

Creating and Growing a Religion

October 2, 2011

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Sermon

I think you could call this sermon a "teaser" sermon because mostly I am going to tell you what I will be telling you about in my Fall sermon series. This Fall will be an exploration of where we as Unitarians and Universalists come from. Now, we do a very stripped-down version of this as part of what is called "Orientation" for newcomers or those who are planning on membership with us, but that condenses 450 years into less than half an hour and obviously cuts out most of the details and a lot of the fascinating stories! It also misses an in-depth look at what really matters to us, and where it came from.

When did we begin? What is our history? What were the ideas that differentiated us from other groups? In other words: How was our religion created and grown? How is any religion created and grown? Are we a fairly recently created new-age group? Some would call us a cult; are we a radical outgrowth from protestant Christianity? Do we walk our talk? And are we finished growing?

With most religions the answer to these questions are fairly specific. There is usually a story about the moment of *kairos* for that particular religion. *Kairos* is that moment when the the holy interacts with the ordinary; when something unexpected or miraculous breaks in upon and interrupts the lateral flow of time. It is when sacred time and chronological time collide.

Then, for most religions, there is a creed that will give you their understanding of the one and only correct theological viewpoint. And there will have been a definite beginning point, there was a person who represented a different moral life stance, there were new values or understandings and often a milieu into which change was ripe to occur. Certainly if we look at Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or the Bahai' faith (to mention just a few other religious life stances) there were specific persons, places, and new ideals or world views replacing dysfunctional attitudes, lifestyles, rules and regulations. In all these religions, and many others like them, there are beginning similarities that help people to place each religion in a certain context, in a certain century, in a certain country with an identifiable prophet. And while all of these religions have grown, matured and adapted from their original revelations and *kairos*, at the same time they have also remained loyal to that initial vision.

Our Unitarian Universalist story starts in several places at once and is both similar, familiar and different from other religious stories. In a whimsical way, our story is a little bit like an adaptation of the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. You may remember that after Goldilocks came across the cottage in the forest, she went in and worked her way through the bowls of porridge until she found one that was *just right*. (if I had written the story there would have also been a bowl that had lumpy porridge in it, because that is part of my particular story)

But in the Unitarian adaptation of the story, the porridge remains just right only for a little while, and

then Goldilocks isn't completely sure if she even likes porridge any more - at least not as a steady or regular diet. Our sense of religious taste has become more complex and adventurous, and while we ought never to forget our nourishing beginning, it is often hard to recognise our present fare as having any connections to the stick-to-the-ribs porridge. In the coming weeks I will be describing to you the milieu in which the UU Goldilocks found the right bowl of porridge (or perhaps we ought to call it 'granola' now) for her/him, and just why he/she happened to be in that particular house at that particular time.

Well, perhaps that culinary analogy or folk tale doesn't work for you. Here's another more serious one:

It seems to me we could say that our religion started more as an apology. No, not an apology as in, 'I'm sorry George, I didn't mean to step on your foot!'; but an apology in the Greek or academic sense of coming to the defense of a position, of desiring to vindicate what was perceived to be the misconstruing of a theory.

That is to say, our early religious ancestors after reading the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) were attempting to explain to other Christians how some central Christian biblical meanings and beliefs had been incorrectly translated or understood as a result of faulty thinking, poor interpretation or even worse, of deliberate misinterpretation. Their corrections were not received by the powers that be - either Catholic or Protestant - with rejoicing, nor were they treated as wise leaders or sage advisors. Rather they were branded as heretics, infidels, anti-Christ, dastardly deceivers, profligate promoters of evil ways and means.

There were other groups who disagreed with the status quo at the time, it is true, but most of them remained faithful to the central tenets of Christianity. We asked questions about the very core of the Christian faith, and the resulting answers we found that made sense to us turned us, for the most part, into unwelcome stepchildren of the reformation. I often imagine that we were a bit like Mozart coming to Salieri over and over again, showing off our clever skills: brilliant arpeggios of logic and large choruses of rational discourses- and never realising or accepting how shunned we were. In that fanciful imagining there lies some possible glimmers of truth, but also some arrogance. As Martin Luther King Jr. said most insightfully, "The religion that ends with the individual, ends." This statement of Martin Luther King Jr.'s brings a large warning for us: Independence is all well and good, but what we need to practice more of is interdependence.

We have, in the stories of our beginnings, the potential seeds to our ending if we do not listen carefully to the stories and learn from them.

What I intend to do in the next weeks and months is tell you stories about the background, the foundation of our religion. I want and hope to do it in such a way that the people who were involved will live for you, and you can almost smell the earthy smells of the time and hear the sounds in the air; that you will be able to struggle with them and feel their triumph, their passion, their pain. I want and hope to do it in such a way that the ideas and theories they grappled with have some meaning for you even today.

I want us to slowly pole through the waters of our past and appreciate the courage and tenacity our religious ancestors portrayed. I also want to find the bays and inlets where the rascally pirates of our past are located, and tut-tut with you over their wicked escapades. And, at a more serious level, sorrow over the shadow-side they force us to acknowledge. Are we sometimes too much like diletants, eager to play with ideas, but not as keen to live them? Even stronger, however, are the benefits of the disciplined mind not chained to creeds or dogmas; or the receptive heart that is able to be accepting of diversity.

These stories began hundreds of years ago, and I will move through the centuries and through the theological development and transformations that both our historical ancestors, the Unitarians and the Universalists, went through to come to where we find ourselves today. Of course, there will be much I will have to pass over lightly and quickly, and for those of you who come somewhat irregularly on Sundays, the emerging picture will have holes in it. You can fill in the holes if you so choose, by reading back sermons, or reading some books I can recommend to you.

My main purpose is and will be to share with you the richness and the depth of our religious history. In this way, we can feel better connected to our past, learn from it, and attempt not to repeat its mistakes. If I do this right, we will spiral around our history and will end up right here in this room. And when we arrive here, I hope you will feel the sense of connection going back to our beginnings.

In fact, let us start with this building and what a newcomer would see when he/she comes in to check us out.

Of course, first of all the building needs to be found, and that is not an easy task! We have no monument out front identifying us and the cement building looks nothing like a church.

But once we have been found the newcomer will arrive at a foyer that has welcoming, smiling people to greet them. Then they will probably be directed into the social hall where other folks will most likely invite them to sit down around tables. If these new folks look around they will see a veritable colorful cornucopia of signs and invitations to events or groups. (Agave Spirit Grove, Christian UU Fellowship, Social Justice, Social Justice, Social Justice, Music, Jewish Discussion Group, Humanists, Small Group Ministry, Service Auction coming up - to name some of the signs) I would guess it is a bit overwhelming to have so much information presented to you all at once!

Eventually a bell will ring and you will follow others into the worship hall. It will appear rather austere after the busyness of the social hall (there are only two pictures in this room, and one has been up less than a year), and that may or may not be a relief.

The service will proceed and it will have some familiar bits to it and some not so familiar. After the service, back into the social hall, and an opportunity to begin connecting at a deeper level and learning what some of the signs and banners are about.

If you are both curious and courageous, you may come back and start peeling back the layers of this different faith and its wide variety of members. You probably won't initially know if we have religious

symbols because they are not highlighted in obvious ways. You may even wonder if it really is a religious community. This may be a relief or a puzzlement!

I think it will be obvious that the present is very important to Unitarian Universalists and that it matters that we are involved in what is happening to the world in which we live, and further, that we are required to participate in some way. That's why there are so many signs and invitations- because there are so many ways to be involved!

In any case, this is the environment and the building in which we Las Vegas Unitarian Universalists gather to support and challenge each other; and the environment in which we remember and respect our past; knowing that it is necessary, or at the very least, helpful, to know where we have come from in order to chart our course into a future of hope and promise.

In the next few weeks, as I am sharing our religious history with you, I invite any of you to write down any questions you may have about this Unitarian and Universalist religion. Or if there is a particular Unitarian person you want to know about, I will try to incorporate your question (and hopefully the answer) into the appropriate historical location. If you prefer, call me at the church office during the week.

If I say anything that contradicts what you understood our religious purpose or history to be, please let me know. It may be that we are both correct but are simply expressing our viewpoint in markedly different ways; it may be that we are both incorrect and that through discussion we can figure out just where the truth is located; it may be that you have located a significant piece of the Unitarian religious journey that I have forgotten or never knew.

Every day I gain a little more insight about who and what we are, but I am a long way from knowing it all. Individually we may each be knowledgeable; together we can be wise...or at least *wiser*!