



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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**Reading the Same Stories Differently:  
Or, Since We Have a Choice, Why Not Choose Love?**

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Prior to becoming your minister in 2012, I served as a pastor in Progressive Christian congregations for nine years. Since I am now starting my tenth year here, it occurred to me recently that I have now been a Unitarian Universalist minister slightly longer than I was a Christian pastor.

That means *my turn toward the dark side is now complete!* Seriously, I am grateful for both the years I served as a Christian pastor and for the years I have served—and plan to continue to serve—as a UU minister. There’s a lot to say about all of that, but since this is a sermon there may be an interesting takeaway from juxtaposing the nine years I spent preaching in Christian contexts with the nine years I’ve now spent preaching in a UU context.

If I look at the bookshelves in my office here at UUCF, they have changed over the past nine years in particular ways. To boil those changes down to one word, **as a UU I’m a much *wider* reader.** The shelf space in my office that is now allotted to science, history, politics, dismantling racism, the religions of the world in general and Buddhism and meditation in particular has expanded dramatically. And I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to support the broad expansive explorations we do here at UUCF. It’s truly exciting that almost anything is fair game in our big tent of Unitarian Universalism, as long as it contributes to living well and ethically in our globalized, pluralistic, postmodern world.

And as grateful as I am to be able to go *wide* here at UUCF, looking back, I am also grateful for the opportunities I had as a Progressive Christian pastor to be a **deep reader**: to mine and plumb the details, nuances, and depths of a book and a tradition. For instance, I once spent six months preaching—chapter-by-chapter—through the Gospel of Matthew, whereas here we tend to shift our focus quite dramatically from week to week.

I should hasten to add that many of you are going deep—either on your own or as part of our various spirituality groups here at UUCF—into Buddhism or Paganism or Judaism, Christianity, Islam and more. But our main Sunday Services cover a vast breadth over the course of a year.

So on this tipping-point occasion—as my tenure as a UU minister begins to overtake my time as a Christian pastor—I want to reach back and share with you one of the most important lessons I learned from going deep into the Christian tradition that is rarely as present for us as UUs. That lesson is **how to wrestle deep meaning from almost any text**.

As UUs we have the freedom to basically toss a passage or even a text out the window if we feel like it. And don't get me wrong; it can be tremendously liberating to really get free from a text that is oppressive for any number of reasons—for example, sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, etc. It is wonderful to be able to give yourself permission to be honest if a text just doesn't feel relevant to you anymore in light of science or personal experience.

At the same time, I learned a tremendous amount from being regularly tasked with finding meaning from some of the most difficult texts that the Bible has to offer, and I would like to share with you some of the tools of textual interpretation that I learned along the way. And far beyond just the Bible, there are useful applications for these approaches for how we interpret any text—from sacred scripture to any other books, films, works of art, the Constitution, and more.

Do you know the saying that, **“If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail?”** Well, I sometimes get the feeling that too many religious folks were handed only one, pretty blunt object for interpreting their tradition's sacred scriptures.

But here's the good news: there's a wide array of compelling interpretative options out there. And when reflecting on what I learned about interpreting texts in seminary and in my years as a Christian pastor, one image that comes to mind is a hermeneutical Swiss Army knife. Hermeneutics—named after Hermes, the messenger of the gods—is the theory and methodology of in-depth interpretation.

**Hermeneutics offers the reader a big interpretative toolbox containing a variety of instruments useful for different occasions.** I'd like to invite you to come with me back behind the curtain to find out how the magic is made.

Imagine with me a big toolbox. You open up this toolbox, and it has three trays labeled "BEHIND," "IN," and "IN FRONT OF." We could spend a lot of time familiarizing ourselves with every tool in each of these trays—indeed, some researchers spend their entire professional career becoming experts at using just one of these tools. But I'm going to take you on a quick tour to give you a sense of just how many tools there are to play with.

Let's start with the bottom tray in the toolbox, the one labeled "**BEHIND.**" There you'll find a set of interpretive tools useful for getting a peek *behind* a given text. There are many tools in this bottom tray, but I'll limit myself to four of my favorites.

So for example, imagine that we have a passage of scripture—from any religious text or even a contemporary text—in front of us, and that we want to know what it truly mean.

- One tool we might pick up is the tool of **Historical Criticism**. With this tool, what can we learn about the *original context* of the text? When was this text written? What else was going on in the world at that time? And what can all that tell us about the text?
- Another tool we might try is **Source Criticism**. What *sources* influenced the author? What sources do they allude to, or even directly quote, and what does that information tell us? What books were in that person's library?
- Or **Form Criticism** asks: what "forms" did this story circulate in within the oral tradition before being written down? For instance, fairy tales tend to have a *basic "form" or structure*: they begin with the phrase, "Once upon a time." They also often

rely on familiar tropes such as the “rule of 3.” Other familiar recurring forms and structures are used in miracle stories, parables, and conflict narratives.

- **Redaction Criticism** asks how this text was *edited at the time*. Among the most interesting examples of Biblical text editing give clear evidence that the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke had copies of the Gospel of Mark on their respective desks when they were writing their own gospels. The particular ways they tended to borrow passages from Mark can give us clues in the present about Matthew’s and Luke’s different biases.

Those are a few of the many tools a reader can use to get a peek *behind* a text.

Moving to the middle tray of the toolbox, we find the tray labelled “**IN.**” The “IN” set of tools invites us to consider if it might be interesting to focus our inquiries about meaning inside the text itself. Again, I’ll limit myself to only a few of my favorite tools, such as:

- **Text Criticism** compares the variations and copying errors found in ancient manuscripts. (Have you ever noticed the tiny superscript letters in most Bibles? They lead you to the extra-tiny footnotes that start with “*other manuscripts say.*” Text critics study the differences in those ancient manuscripts.
- **Rhetorical Criticism** pays close attention to who is speaking, how they speak, and what such questions reveal.
- **Translation Criticism** compares all the nuances and shades of meaning in the original language that are gained or lost over time in translations from the original language.

Those are a few of the many tools for playing *in* the text itself.

The top tray of our toolbox is labeled “**IN FRONT OF.**” This set of tools focuses on what is happening with the individual or group reading the text:

- **Reception Criticism** traces how interpretations of a particular passage or text have changed over time.
- **Feminist Criticism** emphasizes women’s experiences and perspectives sometimes overlooked by male writers and commentators.

- **Liberation Criticism** asks how the inquirer can best apply the text to an unapologetic agenda of inspiring social justice.

It can be both fascinating and exciting to have at hand just the right tool or tools for studying any given text. Sometimes you may need the crowbar of historical criticism, other times the microscope of textual criticism, and still other times the hammer of liberation criticism. If you are curious to learn more about these interpretative approaches, two good starting points are: *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* by William Brown and *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament* by Paula Gooder. (In addition, there is a whole array of sacred reading practices that are fascinating to explore.)

For now, let's pull together some of the implications of having a growing number of hermeneutical tools to play with in your own interpretive toolboxes. Come with me a little bit further through the Looking Glass, and you'll begin to see (as you may well have already) that, for better and for worse, **texts do not have only one plain meaning applicable to all times and places.**

For instance, have you ever heard someone ask, "What does the Bible say about 'x' topic?" Often the questioner expects a single, simple response. And here's the thing: the Bible doesn't say anything, *per se*. You have to *read* it. And **the more you understand about the vast array of options for how you might read text, the deeper the rabbit hole goes.**

And here's the really important part: because we have agency and choice over how we interpret a text—a choice as to which interpretative tool or tools we may wish to apply—we are arguably responsible for the choices we make. Said more bluntly: the more one knows about textual interpretation, the less convincing it is when someone tries to lay the blame for their hatred, prejudice, or violence on a passage in a text. **Is it really the text's fault, or is someone's unskillful interpretation to blame?**

- Have you thoroughly explored *behind* the text for the fullness of the original context, and how it is different or like from our current context?
- Have you tinkered enough *within* the text to consider all the nuances of language, perspective, and detail?

- Have you invited an increasingly diverse group of people to join you *in front of the text* to discover angles you may have previously failed to consider? Because as many oppressed groups have discovered, **“If you’re not at the table, you might be on the menu.”**

The Yale University New Testament scholar Dale Martin has a succinct way of describing the dynamic we’ve been exploring in his excellent book Pedagogy of the Bible: **“Texts don’t mean, people mean *with* texts.”** Appropriately, Martin means at least two things with that quote. First, people *mean* with texts in the sense that text don’t interpret themselves in isolation or have only one plain meaning; instead, we humans create meaning only when we *read* texts. Think of the various songs, films, or other works of art that have come to mean different things to you at different points in your life. As you’ve heard me quote before, “We don’t see the world as *it is*, we see it as *we are*.”

And here’s the second part of Martin’s quote. People also *mean* with texts in the sense of being mean (or *cruel*) to one another. Folks sometimes try to beat each other up with what are sometimes called “clobber texts.” But, as we are coming to see more clearly, the more you know about interpretation, the less persuasive it is to scapegoat a text for one’s own meanness. We each have power, options, and responsibility for the interpretive choices we make. Dale Martin has said it this way: **“You are responsible for the truth, goodness, morality, and social effect of how you interpret the Bible or any other text.”** If your reading is causing harm, it is important to consider whether you have tried out all the possible interpretive tools in your toolbox.

Perhaps the most salient example of textual casuistry in our country today is not with the Bible, but with the U.S. Constitution. Even a cursory study of various 5-4 Supreme Court decisions will expose that there is a huge amount of leeway on how to interpret the United States Constitution—depending on who is doing the interpreting. And as law scholars have shown, it’s not that some justices are “smarter or understand constitutional law better or avoid decisions based on value choices. Rather, their disagreements reflect their differing ideologies, life experiences, and worldviews” (Chemerinsky 54).

And I urge you not to believe the propaganda that some justices are “activists” and others are “neutral interpreters”. If you take a step back and look closely, you will find that all humans—from the most conservative to the most liberal and everywhere in between—are always *making interpretive choices*. Constitutional “originalists” will try to persuade you that they have the best or only way of interpreting original meanings, but their **fundamentalist interpretations of the Constitution do not impress me any more than the fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible**. In both cases, the end result tends to be narrow, rigid, and antiquated. We don’t have to limit ourselves to only one interpretative tool when there are so many hermeneutical toys in our toolbox.

Relatedly, when I was growing up, there was a lot of fear around being seen as “picking and choosing” scripture. In the theologically conservative congregation of my childhood, you didn’t want to be someone who was perceived as favoring one part of the Bible over another, since allegedly it was all equally important—as the infallible word of God. Over time, I’ve come to see that *everyone* picks and chooses. And if we come to accept that we all do have the freedom and responsibility that comes with picking and choosing, there’s one more vitally important decision to make: ***why not choose love?***

If we are all responsible for how we interpret the Bible, or any other text, then why not choose love? Why not select tools that—to the greatest extent possible—will lead to a kinder, more compassionate perspective? Why not choose the interpretative tool for the job that will help increase peace and justice, not merely for some, but for *all*?

I know it’s complicated, and easier said than done. But this approach is in alignment with the Unitarian Universalist Association’s **#SideWithLove campaign**: *as for me and my house, we are answering the call of love*.

Sometimes it is easier to look at a text and decide it is duly antiquated or obsolete—and then write something new that feels more relevant today. Other times it is well worth going deep, staying committed, and wrestling with a text until you receive a blessing.

As you’ve heard me quote before, “We have to give up all hope of a better past.” We cannot change the times in the past when we sided with greed, hatred, or delusion.

But in each new present moment, we have a new opportunity to side with love. So, I invite you to take a moment right now in real time to pause and ask yourself, “What is love calling me to do?” Take a few deep breaths, then listen. Allow yourself to potentially be surprised at the answer that emerges. **In this moment, *what is love calling me to do?***