

Living the Questions

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

17 November 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

One of my favorite professor used to say that his favorite time of the year was the last week of each semester. He called it “A Time of Great Synthesis.” He said he could almost feel it in the air: the energy of students preparing for final papers and exams, striving to weave all the disparate strands of knowledge learned during the term into a coherent tapestry. At the time, I used to sometimes roll my eyes when he would say things like that because I was wearily in the midst of studying. At the same time, I knew he was right. Integration is hard work, but it’s essential for transforming mere data, facts, and information into wisdom.

And I tried in last week’s sermon on “Lost Christianities and Banned Books of the Bible,” to distill in approximately 20 minutes the core lessons from the 9 hours I have spent lecturing about that topic at Frederick Community College this fall. This week, I want to make a similar effort in regard to the 10-week class I have been facilitating this fall here at UUCF on “Building Your Own Theology.” Before that class began, I preached a sermon back in early September titled “Building Your Own Theology,” and this morning’s sermon is a sequel of sorts more than two months later.

The goal of the “Building Your Own Theology” curriculum is to work on articulating what you believe (and why) in conversation both with other Unitarian Universalists as well as with theologians, philosophers, and other thinkers throughout history. You heard a few of the results from the class earlier this morning, and for those of you who were unable to attend the class, one goal of this sermon is to perhaps inspire you to do some reflection and perhaps even some writing of your own about what you believe and why.

Accordingly, perhaps the most important point to make about building a twenty-first century Unitarian Universalist theology relates to what is known as the “Liberal Turn in Theology.” **The Liberal Turn in theology is the move *from a theology constrained by tradition, hierarchy, and community to a theology that views reason, feelings, and experience as equally legitimate sources for theological reflection.*** So instead of being

expected to believe a doctrine or dogma because “it (allegedly) has always been that way,” because a religious leader tells you so, or because “that’s what everyone else thinks,” liberal theology insists that human reason and logic as well as individual feelings and experiences — what you know to be true because you have experienced it in the crucible of your own firsthand experience — are centrally important in building a theology that has relevance and integrity.

And although the prospect of building your own theology can be liberating and exhilarating, the actual process of *deconstructing* obsolete beliefs and *reconstructing* a new framework for beliefs and practices is hard work. A “Do-It-Yourself” theology can be most worthwhile, but the challenge is (as the old saying goes) to ensure that the freedom liberalism gives us leaves us genuinely *set free* from the oppressive parts of our past and not just cast adrift.

For those of who did not take the class, I will offer you as a way of getting started, the three questions that we invited all members of the Building Your Own Theology class to respond to in our first session:

- (1) What are some significant religious beliefs you *cherish*?
- (2) What are some significant religious beliefs from your personal history that you have *rejected*?
- (3) What are some religious issues with which you are currently struggling and would like to *explore*?

Those three questions alone can get you a long way into the process of building your own theology. I should perhaps also add that “building your own theology” is a process that is potentially worth engaging at different points in your life — perhaps at least every decade or in the wake of major life changes.

In that spirit, I love the passage from poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet in which he offers these words of wisdom:

Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. **Live in the questions** now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

I appreciate these words both because of the honesty that we will never have all the answers from our *finite* human perspective as well as the insistence on *action* not just abstract theories.

Accordingly, I will readily admit that I do not have all the answers, and I fully expect that my theology will evolve further as I continue to “live the questions.” Nevertheless, after facilitating ten sessions of Building Your Own Theology, I would like to share with you some of the cornerstones of my current credo, which is a work still under construction:

I believe that ***behavior is believable***,
often much more so than words.

I believe in cultivating **firsthand religious experience**,
in exploring what we can know in the crucible of our own direct
experience.

I believe that our talk about “the divine,” “the sacred,” or simply “reality” must be
informed by the **best of twenty-first century knowledge**,
not only the best of sources such as process, feminist, and liberation
theologies,
but also of quantum physics, Big History, and Deep Time.

I believe that there is **no perfect *past*** to which we can return because “Eden”
never existed in the first place, but **stories of exemplary lives and communities**
— **as well as myths and archetypes** — **can still inspire** us to live bolder, more
beautiful, inclusive, and transformative lives.

I believe there is **no single, perfect way** to live in the *present*, but we can find
pragmatic touchstones at the intersection of tradition, reason, and experience.

I believe there is **no perfect utopia** ahead of us in the *future*, but that we can still
freely choose love, solidarity, and hope. And in so doing can make a difference
in this world, improving the lives of ourselves and others.

As I said, I don't have all the answers, but those are some of ways I am currently living the questions. And I'm grateful to be on this journey with all of you.

In our closing session for the Building Your Own Theology class, one of the final reflection questions asked about the significance of the theology that we had spent the past few weeks articulating:

How does the theology you have built “interfere” with your life? (What difference does it make in the way you live? What are the main obstacles in living your convictions? What concrete steps might you take to bring your life into line with your theology? What will you do differently because of Building Your Own Theology?)

One of the ways my theology interferes with my life is that it calls me out of myself, and continually challenges me to join with others in making this world a better place for all people.

And although I do believe that building your own theology can be a constructive, helpful practice, ultimately we Unitarian Universalists are a big tent movement that explicitly makes room for drawing from six diverse sources in shaping communal life together. And recognizing our theological diversity, we like to remind ourselves that, “You don't have to believe alike to love alike.” And despite the diverse theologies that we are continually building and re-building, we also emphasize that, in the end, our bias is on “**Deeds not creeds**”: on concrete actions of working for justice, standing on the side of love, and building the Beloved Community.

Appendix:
Credos Read in Worship from the Building Your Own Theology Class

Tara Scibelli

Humans are limited and the universe is complex, so it will never be possible for our species to know everything about life and existence.

The discoveries or beliefs that people develop are shaped by their upbringing, experiences, and biological and genetic dispositions, so we should always try to see things from others' points of view. Furthermore, attempting to do so is necessary to get a more "objective" view of reality, and is also extremely important, because having this more complete view can help us to reach more just ways of interacting with each other.

The actions we take in this life are more important than what we think; what we do matters. We should keep trying to reduce suffering.

I am not sure what our ultimate responsibility may be as humans, or if there even is a purpose for our being here, but I think our local responsibility is to do as much good and as least harm as possible to those living beings and entities which are around us. This includes people, animals, and the earth.

We should err towards kindness and play to our individual strengths when deciding how best to positively contribute to our world with our actions

John Ditman

I became atheist at age 3. I was insufferably right about it. I never won any converts that way. I did other people's thinking for them, it was a foolish and egoist thing to do. I don't do that anymore! After 40 or 50 years I left off being a missionary.

I don't believe in the supernatural, I don't know how anyone can. Some do. Now i know religion is personal, you create your own experience. What you believe is true for you, it may not be true for anyone else. The physical universe does not share in your belief. There is no point in arguing if any religion is true, or not true. It does not exist in that realm. Religion is not like arithmetic, what's 2 plus 2, when you get to 4, whistle. Religion is more how do you like your

eggs. No right, no wrong.

I do not believe in gravity, I know about gravity, Believing is too weak! Driving on ice is the same for all of us, It is physical, not supernatural!

Sabrina Smith

Beauty is not how you look. It is how you love and how you speak and how you walk.

belief is not what you find written by someone. It is what makes your heart relax and what touches your center in a way that opens everything inside you to hope.

Greatness is not being right or being followed or admired. It is knowing what is right and standing up for it, while not allowing your stance to be on the backs of anyone else.

let the rain touch my pores. let my heart connect to the mist that caresses the crevices of each mountain nook. these are the places that allow me to live, without judgement

There are not answers. There are questions cradled in the glowing sunsets, the sparkling sunrises, the crackling fires, and the smooth sleek tumbles of river waters

I believe there is nothing but what is here and can be felt, or created between each of us, be the pairing human, ursine, aquatic, somehow sentient, or solid and of the earth.

There is power in each of these things. Some carry power in words, some in caress, some in strength and solidity or in their simple existence.

Find a path. Hold a hand. Touch something other than yourself. These simple things are what I believe in. These connections. These moment of clarity that breathe comfort into the indifference or pain which all too often engulfs us.

There is no god or God, no Goddess or gods judging us, loving us, choosing among us, helping or hurting us...there is energy. There is expansion, growth, destruction, pain, death, sorrow...and love. If there is anything akin to being saved, it is feeling, finding, accepting LOVE.

There is Divine Connection.