

## **The Sources of Our Faith 1: Direct Experience**

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Perhaps some of you have had this experience. You are talking to a friend or neighbor about something going on at the Society. Your enthusiasm and passion are obvious, and they say to you “Tell me more. I didn’t know a religion could be like that. I’ve never heard of Unitarian Universalism.” Or they say, “It sounds great. I took that test on Beliefnet and it said I was UU. I’ve thought about giving it a try, but I can’t really understand it.” So you start to tell them and after a few moments you falter. It’s that blank stare or the look of utter confusion on your friend’s face. “It’s really hard to explain,” you say apologetically.

Perhaps even more of you have had this experience. You are chatting at social hour with somebody new; in fact this is their first time at a Unitarian Universalist worship service. They are bubbling with enthusiasm and they say, “This is just great. I wish I had come here 20 years ago. Has this congregation been here long?”

Why do we have so much trouble talking about our faith? Why is it such a challenge to get our good news out to the world? Part of the problem is our reticence, our fear of imposing or even – gulp – evangelizing. But even for those of us willing to share our good news, there is the further challenge that Unitarian Universalism is hard to explain. We just don’t fit into traditional religious categories.

In seminary I studied systematic theology, a discipline based on the assumption that all religions can be understood by looking at a set of core questions. What do you believe? How do you know what is right? Who has the authority to make decisions on doctrinal matters? It seems that many people are systematic theologians, wanting to pigeon-hole all religions based on that classification system. Unfortunately, Unitarian Universalism is darn hard to pigeon-hole that way. Core beliefs? For most major religions, these are found in creedal statements. “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet.” “I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth . . .”

So we courageously explain to our friend or neighbor that we are a non-creedal faith; the beliefs of the people in our pews cover a rich and varied theological spectrum. “Huh?” our earnest questioner might reply. Then there is the question of source of authority for one’s faith. For many it is a book – the Torah, the Koran, the Gospels. For many it is a leader deemed worthy of following either because they are blessed with charisma, or ordained or otherwise called out as being trustworthy and powerful. Our alternative to these concise and easy to identify sources of authority is to offer a rich and varied spectrum – I think of the sources of our faith as a set of wells from which we draw religious truth in varying degrees. Together we have agreed to name six sources for our faith; six wells from which we draw on a daily basis a rich treasure-trove of resources for our religious journeys.

This is the first in a series of sermons about the sources of our faith as they are expressed in the Statement of Principles and Purposes which is part of the by-laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. This Statement represents the best work of faithful democracy: years of study and conversation and focus groups and editing leading up to a presentation to the delegates sent by our congregations to the 1984 General Assembly. A preliminary vote, another year of study and commentary, and then a final vote in 1985. Twenty five years ago you – or your chosen representatives, agreed that this Statement was a best attempt at capturing the particularity and the diversity of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. And lest you remain suspicious of anything that even appears to be ‘carved in stone.’ I will point out to you that this Statement, as it appears in the front piece of your hymnals, only has five sources. The sixth was added after the hymnal was printed.

This Statement of Principles and Purposes is not a creed. The language is covenantal; that is, no assent is required to call you a Unitarian Universalist. The language is also communal; that is, we use these Seven Principles and Six Sources to constitute our communities of faith. They are an expression of our historical commitment to freedom of thought and to diversity of belief. To my mind the particular genius of the Sources portion of the Statement is that we claim our own life experience as the primary source of authority for our faith. How do you know it is true? Because I’ve lived it.

“The living tradition we share draws from many sources. (The first is) Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” Let’s delve into this phrase by phrase.

Direct experience. The naming of direct experience as a legitimate source of authority in religion is of singular importance. This is the legacy of our forebears in the Radical Reformation. I talked about them several weeks ago on Association Sunday – those Radical Reformers who evolved in today’s Baptists and Unitarian Universalists were adamant that religion is something that must be freely chosen by every individual. They practiced adult baptism – at their peril you may recall. The practitioners of adult baptism during the Reformation were put to death as heretics. And yet the principle of freely and personally chosen religion survived the Inquisition and came to fruition in our free faith, among others. It more fully flowered in the minds and hearts of the American Transcendentalists, most of whom were Unitarians. People like Emerson, Channing, Fuller, and the vast array of literary lights of the Transcendentalist movement developed this idea of the possibility, or, for them, the obligation, to seek out encounters with the spiritual and mysterious in nature, in conversation with colleagues, and in prayer. What did they mean by spiritual? My short answer is, ‘that which is not me.’ “Grow your own soul!” they urge us, their words still living and breathing life into our religious movement today. So direct experience is not only the genius and luxury of our free faith, it is a privilege and obligation that we inherited from people who made it their life work.

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder. This is not a rejection of the rational; after all, if one of the principles of our faith is freedom to choose religious beliefs, another is the embrace of human reason in the religious quest. What this statement reminds us is that balance is essential in all human endeavors, including the religious and spiritual. Yes, we celebrate the rational mind and all that it brings to our lives. But we also acknowledge that there is more to human experience than just thinking – there is feeling, intuition, spirit. This too is the legacy of the Transcendentalists who believed that the application of their considerable brain power would bring them much more than a compendium of verifiable data; the mind engaged in the transcendental quest

would also bring them to a deeper understanding of the human soul and an awareness that we live in a world that is made up of both me and that which is not me.

The scientific method seeks to probe the mysteries of the universe in order to find the reliable patterns on which it operates. The transcendentalist method seeks to probe the mysteries of the universe in order to find the mystery that lies beneath every identifiable pattern. Sometimes that looks an awful lot like chaos – and it reminds us that there is something greater than us – that transcendent thing, whatever it may be. To be aware of the reality that there is something other than us is to be touched with awe and humility. In January, I will begin a monthly adult education series on spiritual practices for Unitarian Universalism. It will begin with a labyrinth walk; our next door neighbors at Christ Church are loaning us their canvas labyrinth for an evening. We will then consider the practice of Sabbath – intentional rest and change of pace to make room for enlightenment. The 3<sup>rd</sup> session will be about finding one's personal spiritual path from among the eclectic possibilities that Unitarian Universalism offers. A spiritual practice is nothing more than a way to pay attention to one's own life experience; a way to make room in your mind and heart for the kind of experience that our first source references.

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures. So, there is in this phrase the germ of an idea that our own particular way of experiencing life – the Western, left-brained, linear way – is not the only way. All cultures, we are reminded, share this human experience of encountering the transcendent, of being surprised by the complexity of life on earth. All cultures share the experience of mystery and awe, of yearning to be in communion with the transcendent. Expressed differently, but still part of a common human experience. How badly we need that reminder at this time in our history, when we are forced by events beyond our control to understand other cultures, other religions, other ways of experiencing the world. The recognition of that need led to another adult education offering this year: several opportunities to experience - rather than read about or be lectured to or talk about – other world religions. Next month you will have the opportunity to visit the Hindu Temple in Mahwah. November 13<sup>th</sup> a group from the Society will take a guided tour, hear a talk about Hinduism, and experience worship and fellowship with members of that religious

community. Later in the year, other faiths may welcome us as well; yet another opportunity to grow your soul in a different way.

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces that create and uphold life. Now we arrive at the place that beckons us to our own growing edges. What we experience – with our own eyes, ears, fingers, minds, and hearts – in order for it to be a truly religious experience it must move us! If we are not moved by what we see and hear and feel, then we are in danger of being exactly what our foes have accused us of being over the years: navel-gazing elitists who are more interested in an academic debate than a life deeply lived. The difficult truth is that the genius of our faith – the centrality of personal experience – is also what makes it so hard. Why? Because it means that for a true Unitarian Universalist religion is not a spectator sport! You can't come here and be a consumer; get your weekly fix of liberal religion lite, then head home unchanged. It is up to you, every one of you, to determine the course of your faith journey. You must move!

Let's imagine together what it would mean to allow ourselves to be moved towards a renewal of the spirit and towards those forces that create and uphold life. First of all, before you can be moved you have to be aware. You must leave time in your daily lives to listen, to look, to feel, to respond. Second, you must be willing to be changed, transformed, catapulted into action, stunned by unexpected beauty, rendered speechless by the enormity of unexpected pain. In short, you have to be present to life in all its glory and agony.

But the ultimate test of your ability and willingness to seek wisdom from this first source, your own experience of transcendent mystery and wonder, will be in the way you live it out in your lives. It is up to you. And since it is up to you, I'm going to let you finish this sermon for yourselves. I invite you now to contemplate in silence what it would mean for you to be moved to a renewal of the spirit. How would your life change in the days ahead if you were to allow yourself to encounter mystery, to feel awe, to heed the call to work in concert with the forces that create and uphold life?

(Pause)

You've each written your own personal close to a sermon about the centrality of personal experience. The next time you are called upon to share your faith with somebody else, remember the sermon you wrote for yourself this morning. Remember that you are the ultimate source of authority for your faith.

We don't have an authoritative book, a creed, or a priestly class to give credence to our religious lives. All we have is ourselves and each other, and those who chose this path before us. So we gather our experiences together, and we create our religion. We do this trusting that the religion we thus create will move us; move us to create compassionate and loving communities, move us to speak out for those who need our voices; move us to act on behalf of those who need our hands to feed and clothe and minister to them. As we create our religion we make it clear to a hurting world that there are forces at work that create and uphold life; those forces are desperately seeking to work through us and for us. And when that happens, then for brief moments at least, all will stand in awe.