in heaven. We venerate not the loftiness of God’s throne, but the equity and goodness on which it is established.”

We don’t talk so much about God these days, but we use almost those exact words with human institutions. From the institution of marriage to our government, we judge them not by their age or their power but by the equity and goodness on which they were established and which they continue to embody, and we call them to account when they fall short. After two hundred years, we’re still true to our parents’ values.

We often don’t see this, in part because some Christians make us not want to admit any relationship with them, but also because no one ever wants to admit that their parents were right about anything. That’s a natural reaction, but it’s not the most mature, and it estranges us from the people who shaped our values. So when we do read from the Bible, or quote Christian theologians, or stand with Christians at immigration demonstrations or work with them at the Interfaith Shelter Network, I think it’s a healthy sign that we’re secure enough to acknowledge our family inheritance.

And not just Christians – while it’s a historical fact that UU-ism arose out of Christianity, it’s also something of a historical accident. I believe that we could have just as easily come from the liberal wings of any of the world’s great religions, for our core values have arisen independently in all of them. If Christianity is our parent and Judaism our grandparent, then Islam and Buddhism and Hinduism are our aunts and uncles – if we had been born to them we would be different, but we’d still share the family features.

After Christianity and Judaism, our next closest relative would be Islam, the third of the Abrahamic faiths. Islam has been passionate about social justice and equity in human relations from the beginning, and they have been famously open to science and reason, giving us both our number system and our word for algebra. They foreshadowed our religious openness – unlike the Bible, the Qur’an explicitly says that there can be no compulsion in religion, and in the year 622 Mohammed made the first known official proclamation of religious tolerance in history, almost a thousand years before anything similar appeared in the West. We definitely could have descended from them, and if there was a modern, liberal branch of Islam flourishing today then I think we would very much enjoy working with them.

As the many Buddhists in our Fellowship can attest, we also could have originated from Eastern religions. We might look a little different than we do today, but that could be a good thing – our First Principle might be more noble if it spoke of the inherent worth and dignity of every sentient being instead of just every person. We certainly could have inherited our commitment to reasoned inquiry from them – the Buddha said it was the only reliable way to find truth, and the current Dalai Lama has said that if science ever showed some Buddhist precepts to be wrong then Buddhism would have to change its teachings to accommodate the new knowledge. And their emphasis on compassion as the fundamental basis of relationship would both inspire our commitment to social justice and perhaps soften its occasional partisan edges.

But it's not enough to be related by lineage, either directly or indirectly. I know that many people here have grown up in dysfunctional or even abusive families, and you know better than I do that not all family is welcome at the table. If the Taliban or the people with the "God hates fags" signs are family, they're the abusive ex-husband that we had to take out a restraining order against. We can hope for their healing and eventual reconciliation, but in the mean time we need to speak out against the harm they are doing precisely because they are family and our family honor is at stake.

But even they can be of service to us by pointing out the dangers that tend to run in our family tree. If half of your relatives were alcoholic, or if four women in your family all came down with breast cancer, you'd realize that your genetic makeup might have some dangers and you'd start watching yourself carefully. And if so many in our religious family seem prone to smug self-righteousness, we might start watching ourselves for signs of the same disease. For example, how do we talk about people who disagree with us about immigration or same-sex marriage? How quick are we to assume that our positions come from exalted values and theirs come from hate, fear and bigotry? We should not be too quick to look away from the mirror our wayward cousins hold up to us.

In the end, the true measure of family is love and shared values. And if some in our family dishonor those things, many others remind us of what is so special about our religious family. Some of you may have seen my online posting last week where I quoted the conservative blogger and faithful Catholic Andrew Sullivan on what he saw as the core values of Christianity. In his words, they are to "not simply love one another, but love your enemy and forgive those who harm you; give up all material wealth; ... Above all: give up power over others, because power, if it is to be effective, ultimately requires the threat of violence, and violence is incompatible with the total acceptance and love of all other human beings that is at the sacred heart of Jesus' teaching."

"Above all, give up power over others" – where else but in our family will you hear those words spoken? Not in the worlds of business or politics or international relations, where power and dominance are celebrated. But these counterculture values that Andrew mentions – forgiveness, radical love and acceptance, generosity, non-violence – have arisen all throughout our family tree, and you'll hear them being taught in churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and Fellowships every week.

And not just taught – the thing that absolutely takes my breath away about our religious family, the thing that makes me love them so much, is that people come to

hear those words, to be challenged to live them in their own lives. In his sermon last week, Rev. David said "We don't come together on Sunday in reverence to stagnation. We don't come to do the same thing each and every week and have it confirm everything we already think." And it's not just us – people voluntarily come to their religious communities, all around the world, to have their certainties challenged, to hear things that are radically different from what everything else in society is telling them. Things that, if they take root in their lives, will cause them no end of trouble and start them on journeys whose end they cannot imagine. The writer Annie Dillard once said "It is madness to wear ladies' hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets" and I think this is what she was talking about. I wonder if Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela, or Gandhi, or Mother Teresa had any idea what they were in for the first time they sat down and listened to our family stories?

Thinking about these people, the famous ones and all the others, makes me wonder if I had my question backwards. Maybe we shouldn't be asking whether these people are worthy of being in our family, but whether we're doing everything we can to be worthy members of theirs. I hope that we are constantly rededicating ourselves to our shared values so that when people of other faiths see us in action, or visit us in worship, or hear us talk among ourselves, they not only say "Oh, these people are family", but also "Oh, they're from the good side of the family!"

May that truly be so.