

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
Date August 19, 2007

Nuns and Heretics: Spirituality for Everyone
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A decade or so ago, at another Unitarian Universalist congregation, far away from here, a member went to the minister and asked her – this is not me, I hasten to add – to do a sermon on “dinosaurs” – this was his term for people like himself who stood firmly in the intellectual humanist tradition, with no interest in all this “spirituality” stuff. The minister said she was intrigued by the concept, but she couldn’t call one group by such a name unless she had an equally amusing and affectionate, and possibly sharply edged metaphor for the other end of the spectrum. After some thought and discussion, they came up with a term, and so was born the sermon on “Dinosaurs and Butterflies.”

At about the same time, at this same church, a Sunday morning discussion group decided to discuss spirituality. But first they felt they needed to define it. They spent the better part of a year trying to come to an agreement. They did not succeed. Eventually, they concluded that, since they couldn’t define it, spirituality must not exist. And so hard-headed dinosaurs and soft-hearted butterflies lumbered and flitted on their merry ways without ever getting to the actual spirituality discussion.

This story amused me when I first heard it, but it has lingered as a disturbance in my mind ever since. What bothers me is the implicit assumption that spirituality and intellectual integrity are somehow in opposition to one another. Two ways of approaching a single reality got themselves labeled as opposing groups. I believe that the universe is a whole, that science and religion, rationality and spirituality, must ultimately work together. They ask different questions, and they emphasize different methods. Their “products” are as different as physics experiments and liturgical dance.

Last week on Jones TV Dave and I were mesmerized by a computer generated video set to the “Neptune” segment of Gustav Holst’s *The Planets*. That was art, perhaps it was spirituality. It increased my interest in Neptune and in the music, but except for the initial photograph, it was not meant to be a scientific illustration. Art is good, spirituality is good, science is good. They are different, but ultimately, however, the great pile of models and equations and metaphors and

myths and practices and dreams and theories must all be consistent with the single reality in which we live.

Meanwhile, spirituality remains an elusive concept. It seems to include a lot of patent nonsense as well as deep inarticulable yearnings towards something of real substance. We hear a lot about spirituality these days, from all sorts of people - Christian rightists, New Age butterflies, even Unitarian Universalist dinosaurs. Bookstores are filled with tomes on spiritual growth. TV shows purport to encourage spirituality. We now see a new strain of spirituality that calls for a particularly expensive and luxurious form of "simple living." – I have a whole catalog of beautiful hangings and temple bells and special clothes for meditation: you could spend a fortune. What does it all mean? Do you long for something, something you can't quite define, but you will know it when you experience it? The trouble is, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between fluffy nonsense and what might be a spirituality worth pursuing. And one person's fluff might be another person's depth. And yet our third Unitarian Universalist principle calls for **"Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth."** It's a challenge.

And then came a time when spiritual growth came to the foreground in my life. I found myself with a semester's unexpected sabbatical, and wanted to make good use of it. I needed a community in which to process recent experiences, to learn the lessons and understand how they fit into my sense of the divine. I also wanted to reframe my sense of ministry through a filter of caring for the people of the congregation, tending primarily to their personal and spiritual needs, and letting institutional development flow from that care. That's when I saw the ad for an open house at Loyola College, offering a program in spiritual and pastoral care, and only fifteen minutes from my home. You could say that God provided just what I needed when I needed it, if you were given to that sort of language and reasoning. Or you could say with the Buddhists, that when the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear. Maybe it was all a coincidence. Or maybe I was just paying attention.

Loyola *was* just what I needed. The sense of community was lovely. I could enjoy the intellectual wrestling with my professors and the pleasure of coming to know my classmates without having to take the leadership role of being "the minister." I loved the interfaith atmosphere at Loyola. I had attended a Methodist seminary, so I was accustomed to translating language that was sometimes too Christian and too Trinitarian for my Unitarian sensibilities. And I had learned to deal with comments like "We are very diverse here, but at least

we're all Christians." Some few of us were, in fact, *not* Christians. But at Loyola, although the overwhelming majority of the faculty and student body are Christian, and most of them Catholic -- and many of them priests and nuns -- I have always felt that my very different viewpoint was respected. I fit in easily and made good friends, acting as teacher and learner and ambassador all at once.

One day five of us went out to lunch at the local Subway shop. Sister Carmen and Sister Paula and Sister Caroline, who are at three very different stages of their careers, in three very different religious communities, went ahead and had settled into the booth with their sandwiches. Mary and I followed. Mary and I were the class heretics.

That word always startles my Christian classmates a little, since they have been brought up to think of the heretics as the bad guys. But heretics are literally those who "choose" -- from the Greek word "herein"-- we choose what to believe, rather than just accept what we are given. And you and I know that heretics were just good people on the wrong end of several important religious decisions. Our unitarian -- small u -- ancestors lost the vote at Nicea in 325 CE which declared that the Trinity is the proper understanding of God.

(As a footnote to history, you might be interested to know that our man in that discussion was Bishop Arius, who lost out to Athanasius, the Trinitarian bishop. Arius' assistant at the council was drawn into a fistfight with one of Athanasius' followers, and was decked by him. Who was that fierce follower of the Trinitarian Athanasius? None other than Nicholas, later of a Saint Nicholas of North Pole fame. They don't usually tell the kiddies about this incident.)

And universalism -- small u -- was declared to be heresy some two centuries later when the idea that all are saved lost out to a more exclusive interpretation of salvation. It would take until the mid 20th century before small u universalism gained a foothold in mainstream Christianity again, just in time to undermine the franchise of the Universalist Church of America. Which is a long way of saying why I am pleased to call myself a heretic among my more orthodox friends. Mary had left Catholicism years ago for a more eclectic religious path. So lunch that day was three nuns and two heretics.

As Mary and I scootched into the booth to join the others, I unwrapped my sandwich and asked whether this food had yet been blessed. I really felt grateful that my life had brought me to that moment. And I make a practice of pausing before every meal to acknowledge my gratitude, and remember those who are

suffering. The nuns glanced at one another. None of them had thought to say grace in this secular setting. It was the heretic who needed to say grace. So they asked me to express our collective gratitude at having enough to eat, and congenial company with which to eat it. Which I was pleased to do. The real punch line came in the next class hour, when our Jesuit professor was describing styles of ministry -- pastoral, social justice etc. The last one he listed was "liturgical." He said, with a slightly disparaging tone of voice, that "these are the people who are concerned to get the ceremonies just right. Obsessive compulsive types. Like people who can't have lunch without saying grace." A wave of suppressed laughter swept across the room. During the break I had to explain that we were laughing, not at him, but at *me*. An explanatory footnote came a month or so later when I told the story to a friend who is a parish priest. He chuckled and told me that it is common wisdom among Catholic priests that Jesuits are no good at liturgy. They have a saying, when something goes wrong in the service, that "It's like three Jesuits in Holy Week." I was not only enlightened and amused by his remark, but comforted. It seems that even those who are experts at liturgy have the occasional mishap, not just Unitarian Universalist ministers fumbling with electronic candle lighters or dripping hot wax on their fingers. That's one reason I use stones and not candles for Joys and Sorrows. I'm always afraid I'll burn myself and say a bad word.

The nuns and heretics lunch was perhaps a slight moment, but it came to be emblematic of spirituality for me. Breaking bread together is always an act of connection. Companion, after all, means "with bread." Praying together -- even my extremely simple "non-liturgical" expression of gratitude, is a way of connecting. We heard in the reading that Rahner speaks of spirituality as **connecting us in knowledge, freedom and love**. That connection happened that day. Finding our common ground across the abyss of differences in doctrine and liturgy and hierarchy was a heady moment of freedom. As I said grace with and for the others I understood and felt my deep connection to them, across all barriers of birth and religion and ethnicity and lifestyle. We had been brought together serendipitously, as each of us made her own way in freedom and struggle to that moment in the sub shop. We had come to deepen our knowledge of pastoral and spiritual care. But beyond classroom learning, each of us had something special to offer and to accept from the others. Learning from each other's religious experiences opened our minds and hearts to new knowledge. Our lives had been widely different, and yet overlapping. Three of us had been married, two had adult children, two had been nuns from a young age. One had interrupted her vocation to marry and have children. We had been teachers and students and women of business and leaders in our communities. All of us had had multiple

career transitions. In coming to know one another, we learned how each was precious, and we shared a deep affection for the others. Caring for one another in that simple, everyday moment, was an act of love. Freedom knowledge and love. We had all the components.

The five of us might have found it difficult to agree on a common definition of spirituality. It is a slippery word after all, and we spoke very different religious languages. But although spirituality is elusive, I believe it is real. The literal meaning is "breath" -- spiritus in Latin, pneuma in Greek or ruach in Hebrew. In these languages, the words that mean breath also mean spirit, that invisible, mysterious force of life which pulses within us, and which connects us to the rest of the world. Here is where the ordinary physical world comes together with the yearnings for something more, something beyond our day to day perceptions. A few years ago a simple definition of spirituality was current among Unitarian Universalist ministers -- **spirituality is that which connects me to something bigger than I am.** I don't know the exact measure or description of that something bigger. Unitarian Universalist minister Susan Manker-Seale writes of **mystery**, and knows that different people describe it in different ways:

Deep in our innermost core we yearn to be connected with the mystery we call god, or nature, or the spirit. We yearn for that sense of oneness with each other and all creation, to know our place and our value. And, often, we yearn for someone to show us how to get there, to direct us to the right path that will lead us on the way to a deeper spirituality.
in *Everyday Spiritual Practice* by Scott Alexander, Ed.

Roman Catholic theologian, Michael Downey, writes of the same phenomenon as **depth reached through awareness and integrity:**

First and most importantly, there is an awareness that there are levels of reality not immediately apparent; there is more than meets the eye. Second, there is a quest for personal integration in the face of forces of fragmentation and depersonalization. . . . The term "spirituality" here is used to describe the depth dimension of all human experience.

Understanding Christian Spirituality by Michael Downey, p. 14.

All of these definitions, and others offered by Downey, acknowledge that "something more," but they do not imply anything spooky or other worldly or contrary to the real physical universe -- and especially they do not imply some secret esoteric knowledge or bizarre practice which some charlatan is going to charge you a lot of money to impose upon you. Spirituality is about that something more, but it is also about yourself, about being who you are and connecting to the world, the real world as well as that dimension of the world we do not quite understand. And so both Downey and Mankar-Seale include in spirituality an understanding of self, a personal integration, and a knowing of our place and time.

How do we approach that deeper dimension of self and world? How do we practice spirituality? There are, of course, many ways. Susan Mankar-Seale goes on to say:

The problem is, finding the right path is like standing in front of a candy counter and trying to decide which piece is the right piece, the best piece. You know that it all depends on your tastes, and you need to know what you like in order to choose the best piece for you. That means that you have to have tried at least some of them to know which ones you like. Even then, it's important to acknowledge that others may find different pieces more to their liking.

(p. 11)

That states the problem, but it's not very helpful. But here's a starting place. Spirituality is about looking inward *and* looking outward. It is about self, and about mystery. It is about yearning, and being, and caring. It is about both openness and authenticity. It requires a rhythm of some regularity, some discipline. It must be a significant part of your life.

The Latin American liberation theologians practice a three part cycle: **action, reflection, and worship**. You can start anywhere this cycle. You do something in the world, some act of compassion or justice making, something to bless the world to make it a better place. Then you reflect upon what you have done. Have you done it well, with good motivation, and in a way which respects the inherent worth and dignity of the others involved, both your co-workers and your opponents? Have you done it with love? What could be improved, to make your action more effective and more compassionate? And then you return to the

well of spiritual strength which makes it possible to act with courage and compassion. You participate in the study or worship which nourishes your spiritual self, and prepares you to act in the world again. You do these things alone, and with others. Each person must find the right balance of individual and group spirituality. And even when you appear to be alone, you are connected in history and practice, as a learner and a guide. Spirituality is not cutting yourself off from the world, but moving in a rhythm of action and rest, approach and withdrawal, to enhance our awareness of and appreciation of the world and ourselves.

I would describe spiritual practice in two elements: **pay attention and take risks.** Spirituality begins with attending to both yourself and the rest of the real world, appreciating it and caring for it. Know thyself, said Socrates. And know the world. And then reach out. All action – painting a picture or raising your voice against injustice, praying for earthquake survivors (or writing a check for them), preparing supper for your family or visiting a sick friend – all action requires generosity and risk taking, going beyond your immediate self. And with the knowledge you gain about yourself and the world, you are further prepared to pay attention, and again to act.

The particular practice you choose is up to you. Our principle calls for encouragement to spiritual growth, not coercion. As Unitarian Universalists we are not bound to a particular spiritual tradition, a freedom which has both benefits and costs. I recommend Scott Alexander's *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* as a source book. Chapters written by different people offer practices as varied as sitting Zen or cooking, prayer or quilting, mindfulness or parenting, music or gardening. You may only need to reframe your thinking about what you are already doing. Or you may need to be just a little more intentional about doing it, so that it is a regular part of your life. Or you can try something new, and see how it fits. Practice does not mean dreary plowing through exercises, but protecting some time for what is important and precious to you, temporarily fending off the demands of others because you know that your spiritual practice will ultimately make your love and your talents more accessible to them.

Spirituality is for everyone. For dinosaurs and butterflies. For nuns and heretics. For you and me. May we connect with ourselves and each other and the source of mystery in the universe. May we attend to the precious reality of the world, and reach out to bless that reality. May we find a rhythm of action, reflection and nurture. May we encourage one another to spiritual growth. Amen, Shalom, and

Blessed Be.