

Progressive Religion and the Future of Unitarian Universalism

Sermon at the UU Congregation of Queens
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Good morning. I am happy to be here this morning, and I am honored by the invitation.

I have had the pleasure, over the summer, of being invited to be a member of a panel at what has been dubbed the Network of Spiritual Progressives, a brand new organization, based in Berkeley and founded by Rabbi Michael Lerner, whom some of you may know as the founder of the progressive Jewish magazine, *Tikkun*. This network (NSP for short) is composed of people of many faith traditions – Hindu, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Muslim, Baha’i, Unitarian Universalist, and others.

I fear that if we UUs cannot claim even Transcendence as a common and unifying idea, then we will have to accept that the things that hold us together can be gotten from places and sources that do not in any way define themselves as “religion.” As someone recently said to me, we can drink coffee and socialize anywhere.

In addition to being a UU, I am now also glad to be an NSP member, and to have been able to associate with to so many religious progressives who are at the same time committed to their own traditions as the home-base of their religious action and exploration. I was able to see how a narrative tradition (the powerful story of their faiths) can empower religious progressives, rather than limit and curtail thought. For while these religious progressives were committed to their religious identities, they were able to, freely, talk and socialize with those of other traditions. In watching them, I wondered, once again, about some of our UU claims to openness, seeing that it is so possible for so many to remain so rooted and yet so clear that religious intolerance and bigotry were to be no part of who they were.

The NSP has taken on several missions.

* First, we intend to join with other progressive religious groups to take on the Religious

Right and reshape the discussion of what religious values are, not what the Religious Right says they are.

- * Second, we intend to challenge secular liberals and progressives who, in their self-described but often unsophisticated rationalism and incomplete knowledge of the different approaches to religion, lump all religious faith into the category of superstition and fairy tale.
- * Third, we intend to provide a support organization for deeply religious and spiritual progressives so that they may be buttressed in their forays into the public square and in their attempts to learn again to feel comfortable using religious language in political spaces, to trumpet the virtues of a life of faith and deep spirituality, for without these we will be unable to convince anyone that we are a viable alternative to reactionary or closed religious views.

You can hear in these missions the fact that the NSP recognizes that political progressives and religious progressives are not always the same people, right? You can here in these missions that being engaged in politics from the liberal perspective is one thing, and being a religious progressive whose politics is in part informed by a liberal religious view of love of neighbor and the call to witness, is another. We note that one need not claim any religiosity at all in order to have certain liberal or political views. That is an important thing to remember. For the religious progressives in Berkeley were not only engaged in political analysis and policy plumbing, but were reaching down into the wells of power that were their religious traditions. A tradition, a shared identity, I noted, can be a powerful tool of change and reform, as much as it can sometimes lead to unthinking stagnation. A tradition, I noted, can also contain the seeds of its own improvement, transformation, and growth. For those at this conference had surely taken paths different from the conservative wings of their faiths, but are as much a part of those faiths as their brother and sister conservative Jews, Baptists, Catholics were. I began to wonder if a religion, any religion, can simply opt to jump the tracks of its narrative history, its memory, and still remain coherent and have an identity, or rather if in doing so things begin to fall apart, as there is no center that holds, in the words of the African writer of Chinua Achebe.

We noted that just as the word ‘religion’ is often stolen by religious conservatives and fundamentalists, the word ‘progressive’ seems, alternatively, to have been stolen by liberal secularists. We take issue with both attempts at linguistic thievery. We who are religious progressives believe secularists do not own progressivism, whether political or religious, and that the country needs to be reminded of the words of Mark Twain as we apply them to ourselves – “Rumors of our demise are greatly exaggerated.” We may have ceded the airways to the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons of America for far too long. But we religious progressives are here and do not intend to be quiet any longer. Witness the NSP conference, organizations like the Interfaith Alliance and the Center for Progressive Christianity, to name but a few organizations who intend to reclaim the word ‘religion’ from those literalists and fundamentalists who use that word to cast aspersions, to judge others, to reduce God to the status of angry old man who wants

to inflict pain on you should you not remain pure as they define purity.

As I suggested to Rabbi Lerner, the NSP's missions are ambitious undertakings, but ones that are worth it. I want to talk to you this morning about why I believe they are worth it, and to, as well, put on the table some concerns that I as a UU have about our Unitarian Universalist movement, concerns which my attendance at the Berkeley conference only highlighted. For in Berkeley I witnessed perhaps the best forms of tolerance and openness: the kind of tolerance and openness between people with coherent religious identities, rooted in their own narrative traditions. I witnessed a true sharing between mature religious thinkers who opt to explore the big questions of life from a home base of faith, while learning and sharing from and with others with different home bases.

In Berkeley I kept thinking about why this kind of sincere sharing is often a problem among us UUs. That even among us UUs there are tensions and communication problems such that expressions of deep faith in transcendence, in God, and in the value of a deep spirituality, for example, are often met with negative reactions of various types, even within our own congregations. I kept thinking about the value of a grounding in a genuine and living religious narrative tradition, and how engagement between people of such traditions seems to carry more respect and sincere inquiry than is often seen when two UUs with different theological perspectives engage one another, when suspicion often replaces understanding and true listening.

I got to thinking at that conference that there are conundrums and confusions over the very meaning of terms like 'religion' and 'spirituality' among us UUs, and about how we are ourselves balkanized into affinity groups within UUism, into side-pockets of associates that share similar views, into theological camps. I got to thinking that what we call our "community of faith" is a community without a core unity of even basic theological beliefs save for a collection of principles that nearly any thinking Western person would accept, UU or non-UU. I got to thinking about how that might be sapping our strength as an organization, and how it might be contributing to the difficulties others have in trying to grasp what it is we are all about other than Tolerance itself. I got to thinking that a religion so focused on religious tolerance rather than religious substance is a religion that may have lost its way.

Now, this is an odd outcome. We are too often unable to share our deepest hopes and theological commitments with our brother and sister UUs, for fear of eliciting an unpleasant response, and so we self-censor and keep our perspectives to ourselves, to the end that those who are supposed to be our brothers and sisters "in faith" are really strangers at their deepest levels. The result is that while we claim to be open-minded and enlightened, we are too often anything but. We are in fact *intolerant* at times.

Many of us are even suspicious of religious language, preferring the vocabulary of science and of

what some like to call humanism. Yes, many UUs are resolved to be very true to the rationalism of the Enlightenment above all else. It is a true hangover, this idea that every religious expression must be tested on the workbenches of science and formal logic. Tolerance is the last thing that some of our self-described humanists express towards words like ‘prayer,’ and ‘blessing,’ and ‘holy,’ and ‘divine.’ It would appear that such persons have closed their minds long ago to a deeper exploration of the meaning of the religious life. And there is a meaning far deeper and richer than the theological trifles and dogmas that so many humanists find so troubling – that we all find so troubling, in fact. What so many of our own UUs who have bought into this kind of jejune rationalism may not know is that such scientific and logical reductionism as they revere has fallen out of favor many years ago in the halls of the academy, the University, and in intellectual circles, and even among many scientists themselves. This does not mean, of course, that all sorts of superstitious pap is now invited back into the conversation of those things we may hope, those things we may believe, but it does mean that if we UUs are to get along in the spirit of openness we claim to possess, we need to get over this virus of reductionistic rationalism as quickly as we fled from the disease of thoughtless dogma that brought us here.

Rationality, contrary to what some might think, is not some thin scalpel that merely teases apart logical error from logical truth. It is in fact an array of tools that help us to explore the various ways to establish a plan of life, a culture, a life-world, a view of things, a metaphysics, even a tradition and a theology.

Rationality, contrary to what some might think, is not some thin scalpel that merely teases apart logical error from logical truth. It is in fact an array of tools that help us explore the various ways to establish a plan of life, a culture, a life-world, a view of things, a metaphysics, even a tradition and a theology, in view of facts and consequences, thoughts and feelings, narratives and traditions. Rationality, I would argue, is about wisdom, about the full lived experience, and the deepest questions of life and meaning are also its domain. Fetishizing a childish rationality, as so many UUs and modern secular political progressives do, is a form of idolatry (to put it in religious terms). It takes a tool called reason and lifts it to the level of deity or ultimacy, limiting its domain to mere logical cognition and excludes those things that are most human. A truer rationalism is holistic, more truly human, and encompasses an engagement of all of human existence, including the very question of the meaning of that existence, which is the core question of religious life, and, ironically, the question that has gone missing at the core of Unitarian Universalism. The old form of rationalism that so many of us seem to gravitate toward isn't only limited, it is also a cultural production, it is the result of certain cultural choices, it is a way of looking at the world that claims a special privilege over all other ways of looking at the world. It is the product of a very Western and very *Eurocentric* disposition toward the world and everything in it.

A narrow and immature rationalism isn't our only challenge. There are other bases for our internal

divisions. The wounds and scars which we often carry from our encounters with the faiths of our youths bid us to come to UUism. We were relieved when we found that there is no one here who can make us adopt a problematic creed or dogma. This was a great moment of joy for many of us engaged in the search for a religious home. The question then became whether we would continue to define ourselves based upon what we reject, rather than what we affirm in and as a religious community. But many of us never really seemed to get past that question. And this is a problem. For if our being UUs depends on what we reject rather than affirm, on no shared metaphysics or theology, then no common language of reverence (President Bill Sinkford's phrase) can be possible, especially if we continue to water down our central message to a metaphysical and theological 'anything goes' whereby as we seek to remain open, we permit the viral growth of internal censorship and theological incoherence that will one day so gut the movement of theological and sacred content that we will exist for the sole purpose of coffee hour, pot luck dinners, political rumination and social action. To pick up on President Sinkford's suggestion, it is time for Unitarian Universalism to grow up as an organization in the world, to recognize that the UUA is an organization that needs to define its religious mission and forge an identity, rather than state that it has as many missions and identities as it has members. No organization, religious or otherwise, can look anyone in the face after stating such a notion and not expect in return a look of bewilderment. Yet we wish to make such a statement and at the same time build our numbers and, failing to build them, we actually wonder why.

No organization can long survive the kind of identity crisis that UUism presently has. And as a teacher of Adult RE, I see this identity crisis up close every time I conduct a class, and every time I get reports and murmurs that religious language from the pulpit is "too thick" and needs to be toned down. The conceptual confusion among UUs is astounding, and the Herculean attempts to reconcile the sometimes vast theological and anti-theological views of our membership is an endless game that is doomed to failure.

We UUs have not come to appreciate that we have a Diversity fetish when it comes to theological matters. That is to say, while it is certainly good to enjoy the exploration of other ways of thinking which arise out of other traditions and theologies, we are not satisfied with such enjoyment unless we *own* them all under the umbrella of UUism. We have failed to grasp the distinction between celebrating difference and owning all differences. In our attempt to own all differences, we have collapsed into a theological least common denominator of sameness that gets expressed in a list of ethical propositions with little theological content, while we feign to pay homage to all traditions by boldly declaring none, and certainly not one of our own. We fear that that would create exclusions. And heaven knows we wouldn't want that! So, too often at least, we are forced to bite our tongues in one another's presence. If we as individuals declare that a particular theological stance has some claim to conceptual or ethical superiority over another because we sincerely believe so, we need fear a wagged finger by a jejune UU rationalist or a UU who fears such comparisons. We rarely stop to consider that if we are all here as UUs that exploration of religious ideas ENTAILS such honest comparisons and evaluations as we, as individuals, construct our own points of view on important theological questions. We think that

we are free, but there is a kind of McCarthyism that haunts our congregations. We think we are safe from dogma, but we have erected a tacit dogma of our own - - Don't ask, don't tell. We retreat to the safe, uncontroversial statements of our seven principles, which are themselves but masked faith propositions but are appropriate enough in their political correctness to not be troublesome – yet.

So, in the context of the work of the NSP, and given this identity crisis we must surely face down if we are to survive, let alone grow, I wondered in Berkeley about whether we, **as an organization** of congregations linked through the UUAC, can be a coherent part of movement of spiritual progressives or any like movement, notwithstanding what we might think of ourselves. If we the UUAC would give the country and indeed the world an alternative to dogmatic religion, just what is it that we think we have to offer it? What comparable Grand Vision? What theology? What answers, as a self-described religion, to the ultimate questions of life?

The world needs progressive religion, if it needs religion at all. I certainly think it does need religion, for religion helps us to tackle the biggest questions of life, and tackle them not with our heads alone, but with all that we are, with the totality of our lived experience. As a student of both philosophy and religion, I don't think these questions can best be pursued in isolation, or through novels, or poetry, since these questions are about our common predicament, our common confrontation with a world that is sometimes splendidly beautiful and at other times frightening. Forrest Church once said in a sermon that theology is just poetry. I think what he meant by that is that theology is certainly not science, but I disagree profoundly that it is merely poetry, since it is a grand thought Experiment arising from within and out of a point of view about all that is. But I am ahead of myself. Time to define some terms.

What do I mean by 'progressive' and what do I mean by 'religion'? By 'progressive' I mean the ability and willingness to grow and adapt to new experiences, new ideas, new facts, so that expansion and movement in the direction of one's goals is the result. It is not 'progressive' just to move in any direction at all. The civil rights movement in this country was a progressive movement because it took the country in the direction of its goals of liberty and justice for all Americans which was the country's stated civil ideal. It did not just yield for the citizen the right to do more stuff as he or she pleased, did not result in the anarchy that some at the time claimed would result. Progressivism entails the movement of a person or institution in the direction of its goals, overcoming obstacles in its path – it does not entail the ablation or dissolution of goals. It makes the person or institution better as it removes obstacles to its growth and advancement. That entails being receptive to the possibility of change, to the possibility that an individual or a community or an organization never really gets it completely right, to the possibility that an approach or basic ideas can always be improved in the face of new beliefs. Progressivism is not the same as revolution, in which the thing itself (the religion, the organization, the institution) is disassembled to its foundations so that another can be built. This is key because it may be the case that what UUism in its present form is heir to is not a progressive movement toward openness

from the perspective of a religious tradition, but heir to a revolution that, in the words of the radical singer Gil Scott Heron, was not televised. A quiet revolution in which the seeds of destruction of organizational identity were sown, seeds in which the Universalist and Unitarian God of Abraham and Jesus was replaced by the God, Diversity.

By 'religion' I mean the communal pursuit of the transcendent and the sacred, of the big questions of life, and taking those big questions as central to what it means to be human. It is, further, the preparation of sometimes audacious Experimental answers to those questions and the living out of our answers to them in and through a community of like-minded believers.

The world needs progressive religion, if is to have religion at all, because the world is shrinking, and shrinking fast! Absolute certainty in religious and theological matters is more dangerous now than ever before in the history of the world. Religious ideas, just as cultures, will need to pick from three options: adapt to new realities, perish, or move toward insularity, sealing themselves off from other ideas and ways of life entirely. This has always been true of course, but the difference now is that, as far as the third choice is concerned, such insularity and rigidity may no longer be sustainable, and because now the consequences are becoming more severe. The censoring of ideas is becoming less and less possible, and less and less feasible in a world filled with instantaneous communications and multiple means of fast travel and transit. Ideas, like water, find their way in. We will either go to them, or they will come to us.

The world needs progressive religion because our reactionary and fundamentalist friends need to see that there are people with *deep religious faith* but who have also learned that love and humility require an open mind. We progressive religious people want to welcome them to celebrate their basic commitment to God, or the life of the spirit, to the values that attend to awe and reverence rather than money and celebrity, while making room for others to live out their own grand visions that attend to the questions of the purpose of life, the meaning of existence. *Religious people, as members of religious communities or movements, almost to a faith or tradition take those to be the primary questions of life.* Without them, one may ask, is there really religion at all, other than religion in that watery, etymological sense?

In a shrinking and more cosmopolitan world the peoples of the planet who begin to question their traditional beliefs will seek out alternatives, and so progressive religion can provide them, at least for some. The peoples of the planet need to see that thinking and open-minded people can be as committed to faith and religious reverence as any traditionalist conservatives; to the quintessential religious values such as faith in something larger than the self, in the humility that reverence and awe and gratitude bring to life, but who leave aside the need to name God, to be God's spokesperson, to pontificate about who is damned and who is saved, and who yet have the power to stand-up to a world that has gone mad for markets, things, and money – the true Gods and Goddesses of the modern age.

We UUs have much of what the world needs, it is true – much of what many of its peoples seek and will no doubt seek even more fervently as the questions and challenges of technology and globalization thicken and cause crises, and as we face the very question of what it means to be human. But as I suggested, what we think of as open-mindedness may in fact be a misconstrual of who we think we are. Of course I am speaking not of this congregation or any particular UU congregation, but of the movement itself, that which sets the boundaries for what UUism actually is and means, if it means anything at all. In that regard, what we think of as open-mindedness may in fact be vacuousness, a feigned receptivity of ideas where in point of fact there is nothing for those ideas to be received *into* but a metaphysical and theological void. To receive *in* ideas there has to be an *in*, and an *in* can only be understood in relative terms - it can only be understood in terms of an *out*. We UUs may be making the fatal mistake of thinking that all exclusions, even exclusions of what is functionally hostile to the very meaning of faith, are equally derisions of other points of view (but they are not!), that all boundaries are bad, rude and uncharitable (they are not!), that all fences are for the purpose of keeping social distance (they are not!). These things can do all the horrible stuff that we fear, but they can also, when handled reasonably, define and create religious identity, a religious identity based upon a shared narrative theological tradition, a shared story, with shared memories.

We of course want expansive diversity *in the world* and would never dare debar any personal exploration of any reasonable approach to faith, but it does not follow that we ought to incorporate into Unitarian Universalism all such approaches, or to honor them equally and uncritically. Because we tend not to see things that way, we have, perhaps, gutted the very meaning and content of religion and the religious life of all ultimacy and theological content, leaving in its place the remaining and valuable leg of the religious life, a sense of community, but with no shared basis for community save community itself.

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Progressive "religion" is still "religion" and, I would argue, ought not to be so only in the watery, etymological sense of that word, as mentioned. Quite to the contrary of what some of our own UU thinkers assert, "to rebind or bind up," the etymological meaning of the word 'religion' when viewed at the linguistic root, in no way expresses the meaning of the religious life. Survey the world's religions, and nearly all affirm a transcendent order, a Something that is greater than what we can see, know, touch, even think – whether they personalize that something or give it titles like the Way, the Friend, the Source, Brahman, the or Great Spirit. They all affirm that reality is, at bedrock and in ways that words cannot adequately express, *Good* - even where our own individual existence is not at all guaranteed; even as tsunamis wash away hundreds of thousands

before our eyes, or as millions are slaughtered on battlefields, or are laid out like sardines in slave ships, or are murdered in camps by the thousands and millions. Our modern rationalism and scientism, in uninformed hands, makes mockery of religion's attendant mythologies and stories, but those mythologies and stories persist because behind them is a deeper truth, just as behind the mere words of a poem there is a deeper truth. All religions boldly declare, through both propositional and mythopoeic language, their truths about the nature of reality, about the purpose of life, about why anything exists at all, and they stand by those truths and the wisdom that lives of faith often deliver-up *where and when no other kind of lives can*.

What metaphysics or theology does Unitarian Universalism boldly declare, in similar vein? Even in observing wonderful and vigorous social justice work of which we are rightly proud, our concerns about the environment, our communal openness, our struggles to make sense of liberal religion in a post-Christian movement, the answer remains: *None*. As a religion it has lost its narrative voice and its memory (and so its identity) and is, I would argue, stuck in the thickets and brambles of mere individualism (religious individual is an oxymoron, it may be noted, for religion is carried out in community rather than isolation).

These are tough words, but perhaps words that are also useful, since I speak them with love and a deep hope that we may be a part of that thing that the world needs.

We UUs, so wounded, so often, from our battles with the Jewishness or Catholicism or Islam of our youths, are on a hair trigger when it comes to any suggestion that we have gone too far from any semblance of what the world understands religion to be. And so we too often conflate the words, and misunderstand the very idea of what liberal religion entails. When we have a choice of defining religion as "critical" or "progressive," we say it must be critical, even if it erodes faith utterly. Likewise, we seem to have chosen corrosive theological "anarchy" over healthful "freedom." We mistakenly equate "creed" and "credo" even when credo (a mere statement of shared theological belief) is something we should have little trouble with, but do. Because we are weary of any "authoritarianism" we crush "authority" as well. Our scientism and rationalism and even *Eurocentrism* tell us that "knowledge" is better than "wisdom;" that "superstition" and "God-talk" are the same thing, and both are to be avoided at all costs. A religion may be and even should be, on my account, progressive, free, believing, an authority in one's life, and pursue wisdom rather than just knowledge, and sustain and support reflections that utilize transcendent vocabularies, including but not limited to God-talk of various types. *That is, it should not just do these things by default, but herald and proclaim them in its core or founding documents.*

No religion can sustain itself as a religion if it rests on deep suspicion of its own world view, and shy about asserting its own identity and point of view. It can certainly not sustain itself as a religion if it proffers no particular world view whatsoever as an explicit proposition of faith. Let's face it, we UUs are, too often, greedy individualists who want community and intimacy at the cost of causing our fellows to censor their deepest beliefs, faith commitments and languages of reverence; often greedy individualists who stand in the way of the creation of a basic and core

theological vision that would allow us as a movement to live in and through a *real* religion, with a shared and COMMON faith, rather than a dust cloud of chosen ones. If we would be a religion rather than an interfaith fellowship we must reclaim a central metaphysical and theological message, our own particular affirmation and declaration to the world and to ourselves about the nature of the order of things, devoid of undue and paralyzing timidity and trepidation that what we express may need revision (of course it shall, and always will). We must not assert mere and safe platitudes, such as that there is an interdependent web of all existence; we must assert also, without nuance and hedging, that that web is *somehow and in ways that we may not yet understand, Good*, even when what seems like evidence to the contrary presents itself. Only then will we be able to be that thing that the world needs, that progressive religious voice rather than a choir of veiled secular progressives and rationalists whose song seems to declare suspicion of that which is at the very core of religious life – the leap of faith, the surrender of the self to a Grand Vision, the beatific vision that imbues all existence with ultimate meaning. Because we share no common faith, because we are often stuck in a limited thicket of rationalist ideas, we are often timid to even declare in public, in our workplaces, among friends that we are in fact religious people. Of course, it may also be that some of us are not religious people, save for in that watery etymological sense that I believe we should reject IF we insist on calling ourselves a RELIGION.

Only then will we have a common faith that speaks as well to the terminal cancer victim as to the policy analyst and intellectual; to regular folk whose souls are as big and important as ours and whose ancestors handed down a simpler faith; to the down-trodden who are illiterate, as well as to the highbrow who write tomes filled with nuanced and caveated theology that means very little in times of crisis; to the simple seeker who looks up to the stars and asks "But *who* am I?" as well as to the Darwinist who explicates *how* our bodies came to be. Shall we be a religion, or a club? Shall we come together for *intimacy* only, or also for *ultimacy* around a common vision of religious truth, which is not the same as scientific or managerial truth? Shall we love our fellows as a common faith proposition, as Unitarian Universalism writ large, or only as individual and atomized members and ministers of sub-movements within it? Shall we be activists and policy analysts in cassocks and stoles and robes, or *prophets, prophetesses, priests and priestesses* of a bold but reasonable faith? Does religious freedom proceed unconstrained and with appeal only to an individual conscience and sensibility, or is freedom best pursued within banisters and borders, a framework, with some level of humility, modesty and, yes, even a degree of submission to the needs of the religious community as such? By analogy, do not political freedom and democracy, even at their best, require the constraints of law and a system of traditions that guide them. Certainly, they do! Freedom without law, without constraint, is not freedom at all, but its opposite. Likewise, there is no identity without memory, without a shared story.

We UUs so often recoil at such words. And that may be why we fail to build our numbers and hold onto our youth. We joke about ourselves and think the attendant laughter is healthy. We say that our theology is the same as what you will find on PBS. We hear jokes that to terrorize a Unitarian Universalist you burn a question mark on her lawn. We proclaim that there are millions more Unitarian Universalists out there, they just don't know it yet. Well, I do not think we should

be laughing.. The only possible reason why there may be so many millions of people who we think are unwitting UUs is that one need assent to very little to join-up, other than to be reasonable. Being reasonable is nearly the test for walking out the door or buying a quart of milk, it seems to me. How can it be the test of any serious faith?

Yes, the world needs progressive religion, but does it need us? Does it need us, who think that thought proceeds best with no constraints? Not even science or philosophy really hold such views any more. In science, basic bench science, the scientist, who is no lone ranger but part of a community of scientists, proceeds within the constraints of working and established theories. To do otherwise is to flail about testing hunches and whims with no discipline or direction. Many philosophers have given up the notion that thought proceeds apart from the community and time in which it finds itself. As one philosopher put it, we are sons and daughters of our time, and we are constrained to think the thoughts of our time, using the language of our time, and the metaphors, myths and stories that have been handed down to us, and which shaped us. Scientists and philosophers may break out of old theories by constructing new ones, but then the new theories will provide the new bannisters and boundaries for thought, until the paradigm shifts and the wheel turns forward once again, progressively bringing on new insights, new ways to view the world.

On this account, which you can take for what it is worth to you, Unitarian Universalism, having jumped its narrative tracks which were once rooted in the Judeo-Christian story, is no religion, but perhaps has become something else. A fellowship perhaps, or an interfaith society. Assuming those descriptions would end the identity crisis we seem to have, but at the expense of our being a religion in any historical or coherent sense of the word.

Transcendence as the Key to Our Identity?

I want to make a few bold proposals, after that barrage of critique. I want to suggest that UUism (that is the UUAC) reclaim and embrace *Transcendence*, in which word is enough room for all of us to move about and explore various theological perspectives. For *Transcendence* entails both God-talk and humanistic universalism, the idea of the ineffable and in some sense even of the concrete. It is a word that entails prayer and faith, as well as ethical sympathy and empathy. It is a word that entails mysticism, and the lone pursuit of the lover of the world and all that is in it, including the environmentalist and naturalist. *Transcending is, after all, what we human beings just happen to do every day of our lives*, as we look outside through the windows of our eyes into a reality that we are barely able to comprehend. Transcendence includes faith in a purposeful universe, and faith that love and forgiveness are where the action is on the ethical plain. It suggests a whole ethics and philosophy of diversity, and the exploration of all that is not us or like us. *Because it encompasses a continuum, a spectrum of thought and emotional range Transcendence solves the problem of identity for UUs and, ironically, returns us to some of the core thinkers of our movement – to our narrative tradition.*

I fear that if we UUs cannot claim even Transcendence as a common and uniting theologico-metaphysical idea, then we will have to accept that the things that hold us together can be gotten from places and sources that do not in any way define themselves as “religion.” As someone recently said to me, we can drink coffee and socialize anywhere.

To make this move is to then be in a far better position to offer the world what we religious progressives think it needs. We can say to it: “Come and have religion with us.” And that invitation will seem reasonable rather than absurd or curious. I want very much for Unitarian Universalism to extend that kind of invitation. For if we don’t do it, we will not only fail to grow, we will begin to loose members to other progressive religious organizations that are beginning to come on line. And that would be a shame.

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