

## Pluralism, Pragmatism, Progressivism: My Journey to Unitarian Universalism<sup>i</sup>

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

22 July 2012

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

*When I was 12, the most salient books on my parents' shelves were two red-bound volumes, The Case of Leon Trotsky and Not Guilty. These made up the report of the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. I never read them with the wide-eyed fascination I brought to books like Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis, but I thought of them in the way in which other children thought of their family's Bible: they were books that radiated redemptive truth and moral splendor. If I were a really good boy, I would say to myself, I should have read not only the Dewey Commission reports, but also Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution, a book I started many times but never managed to finish. For in the 1940s, the Russian Revolution and its betrayal by Stalin were, for me, what the Incarnation and its betrayal by the Catholics had been to precocious little Lutherans 400 years before....*

*I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists.... Working as an unpaid office boy during my twelfth winter, I carried drafts of press releases from the Workers' Defense League office.... On the subway, I would read the documents I was carrying. They told me a lot about what factory owners did to union organizers, plantation owners to sharecroppers, and the white locomotive engineers' union to the colored firemen (whose jobs white men wanted, now that diesel engines were replacing coal-fired steam engines). So, at 12, I knew that the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice.*

—Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and The Wild Orchids”<sup>ii</sup>

Sigmund Freud once said that, “Copernicus, Darwin, and he himself had been responsible for successive cataclysmic decenterings — of the planet earth, of the human species, and of the conscious mind respectively.”<sup>iii</sup> In addition to these three historic decenterings, we could add Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, which decentered our sense of space and time into the conflated relativity of space-time. The cumulative implication of these paradigm shifts is that *before* the Scientific Revolution, it was much more justifiable to understand our planet as the center of the universe, our species as the center of creation and our sense of our “self,” as well as our perspective of space and time, as the only legitimate view. But the postmodern world challenges us to question the dominance of each of these former center points.

Each of these decenterings has been formative in my own journey to Unitarian Universalism, which began in the Southern Baptist fold and passed through liberal Baptist life. I'll be speaking this morning mostly about pluralism, but you will be hearing more about my touchstones of progressivism and pragmatism in coming weeks. For now, to share with you some

of my journey, my primary childhood religious context was a large Southern Baptist congregation in the midlands of South Carolina. When I was younger and my worldview was formed almost exclusively from this perspective, I would have been happy if all six billion people on Earth were Southern Baptists. But as I grew older I began to meet increasing numbers of *non*-Southern Baptists who were kind, well-adjusted, smart, funny, competent human beings. My church was the center of my world, and taught me to believe that the most important decision anyone could make was whether to accept Jesus as “your personal Lord and Savior.” But I became increasingly unsure of how to reconcile this exclusivist belief with the many remarkable people I was meeting in the world who understood Jesus differently than I had been taught.

My church taught me that Jesus, as defined by the Southern Baptist Convention, was the one, true center. Yet I increasingly met people whose worlds centered on the Methodist church or the Catholic church as well as others whose worlds did not revolve around any religion. Their lives centered on their career, family, or favorite sports team. If I had been born a few decades earlier, I could perhaps have more easily maintained my Southern Baptist beliefs with less struggle because I might have met fewer people who were not Southern Baptists. But when your roommate is a Roman Catholic, your best friend is an atheist, and your favorite professor is a Buddhist, it is increasingly difficult to maintain with integrity the position that the Southern Baptist faith — or any other single religion — is the one, true center. My encounters with a diverse and pluralistic humanity was *decentering Jesus* in the same way that Copernicus decentered the planet earth, Darwin decentered the human species, and Freud decentered the conscious mind.<sup>iv</sup>

Since the decentered, pluralistic perspective that I have been describing has been my worldview essentially since my sophomore year in college, some of you may be wondering what took me so long to join Unitarian Universalism. Reflecting on this question, at least three reasons come to mind. First, the deeper I delved into the two thousand year history of Christianity, the more I came to discover the many neglected resources in the Christian tradition that can be vital contributions for healthy spirituality and transformative ethics, which is part of why the “Jewish and Christian teachings” remain one of the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism.<sup>v</sup> Second, retrieving the best of the Christian tradition has allowed me to help many people move from a more fundamentalist faith to a more open-minded, generous, and compassionate practice. Third,

there are many *de facto* Unitarian Universalists in progressive Christian circles, and hanging out with those folks kept me amongst liberal Christians longer than I may have otherwise stayed.

Some of you may have heard that before choosing to seek fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, I was an officer on the national board of the Alliance of Baptists.<sup>vi</sup> To quote from the homepage of the Alliance's website: "We began as a dissenting voice in Baptist life more than 25 years ago. For more than 20 years we have affirmed the call and ordination of women in ministry and the full acceptance and embrace of the LGBT community.... The Alliance is committed to ecumenism, partnership in mission, radical hospitality, and social justice." (Not too shabby for Baptists, right?)

Yes, it is true that Jerry Falwell, Mike Huckabee, Roy Moore, Tim LaHaye, and Fred Phelps are Baptists, but Martin Luther King, Jr. was also Baptist — so too are Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Jimmy Carter, Jesse Jackson, and Bill Moyers. However, despite my gratitude for many aspects of my Baptist heritage, I am even more grateful for the opportunity to choose Unitarian Universalism as a liberal religion that embraces the fullness of twenty-first century knowledge and experience. I am grateful for the opportunity to choose to join a religious tradition, whose forebears include John Adams and Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton and William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, Thomas Jefferson and Frank Lloyd Wright, Forrest Church and Rebecca Ann Parker, William Sinkford and Peter Morales.<sup>vii</sup> I am similarly grateful for the opportunity to choose to be a part of a congregation in which myself and my wife Magin can both feel fully a part. Magin was raised to practice Reform Judaism, but has become a practicing Buddhist in recent years and is interested in merging a Western-style Buddhism with an earth-centered spirituality.

In the coming weeks and months, I look forward to getting to know all of you better and learning about your practices, values, and beliefs. In particular, I hope to find opportunities to connect with many of you individually or in small groups. I welcome you to invite me to breakfast, coffee, or lunch. I would love to hear about your journey to Unitarian Universalism, how you first came to UUCF, and what keeps you coming back each week. I would love to hear about the people, places, and events in this congregation that make you feel most connected, most alive, and most grateful.

From listening to the Search Committee, the Board of Trustees, and a few other individuals and committees, it is evident that portions of this congregation are drawn here for

different reasons. Some of you are here to strengthen and extend Unitarian Universalism's historic commitment to social justice. Others are here to take the next step beyond the religious traditions of their childhoods — or to escape some form of religious fundamentalism. Still others are here because Unitarian Universalism is wide enough to include both secular humanism and earth-centered traditions. Many of you are also here to raise your children in a religious community that celebrates diversity, promotes lifelong learning, and practices compassion.

There may well as many reasons for being here at UUCF as there are members and friends of this congregation. And part of how I understand my charge as your minister is to help hold the space in which we can collectively draw from all Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. By no means does this position require that each member of UCCF find all Six Sources equally meaningful, but, for better or worse, you've hired someone to be your minister who finds all Six Sources to be significant. I look forward to attending AHA and CUUPs, the Buddhist Fellowship and the Servetus Society. For the uninitiated, those are the UUCF groups grounded in the intersection of Unitarian Universalism and the Humanist, Pagan, Buddhist, and Christian traditions respectively.

To give you a glimpse into my longstanding interest in all manner of religious and humanist traditions, I would like to share with you a few results of an admittedly unscientific test I took back in 2007 on Beliefnet.com called Belief-O-Matic. (One of the advantages of moving is that you excavate all sorts of random documents from your past.) The quiz is described as follows: "Even if you don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic™ knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic™ will tell you what religion (if any) you practice...or ought to consider practicing." It then issues the following whimsical caveat, "Warning: Belief-O-Matic™ assumes no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul."<sup>viii</sup>

Back in 2007, my top four recommended religious affiliations, according to the Belief-O-Matic, were #1: Neo-Pagan (100%), #2: Unitarian Universalism (99%), #3: Liberal Quakers (97%), and #4: Secular Humanism (85%). For those of you familiar with the work of William Murry in books such as *Reason and Reverence*, I suspect my percentage match with humanism would be significantly higher than 85% if the questions were adjusted from generic Secular Humanism to Murry's more nuanced definition of Religious Humanism. Also noteworthy is that my match for "Mainline to Liberal Christian Protestants" was only 74%. So, at least according to

the Belief-O-Matic, I get an “A+ in Neo-Paganism, UUism, and Liberal Quakerism, a solid “B” in Secular Humanism, but only a “C” in Mainline Christianity. I’m glad to be here this morning at UUCF because I always like to get an “A.”

Incidentally, Magin gave me permission to share that back in 2007, she received a 100% match with Unitarian Universalism, 99% with Neo-Paganism, and 98% with Buddhism.

Ultimately, however, neither Unitarian Universalism nor the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick is about me or Magin alone. It is also not all about any of you alone — no offense.

It’s not about any of us individually, in isolation. Unitarian Universalism, at its best, is about all of us together. It’s about the entirety of this one planet on which we find ourselves. It’s even about the whole cosmos. As you can see written on the back of your Order of Service each week, Unitarian Universalism is about:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.<sup>ix</sup>

Along these lines, one of the best statements I heard at the recent Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Phoenix was from the current UUA President Peter Morales, who said, “I want someone to design a UU t-shirt that says, ‘UU: It’s not about *you*.’” As the old joke says, “Only *you* can cure narcissism.” And one of the best cures for narcissism is learning to survive and thrive in the midst of the religious diversity that characterizes most, if not all, Unitarian Universalist congregations. We are on the frontline experimenting with and modeling what a world community could and should look like, although we have a long way to go on this journey.

In closing, I would like to share with you part of the address Peter Morales delivered at General Assembly. He was speaking as if it were the year 2017 and he was giving the final report of his eight-year term as President of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

He praised the UUA's "Leap of Faith" initiative, which partners congregations eager to grow with mentor congregations that have achieved significant growth. He hailed the local partnerships congregations forged with immigrants after the 2012 [Justice] GA. He celebrated "more than a thousand UUs" who participated in UU College of Social Justice service learning trips....

"What I am most proud of," he said, still looking back from 2017, "is how we have reached out and engaged so many religious seekers and UUs who are not currently members...."

"We are helping people to connect to our faith as never before — people who would not have found one of our congregations. Lots of these groups are attaching to our congregations. Thousands have joined our public witness efforts, making us a powerful force."

"In 2017, Unitarian Universalism has gone viral!"<sup>x</sup>

As the Internet-savvy among us can report, "Going viral" is when an idea, video, or other product begins to spread with uncontrollable rapidity. But unlike a biological virus or a debilitating computer virus, "Going Viral" is generally a good thing in the virtual world.

Peter Morales has also said that

We have known for many years that the number of people who identify as Unitarian Universalists (UUs) is about four times the membership of our congregations (about 160,000 adult members and about 650,000 people who identify as UUs). In other words, for every adult member there are three non-members who say they are Unitarian Universalist.

Those statistics identify some low-hanging fruit that makes the vision see possible of Unitarian Universalism going viral.<sup>xi</sup>

I believe in the Principles and Sources of Unitarian Universalism. I'm proud to be an advocate for liberal religion as a vision for how we can build a future based on compassion, justice, and peace for the whole of this planet. I am honored to accept the challenge of helping both Unitarian Universalism and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick "Go Viral." I look forward to partnering with you in making this vision a reality. Together we can turn dreams into deeds. We can turn dreams into deeds...*together*.

## Appendix: Chalice Lighting

The following reading is adapted from Douglas John Traversa:

In a world that sometimes seems filled with despair, the flame of this chalice shines with the light of *hope*.

In a world that sometimes seems filled with ignorance, the flame of this chalice shines with the light of *reason*.

In a world that sometimes seems filled with hate, the flame of this chalice shines with the light of *love*.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> “*Pluralism, Pragmatism, Progressivism*” —

I owe the title of this sermon to the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007). In a field notorious for dense prose and technical jargon, Rorty’s lucid writing style is a breath of fresh air. Across many popularly accessible books, he was able to write clear, direct, even beautiful sentences without sacrificing analytic rigor. I have a few significant points of departure from Rorty’s philosophy, but I also owe him a significant intellectual debt. Specifically, the title of this sermon is adapted from his book *Philosophy and Social Hope* in which the subtitle of the Afterword is “Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism.”

If you are looking for a good entry point into Rorty’s work, try [\*Achieving Our Country : Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America\*](#) or [\*Philosophy and Social Hope\*](#).

Free web resources about Rorty include the entry about him in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/>) and his obituary in *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/11/obituaries/11rorty.html>).

Specifically on religion, see either of two books in which Rorty was a main contributor: [\*An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion\*](#) or [\*The Future of Religion\*](#).

My favorite critique of where Rorty overreaches is NYU philosopher Paul Boghossian’s book [\*Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism\*](#).

<sup>ii</sup> “*Trotsky and The Wild Orchids*” — The excerpt from Rorty’s autobiographical essay can be found in his book [\*Philosophy and Social Hope\*](#) (5-6) as well as in [\*The Rorty Reader\*](#). You can also read this essay free online at [http://cdclv.unlv.edu/pragmatism/rorty\\_orchids.html](http://cdclv.unlv.edu/pragmatism/rorty_orchids.html).

<sup>iii</sup> “*successive cataclysmic decenterings*” — Freud, quoted in Rorty, [\*Philosophy and Social Hope\*](#), 263.

The first major decentering was the publication of astronomer Nicolai Copernicus' 1543 book *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, which argued, based on observable, verifiable evidence, that we live in a heliocentric, not geocentric, universe. This insight decentered the Earth, overturning the incorrect assumption that our planet is the center of the universe. We know today that there are more than 100 billion galaxies in the universe, and each of those 100 billion galaxies includes billions of stars (For more, see Carl Sagan, [\*Billions & Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium\*](#),56). Earth is only a small planet, orbiting *one* medium-sized star toward the *edge* of one spiral galaxy that, again, is only one among more than 100 billion other galaxies in the universe. As with the other decenterings, one challenge is to learn speak not of “The One,” but of “one among many.”

A second major decentering was the publication of English naturalist Charles Darwin's 1859 book, *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*, which decentered the human species. Darwin’s meticulous observations of the natural world helped demonstrate that human beings did not originate from a special, one-time act of divine intervention. Instead, humans evolved through the process of natural selection just like every other species. Thus, humanity is not the central pinnacle of creation. Although our capacity for reason and higher-order thinking may make our species unique and significant, we are, at the same time, in an important sense, just another species, one among many.

Third, at the turn of the twentieth century, Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud demonstrated the influence of our unconscious. With the advent of modern psychology, not to mention the contemporary insights of neuroscience, we have increasingly come to appreciate the



---

extent to which unconscious drives motivate us, outside of any conscious thought or rational decision-making process. This discovery decentered our self, what Freud called, in German, the “Ich,” which is translated as the “ego” or, better, simply as the first-person pronoun “I.” The word “ego” derives from the Latin word for “I.” Translating the German, first-person pronoun *Ich* into English as “ego” instead of “I” can needless complicate Freud’s point that of our sense of our self as a cohesive, conscious “I” was decentered by his emphasis on the influence the unconscious.

<sup>iv</sup> “*Decentering Jesus*” — for more, I recommend the work of Paul Knitter such as his recent autobiographical book [\*Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian\*](#) or a volume he edited [\*The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multi-Faith Explorations of Religious Pluralism\*](#).

<sup>v</sup> For more on the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism, visit <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/principles>.

<sup>vi</sup> For more on the Alliance of Baptists, visit <http://www.allianceofbaptists.org>.

<sup>vii</sup> For more on historic Unitarian Universalists forebears, see [\*A Who's Who of UUs : A Concise Biographical Compendium of Prominent and Famous Universalists and Unitarians\*](#), edited by Gwen Foss.

<sup>viii</sup> To take the free Belief-O-Matic quiz, visit <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Quizzes/BeliefOMatic.aspx>.

<sup>ix</sup> For more on the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, visit <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/principles>.

<sup>x</sup> For the full article on Peter Morales’ 2012 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly address, visit <http://blogs.uuworld.org/ga/2012/06/24/in-2017-unitarian-universalism-has-gone-viral/>.

<sup>xi</sup> “*number of people who identify as Unitarian Universalists (UUs) is about four times the membership of our congregations*” — for the full article, see <http://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/officers/president/moralespeter/192145.shtml>.