

Open to change – the Unitarian way?

from the Worthship service at Glasgow Unitarian Church 7 September 2014

Today we shall mainly be exploring openness to change and the importance of this to Unitarians past and present.

For those new to us, it is I think very important for you to realise that – very **unusually** for a religious community - you are entirely free to agree or disagree with anything that is said in this service, which I bring to you in the Unitarian tradition of worthship – the finding, valuing and sharing of that which may be found to be of worth and meaning from within the **entirety** of human experience.

It is always my hope that you may be able to take away and value – maybe even share with others - something you find in this service to be of worth and meaning to **you**.

It is very appropriate that I am contrasting the inclusive Unitarian approach to spirituality and religion with the inherently divisive approach of traditional “shared faith” religion just two days before the anniversary of “9/11” – the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York which is rightly regarded as the work of religious fundamentalists.

Unitarians are generally opposed to fundamentalism and “radicalism” of all kinds. As one part of the wider family of liberal religionists, we have found ways of engaging with the spiritual/religious which lie at or near the opposite end of the spectrum from religious fundamentalism.

The Unitarian way of building and holding personal faith

The search for that which is of worth and meaning

All of us have been conditioned - over millennia - to believe that all religions and faith communities **must** be centred on, and their individual members empowered by, the **holding** of a shared faith both in the certainty of a higher power or powers and in the certain truth of their community’s particular **one** of the various hypotheses out there – past and present - as to the precise nature of these powers and of our relationship with them, as laid down in their various creeds and doctrines.

The unhelpful distinction is made between “persons of faith” and “persons of none”, falsely categorising individuals who do **not** subscribe to a “shared faith” community of that type as “persons of no faith”.

It is here that I, and most Unitarians I know, say “Wait a minute!”

Surely we are **all** human, surely we **all** ask ourselves spiritual questions such as “why are we here?”? Surely we **all** adopt a worldview which includes a view of what it is to be human? Surely we **all** hold a view about the nature of our connectedness with each other, with the planet, and with the cosmos, whether this includes the unseen forces which so many of us **want** to exist or whether it does not?

I most certainly hold such a worldview, and I am sure that everyone here today does as well. These worldviews amount to the holding of **personal faith**. We do **not** become “persons of no faith” just because we – along with a growing number of others - are unwilling to sign up to the absolute truth of only **one** way of viewing the wonderful thing which is the cosmos and life within it.

Unitarian communities have been at the forefront of a **different**, and much more inclusive, way of channelling response to our spirituality for the last three hundred years (though perhaps they would not have put it in quite those terms). They did, however, even back then, claim to practice **creedless religion**.

Now starting to use terms such as “Communities of inclusive spirituality” to describe ourselves, we seek to incorporate many of the beneficial practices of Christian and other “shared faith” communities whilst avoiding the divisiveness of creed and dogma.

We do not throw the baby out with the bathwater, because we keep the bathwater of religious and spiritual practice and of beloved community. Rather, we simply avoid insisting that the bathwater contain required adherence to one particular religious creed or dogma.

I am proud to be a member of such a community, but am all too well aware of the difficulties in getting across to those outside of the Unitarian community exactly what it is we are all about.

It is in the hope of providing a meaningful glimpse of what we offer to any new person who may be attending that in my services I usually include reference to the Unitarian tradition of “worthship” – the finding, valuing and sharing of that which may be found to be of worth and meaning from within the entirety of human experience – a key aspect of Unitarian openness to change.

You might like to note that the word “worship” is not just my invention, and neither is the definition I give it.

Both came from personal discussion with Rev, Dr. Ann Peart, Unitarian Minister, former President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and who was for many years in charge of Ministerial training at Unitarian College, Manchester.

In dealing with my difficulties regarding what exactly it is that Unitarians worship, she herself explained that the term “worship” is actually a shortened form of the word “worship”, a word with the rather wider meaning now presented regularly by myself.

We Unitarians are free to incorporate elements into our personal faith from **all** that we encounter, which is a quite remarkable openness to change when compared with traditional “shared faith” religion..

This non-dogmatic holding of personal faith, belief open to change but which we allow to drive us, lies at the **heart of the Unitarian way of engaging with our spirituality and achieving spiritual growth.**

Engaging with science

The way we deal with science is a bit like the way we deal with worth. We hold elements from both within our personal faith and allow them to drive us, but we hold our faith open to change in the face of new experience (including learning).

We are more open to change than traditional “shared faith” groups because the way in which we build and hold our personal faith frees us from the need to judge everything we encounter against the fixed certainties of one particular “shared faith”s creed and dogma, making us less likely to reject what we encounter.

We do not experience the difficulties of Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Roman Catholic priest, botanist, earth-focussed spirituality and believer in the sciences of geology and evolution) and Bishop John Shelby Spong (Anglican Bishop, Progressive Christian and believer in the science of evolution) as they sought to resolve very apparent differences between some parts of Christian creed and dogma and some parts of hypotheses based on evidential science.

Not for us, either, the divisiveness and arrogance of the dogmatic views on show when Richard Dawkins (fundamentalist atheist) met Ted Haggard (fundamentalist Christian and(then) senior pastor of a large megachurch in America's bible belt). There ensued an entertaining and very illuminating exchange in which each belittled the other's starting point and claimed (quite truthfully in my view) that the other was being arrogant.

I would dearly love to bring this interview to you, but it is copyright of Channel 4, and their copyright currently prevents it being legally shown here.

We Unitarians generally view science's willingness to change hypotheses on the basis of new evidence and knowledge as a strength, and not as a weakness (like Mr Dawkins, and unlike Mr Haggard).

We Unitarians generally view fundamentalist religion's refusal to change in spite of new evidence and knowledge as a weakness, and not as a strength (like Mr Dawkins and unlike Mr Haggard).

We Unitarians generally view fundamentalist rationalist dismissal of the spiritual side of humankind as a weakness, and not as a strength (like Mr Haggard and unlike Mr Dawkins).

Engaging with personal experience, knowledge, and faith

On one level, the way we deal with knowledge and personal experience is very similar to the way we deal with science and worth.

On another level, however, we are pretty unique amongst faith communities and religions. We **question** the practice of representing belief as certain knowledge, particularly that sort of highly personal, powerful, yet ultimately unverifiable belief which is the result of intuition, mystic encounter, revelation, or acceptance of dogma.

A friend helpfully coined the term "strong agnosticism" for this approach, an approach taken by every Unitarian I know!

Far from being an inability to make up our own minds, this type of agnosticism is an understanding that there are some things which we can believe in (e.g. the existence, or absence, of a supernatural interventionist God) **and** be driven by whilst understanding not only that we can never know such things with certainty but also that no one else can either.

In dealing with such matters, we "know that we believe" rather than "believe that we know", and therefore hold such beliefs within a non-dogmatic personal faith.

Openness to practical change –a new Unitarian way?

I hope that I have shown up some of the key ways in which the Unitarian approach to the “good” or “God-like” part of “being human” – that very real part which I am happy to term human spirituality - is more **open to change** and more **inclusive** than the approach of traditional “shared faith” religion can **ever** be.

I am proud to belong to a community in which we hold differing beliefs and personal faiths which drive us but in which we **share** an inclusive approach to personal faith and to spiritual growth.

I need however to move on to another kind of openness which I think we may need to show - openness to changing how we “do” Unitarian.

I start – and in fact end - with two documents, both from 2014 and both from **outside** UK Unitarianism.

The first is the Epistle from the Quakers’ yearly meeting. ,which I hope will warm your heart as much as it has mine.

There is great stuff in the Quaker newsletter (Reading 1) about the relationship between engaging with personal spirituality, engaging with collective spirituality within beloved community, and engaging with the real world.

I find some comfort in the knowledge that we Unitarians are **not** alone in struggling to find the appropriate balance.

I now bring you directly a large part of the UUA Newsletter.

It is very thought-provoking indeed, and there are some parts of it which you may find a little hard to swallow, but I have to say that I am broadly in agreement with the content.

from the article "into the beyond" by Teresa Cooley in UU World Summer 2014

“Changing how we do church is scary, but not changing means decline and a lost opportunity.

Most religious denominations are losing members, many rapidly—mainline Protestants most of all. Unitarian Universalist congregations seemed for a while to have bucked these trends, but our U.S. membership has slipped each year since 2008. And almost all denominations are losing young people. One-third of adults under 30—members of the rising “millennial” generation—claim no religious affiliation, and only two out of ten millennials believe church-going is important.

These statistics are scary. But I find another statistic even scarier: Seven years ago 10 percent of adults of all ages in the United States gave their religious affiliation as “None.” That number is now closer to 20 percent. Americans are losing faith in their religious institutions and in religious institutions across the board, and that trend is not in our favor. Or is it?

In 2012, UUA President Peter Morales wrote a vision paper - called “congregations and beyond” - about how we need to pay attention to these trends.

“Our core values,” he wrote, “appeal to far more people than are attracted to (or likely to be attracted to) our congregations. We have always treated this as a problem to be solved by devising ways to get people to become members of our congregations. But the reality of today’s world is that not everyone who shares our core values will want to become part of a traditional congregation.

The fact that so many share our values is an enormous opportunity, not a problem.

The future relevance of our faith may well depend on whether we can create a religious movement beyond, as well as within, the parish.”

Our denomination cannot flourish if we only offer one way of being in religious community. If our congregations only focus on serving the needs of their present membership, we become rapidly more insular and irrelevant to the larger community.

According to national surveys, more than 650,000 people identify with Unitarian Universalism, and yet only approximately 180,000 are members of congregations. People who are philosophically in tune with our values can sometimes feel alienated by our predominant culture.

Congregations can and should respond to these realities with vitality and agility, but congregations alone are not enough. We have long used the language of seeing Unitarian Universalism as a “movement.” Let’s become one.

President Morales often says my job as the Unitarian Universalist Association’s program and strategy officer is to scare him.

Actually, my job is to scare all of us, at least a little bit, because if we don’t pay attention to these trends, we could end up like those near-empty or abandoned churches.

People who are disenchanted with church today say they want more acceptance of difference. They want religion to make peace with science. They don’t want morality equated with sex, and they want churches to deal swiftly and openly with leaders who abuse their power. They still want spiritual experiences. They want to serve others, stand up for social justice, and live lives that matter in the world. They want joyous, loving community with other people.

But they’re fed up with institutions.

That sounds like the reasons a lot of us are Unitarian Universalists, doesn’t it? The values we’ve always promoted match very closely with those of millennials and with those of unchurched liberals of all ages. You’d think at least some of them should be flocking to us.

Yet despite our anti-institutional self-image, we still act like an institution in many ways. The primary invitation we extend to people who are drawn to our message and our work is to join a congregation and support a church building and staff, with all the financial and time commitments that requires.

People whose lives are more transitory and whose lifestyles don’t match our congregations’ traditional structures will not accept that invitation.”

Thoughts on the UU “into the beyond” article

I feel that this article focuses us on reality, and on the need to find the right balance between extra-congregational activity, congregational activity which meets the spiritual needs of existing members, and congregational activity which meets the needs of a **wider** range of potential attenders.

This will not be easy. It is however possible and necessary. It may be **critical to** our survival.

I feel that we must try to do this, not just for ourselves but for all those out there who don't yet know or understand what we can offer them.

Reading 1

from the Quaker Yearly Meeting 2-9 August 2014

We send our loving greetings from Yearly Meeting Gathering. Over 2,000 of us have come together as a community of all ages, “to see one another’s faces and open our hearts one to another”.

Our theme of ‘Commitment and Belonging’ was the culmination of a three-year process of exploring what it means to be a Quaker today. It led us to look inwards at the meaning of membership and outwards to our service in the world.

Coming into membership of the Religious Society of Friends is not simply arrival at a comfortable place; it is also a point of departure: a commitment to the Quaker community and to a life-long process of learning, together with others. What matters most in this community is the quality of our relationships.

When we are faithful to our discipline and trust in the Spirit, we may be led in unexpected ways.

In his Swarthmore Lecture Ben Pink Dandelion urged us to be open to the possibility of transformation – to “seeing and feeling the world in a new way.”

He reminded us that our core insights, of encounter with the divine, discernment, worship and testimony, are all inherently collective. We should rekindle a strong sense of our Quaker identity, our clarity about who we are, and we should reclaim the spiritual.

Our ‘love in action’ is not an alternative to the spiritual life; we need to be both Martha and Mary.

The more we listen carefully to one another the closer we come to an intimate connection with the greater whole. We are challenged to become beacons for change in the world and to have the courage to ‘hope beyond imagination’.

Appendix 1

Prayer

Now I bring you a version of a very well-known Christian prayer, one attributed to the American theologian and writer Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) and directly linked with Alcoholics Anonymous, the Christian group who reach out to all alcoholics with their 12-step programme.

This version **does not depend upon** belief in the interventionist God defined in Christian creed and dogma, and is what **I** envisage when engaging with the original version.

The Serenity prayer – as I hear it

I seek the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
the Courage to change the things I can;
And the Wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking this world as it is, not as I would have it.

Trusting that all things can be made better as **I** engage better with the **good** in me, and that I may become happy.