

Building Your Own Theology

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9 September 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

At the end of last week's sermon, I invited us to sing the hymn, "As Tranquil Streams."

The text of this hymn was written in 1933 to celebrate "the growing closeness of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations for approximately a century."¹ Some of you may recall that a few decades later in 1960 later that song was chosen as the processional hymn at the worship service held in the wake of the Unitarians and the Universalists each voting separately to consolidate into Unitarian Universalist Association. They sang this hymn over and over until all the delegates from both former groups were together in one room for as a new united body.

The first stanza of that hymn are "As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to seek the sea, / Our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be free." I must confess that as powerful and meaningful as all four stanzas of that hymn can be, if you read the history of our movement, we should be honest that the metaphor of "tranquil streams" is not the most accurate description.² Neither the Unitarians nor the Universalists were particularly known for their tranquility. Indeed, both the Unitarians and the Universalists were named for their willingness to take controversial stands such as affirming the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus (on the Unitarian side) and the rejection of hell and affirming of a universal love for all people (on the Universalist side). And as those two movements united, to name only one of the flash points, a conflict arose over one word in the initial version of the Unitarian Universalist Principles: should they affirm *the* Judeo-Christian heritage or *our* Judeo-Christian

¹ "the growing closeness" — *Between the Lines: Sources for Singing the Living Tradition*, 40

² "'tranquil streams' is not the most accurate description" — *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, *The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, 18-19, available at <http://www.uua.org/documents/coa/engagingourtheodiversity.pdf>.

heritage.³ Ultimately, the language of *the* Judeo-Christian heritage won as a way of including both the humanists and those who identified strongly with the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the process of arriving at that decision was more *less* like tranquil streams merging and *more* like negotiating a Class 5 Whitewater Rapids.

But perhaps I should add “not that there’s anything wrong with that!” There’s nothing wrong with strong opinions if they are grounded in good reasoning and authentic experience. Bringing strong, diverse opinions together in the same community is hard work, but it’s also the good, vital work that is the only way of having any chance of creating what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community.

At the same time, as heard earlier in Magin’s [Spoken Meditation](#), I have learned that I don’t always have the time and energy to dialogue with every person on that person’s terms.⁴ There are times when alleged dialogue starts to feel like banging your head against a brick wall: the process doesn’t seem to affect the wall, but my head starts to hurt.

There are also many times when dialogue with another person has changed me significantly:

- Learning about the size and age of our 14 billion-year-old Universe with its more than 400 billion galaxies, forced to me to believe than **any theology that does not account for these discoveries is inadequate for our twenty-first century, postmodern world.**⁵
- Seeing women in leadership and hearing powerful sermons from women convinced me that restrictions based on gender were about misogyny, prejudice, and patriarchy, not about biology.

³ “*the* Judeo-Christian heritage or *our* Judeo-Christian heritage” — Warren Ross, “Shared values: How the UUA’s Principles and Purposes were shaped and how they’ve shaped Unitarian Universalism,” available at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/3643.shtml>.

⁴ Magin LaSov Gregg, “How a Fight Brought Us Closer Together,” available at http://www.interfaithfamily.com/relationships/marriage_and_relationships/How_a_Fight_Brought_Us_Closer_Together.shtml.

⁵ “400 billion galaxies” — Lawrence M. Krauss, [*A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing?*](#), 3. See also, Carl Gregg, “Why Is There Something Instead of Nothing?” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/03/why-is-there-something-instead-of-nothing/>.

- Likewise, seeing same-sex families convinced me that they are neither more nor less dysfunctional than opposite-sex families, and that restrictions against them were about heterosexism and bad theology.

I could go on about how my mind and heart have changed about theology, philosophy, ethics, politics, and other areas, but I suspect you get the idea. The point is that **personal, firsthand experience challenges us to build and rebuilding our theology.**

And emphasizing *experience* as the catalyst for change is critical. The “Liberal Turn” in religion can be seen precisely as the move *from* authority vested in hierarchy, community, and tradition *to* authority derived from human reason and individual experience. And I mean “Liberal Turn” in the classical sense of Liberalism (from the Latin root, *liber*, meaning “free”).

Historically, you can see this Liberal Turn in theology begin in the 18th-century with the Enlightenment emphasis of bringing *human reason* to bear on religious tradition. And to consider one major figure, Friedrich Schleiermacher is known as the “father of Liberal Theology” for his emphasis on personal feelings and firsthand experience in constructing theology as well as his insistence that theology must make sense not only to those within a faith community, but also to the general public.⁶ I bring this up because it’s important to note that we should not allow Liberal Theology to be dismissed as a “newfangled” idea; indeed, it’s more than two centuries old. After all, Schleiermacher’s landmark book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* was published in 1799! (A book that could easily have been written to today’s “New Atheists.”)

In contrast to this Liberal Turn in theology of emphasizing firsthand experience, in traditional theology, you wouldn’t be asked to “Build Your Own Theology.” You would be required to believe a theology that religious authorities, the larger religious community, and historical tradition, had built for you. To use Christianity as an example, traditional inherited theologies typically move through seven categories concerning what you should believe about: (1) God, (2) Jesus, (3) the Spirit, (4) Humanity, (5) Sin and Salvation, (6) the Church, and (7) the Future.

⁶ Schleiermacher — see Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology In The 21st Century*, 3-4.

In contrast, I'm not sure if I can emphasize too strongly how significant it is that Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious tradition that seeks to equip you to build your own theology. The best UU theologies are often, of course, in conversation with theologies of the past, but they are not constrained by them.

And for those who take the Building Your Own Theology class now, in the future, or who choose to reflect on your own, you'll see that the starting point is not studying traditional theologies from the past (that comes at the midpoint). The starting point is autobiography: owning more fully how your life story and your firsthand experience affects, shapes, and informs how you construct theology.

And perhaps I should also clarify that Building Your Own Theology — at least as far as Unitarian Universalism is concerned — does not require theism: a belief in God. In contrast, there is much potential benefit for both theists and atheists, Buddhists and Pagans, Christians and Jews in doing the hard work of articulating what you do (and don't) believe about God (or reality), human nature, religious community, ethics, and the future of our species and the universe — and doing all of that in conversation with one another. And we'll be moving through each of those areas, in turn, in the Building Your Own Theology class.

But for those of you who are unable to make the Tuesday night class, I encourage you to spend some time in the coming weeks reflecting on what you do (and don't) believe and why. And my current plan is the revisit all of this in a sermon in mid-November that will seek to incorporate some of what we experience and learn through 10-weeks of Building theology on Tuesday evenings.

And this call to reflect generally in the coming weeks on what you believe is too vague, here's a specific homework assignment. Some Unitarian Universalist congregations recite (either weekly or occasionally) some version of the following words, which are adapted from historic covenants written respectively by a Unitarian minister named James Blake in 1894 and a Universalist minister named Griswold Williams in 1933. As I read this covenant, I invite you to consider which of the following words or phrases are meaningful to you and which you would want to contend with?

Love is the spirit of this fellowship,

The quest for truth is our sacrament,
And service is our prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To help one another,
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Spirit of Life.
Thus do we covenant.⁷

I would be interested to hear back from you what parts of this historic Unitarian and Universalist covenant remain potentially meaningful to us here at UUCF and which may be no longer meaningful in our contemporary context.

Now, having challenged you to do the hard work of building your own theology, allow me, in the spirit of full disclosure to tell you a little about my own theology, and why I think it is hard, but vital to do this work in community. Articulating your theology in a way that is intelligible to other people is much more difficult than justifying your beliefs to yourself privately in your head.

And for that reason, all potential Unitarian Universalist ministers are required to answer questions about theology and many other areas — 15 other areas to be precise — before two different panels: the Regional Subcommittee on Candidacy and the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. When I met with the RSCC, they approved me as a candidate; nevertheless, one of their criticisms of me (from their perspective of meetings me for approximately 30 minutes) was that I “struggled to articulate my personal Unitarian Universalist theology.” In reflecting on that criticism, my response is that I feel like they wanted to put me in a theological box. My sense is that the answer they were looking for was for me to say something simple such as I’m a UU Buddhist or I’m a UU Christian or I’m a UU Humanist. Then they would’ve asked me a follow-up question of how, for example, I minister to a congregation as a UU Buddhist when members of the congregation identify with many different theological and philosophical perspectives.

⁷ On adapting the historic Blake and Williams covenants, see *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, 102-104.

But I wasn't willing to say that because it wasn't true, even if it would've been politically expedient for the sake of satisfying the panel. Instead, this one man on the panel asked me at least three times in a row about, "How does your UU theology impact your everyday life" to which I responded with essentially the same response about how enlivening it is to me to have the freedom to draw from all Six Sources depending on the circumstance.

Remember what I said earlier about some dialogue feeling like banging your head against a brick wall? Well, the two of us went round and round about 3-4 times without getting anywhere. Despite my requests that he rephrase his question in way that might make more sense to me, he kept asking the same question, and I kept giving the same answer.

Now, I don't know if what I'm about to tell you would have been any more satisfactory to the panel, but I think that the truth of the matter is that I'm theologically promiscuous. I'm a theological mutt. I borrow this notion of theological promiscuity from Paul Knitter, who has written a moving book about his own journey titled *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian*, which reflects on his perspective as someone who was baptized as a Christian in 1939, but who — while never ceasing to consider himself a Christian — also took refuge as a Buddhist in 2008. Like Knitter, I would say that I'm not a religious "purebred." I'm a both/and, not an either/or. And as Knitter writes, the good news is that when we look to nature, "Hybrids are stronger, live longer, and [arguably] have more fun than purebreds."⁸ And don't UUs love hybrids?!

To expand this focus to the congregational level, some sociologists of religion has noted an important shift from a paradigm of Believe-Behave-Belong in which newcomers to a religious community first had to *believe* the right doctrines, then *behave* correctly, and finally were allowed to *belong*. The new postmodern paradigm is Belong-Behave-Believe, the exact opposite. Today, most newcomers first want to feel like they *belong*, then they are open to reflect on ethics (how they *behave*), then they may find over time that their *beliefs* are shifting through being in community.⁹

This cultural shift of belief from first to last seems highly significant for Unitarian Universalism, which emphasizes *deeds* not creeds and *unity* not uniformity. Accordingly, I would

⁸ Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 213-215.

⁹ "Belong-Behave-Believe" — Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 159.

like to briefly some statistics from a [survey](#) released in mid-July from the Public Religion Research Institute and The Brookings Institution, which support a potential bright future for progressive, open-minded religions such as Unitarian Universalism, which emphasize the importance of all individuals doing the hard work of building your own theology:

- **Religious progressives are significantly younger than religious conservatives.**
The mean age of religious progressives is 44 — just under the mean age in the general population of 47 — while the mean age of religious conservatives is 53. The mean age of the nonreligious is 42.
- **Religious conservatives make up smaller proportions of each successive generation,** from 47% of the Silent Generation, 34% of Baby Boomers, 23% of Generation X, and 17% of Millennials.
- **Religious progressives constitute nearly twice the proportion of Millennials** (23%), compared to the Silent Generation (12%). Among Millennials, there are also roughly as many nonreligious (22%) as religious progressives.¹⁰

My point is that one of my goals is to make sure that this congregation is not the best kept secret in Frederick. Unitarian Universalism is not for everyone (nothing is), but there are increasing numbers of people who are “UUs and don’t know it”...yet! So if you have friends, family, or coworkers for whom Unitarian Universalism might be a theological or philosophical home, consider inviting them to come with you one Sunday to UUCF. Share a sermon that you think may be particularly meaningful for them. Point them toward our website. There are increasing numbers of progressively-minded people out there, who could use the encouragement of a community in building their own theology. And we could use their support because there is so much more we can do together than apart.

For now, as we each continue to reflect on the hard work of doing constructive theology, I invite you rise in body or spirit as we prepare to sing together hymn number 23, “Bring Many Names.” And whether you are a theist or atheist — whether you prefer the word God, Spirit of Life, or simply *reality* — I invite you to reflect on the ways that our life experience shapes the

¹⁰ “Do Americans Believe Capitalism & Government Are Working? Religious Left, Religious Right & the Future of the Economic Debate,” available at <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

way that you do theology as well as the ways that this song invites us to *subvert* traditional theologies. As you sing, consider if there are way that this hymn invites you to build your theology differently:

Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory, living, loving God.
Hail and hosanna! Bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation, genius at play:
Hail and hosanna, strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving till we're reconciled:
Hail and hosanna, warm father God!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:
Hail and hosanna, old aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
crying out for justice, giving all you have:
Hail and hosanna, young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing, everlasting home:
Hail and hosanna, great, living God!