

*Ours Is a Simple Faith* a sermon delivered at the  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario  
Sunday, September 28, 2014

**Reading #1: “A Reflection on E. B. White”** by Tom Owen-Towle

E. B. White wrote: “If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world, and a desire to enjoy the world.

This makes it hard to plan the day.”

Tom Owen-Towle writes: “A robust congregation urges parishioners to save and to savor the Creation in cadence. Our days without compassion grow hedonistic. Our journey without pleasure turns us grim. The challenge for individual explorers and congregations is to juggle moments of both duty and delight. Sometimes they turn out to be one and the same – as when we celebrate justly and do justice work joyfully. Or, as the Zuni people phrase it, ‘We dance for pleasure and the good of the city.’”

**Reading #2: “A Reflection on Rebecca Ann Parker”** by Sean Neil-Barron

“I wonder how many people here realized at one time in their life when a particular religious narrative they had believed was no longer in line with what they have experienced. These could be the stories we were told as children from our parents or from our churches or places of worship. When we come to this place of religious impasse, where our reality and our beliefs are no longer compatible, Rebecca Ann Parker, a Unitarian Universalist theologian, suggests we have three options:

[we can] hold onto our religious beliefs and deny our experiences, or we can walk away from our religious traditions and hold on to our experiences, or we can become theologians.”

**Sermon: “Ours Is a Simple Faith”** by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

*What does it mean to be a liberal religionist? A Unitarian? A Universalist? What are the pros and cons of a creedless faith? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Mystery. Mystery. Life is a riddle and a mystery.*

About twelve years ago, I started telling my family that I was planning on attending a Unitarian Universalist seminary. Well, most of my family are heretics of one sort or another – that is, we maintain religious opinions contrary to the beliefs professed by the church of our birth. A bunch of skeptics and contrarians.

But my youngest sister-in-law Cheryl, who was raised and remains in a conservative Christian faith [no women as ministers; certainly no gays], came up to me and asked “So, Suzy, what’s this Unitarian thing all about?”

I’m sure many of us have a UU elevator speech. The short speech we have prepared to explain this “simple” faith of ours. Some are shorter than others – we’re going up just three floors. And some are longer – we have 30 floors to give our spiel.

Since we weren’t going anywhere I suspect I may have given Cheryl the 50-floor version. After what I considered was a perfectly reasonable – and reasonably impassioned – speech, Cheryl looked at me and asked: “Is that all?”

*Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?*

As far as Cheryl was concerned, I had offered no adequate explanation of where we came from, who we are. We held a totally wobbly position on the existence of God. No talk of being saved, from what or by whom. Jesus hadn't even been mentioned. Heaven and hell figured in only marginally.

As an old philosophy professor would say: "My argument was neither cogent, nor coherent, nor cohesive. Meaning my explanation was – at least to Cheryl – not convincing, or believable, or clear, or to the point; the parts weren't logical; they didn't stick together. Just a muddle. And simply not adequate as a statement of faith, of what a person ought to believe in.

*Is that all?*

In subsequent years, after giving my speech, I've never received quite such an honest response to my elevator speech. "Is that all??!!"

I've often received puzzled looks; and lots of uncomfortable silence.

But on occasion, I've gotten a spark of connection. A nod of agreement. A light in the eyes. And more questions, even a conversation.

[My current elevator speech:

Our Unitarian heritage tells us that we are, all of us, made of the same stuff – star stuff. You are a unique piece of stardust. And – as the local Greek Orthodox priest reminded me when I was doubting myself: "You are worthy."

You are worthy. We each carry a piece of that original light – [the Big Bang, the kitchen of Creation, the Great Radiance; whatever you call it. We need to recognize that light in ourselves and each other. And let it shine.

And we're all part of an intricately and inextricably interconnected web of existence. We are all in this together, this evolutionary enterprise, this blue-green earthly home. And we're all connected. So we better pay attention to what we do, and how we do it because, not only does each of us matter. What we do matters.

Our Universalist heritage tells us that we all have a place at the table of Creation. We are a richly diverse humanity with a cornucopia of possibilities to explore. .

So, you see, even the short version – all is One; we all matter; go out and shine and helps others shine – we all got a lot of 'splainin' to do.]

*Where do we come from? Who are we?*

When I told a house of guest of ours, an old high school and college friend who has also gone through seminary [and subsequently changed denominations] – when I told her the title of this sermon – "Ours Is a Simple Faith" she quickly responded "Not!!"

Just trying to formulate an elevator speech can be daunting – even for someone who has read thousands of pages of UU theology & history & biography & polity [that's how we govern ourselves] and such.

Ours is not a simple faith to explain to an outsider.

We, who pride ourselves on belonging to a non-creedal faith [and by that I mean we do not have to subscribe to any one distinct doctrine – about who God or Jesus is, about heaven or hell, about salvation, or the inerrancy of a scripture] – we Unitarian Universalists have the dubious distinction of being named after not one, but two, doctrinal issues. [Baptists are named after their particular belief in how and when a baptism, the washing away original sin, should occur. Lutherans and Buddhists are named after their founder. Taoists are named after a holy writing. Methodists are named after a method of practicing their faith. Presbyterians and Congregationalists are named after their method of church governance.]

*Where do we come from? Who are we?*

Ours is a faith with no prescribed sacraments or rituals. No original sin.

Ours is a faith with not just one founder.

We have no one way of practicing our faith.

[Our polity is indeed congregational – we govern as a democratic body – but a couple hundred years ago we broke away from the Congregational church because their beliefs were simply too conservative for us.]

*Who are we?*

Unitarians, historically, believed in one God. Not in a Trinity, a three-person God.

Plenty of us dismiss that “G” word altogether as irrelevant to our lives; and plenty of us have our doubts – about its veracity, but prefer to keep our options open.

The theists among us may sometimes reference the three aspects of God – the traditional Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit – or in more contemporary terms – the Creator, the Liberator, and the Sustainer – that which gives us life, that which frees us to be all we can be, and that which gives of hope and strength to go on – as three aspects of God, three types of movement we experience in our lives.

These days, the joke tells us, Unitarians believe in one God. At most.

Universalists, historically, resisted the idea of predestination – the idea that God had, at the beginning of time, determined which folks would be saved – and go to heaven, and which folks would be damned, for eternity, to hell. Universalists believed in a loving God who could not possibly damn any of His [and it really was always “He” at this point] children to hell for all eternity.

Indeed, it is said that Universalists believe that God is too good to send anyone to hell; and Unitarians believe that they are too good to be sent there.

Well, the idea of Unitarianism was raised – some 1800 years ago [and even quite a bit earlier if you count the ancient religions of Egypt]; and the idea of universalism was raised in the northeast American colonies almost 500 years ago. Since then a lot has happened.

The two branches of our faith were both heretical – rejecting the orthodox religious beliefs of the Christian faith that prevailed in Europe and then the Americas.

After burning a bunch of heretics at the stake, or running people out of town or out of the country, after persecutions of various sorts because of those folks' unorthodox religious views or practices, little pockets of tolerance grew and expanded.

Spain under Muslim rule – between 711 and 1492 – was remarkably tolerant of the three main religions of the day – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The Edict of Torda, a decree of religious toleration, was issued in Poland in 1568 by King Sigismund, the one Unitarian king we can claim as our own.

In the 1600s the Enlightenment happened – the age of reason and individualism. Science was introduced as the new norm for truth.

The Transcendental movement with its new appreciation of nature and our place in it.

And revolutions came, calling for rights and freedoms for the common people, rights that were little known under tyrannies, divinely-backed monarchies, patriarchies.

Unitarians and Universalists became the poster children for liberal religion. Freedom of thought and belief, freedom from dogma [like the bumper sticker: “We curb our dogma”], the right of conscience, the practice of democracy in our congregations, a focus on the individual, the idea of tolerance moving into an appreciation of the blessings of diversity – we became welcoming congregations [like the wit Swami Beyondanonda tells us: we do not want to live in a “dogma eat dogma world”].

We UUs accepted science and individual experience as pathways to the truth.

We sought to move society forward – more freedom, more justice, more equity for all. [We worked against slavery; for voting rights for women; for the humane treatment of the weak and powerless – children, the mentally ill, animals – the founder of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was a Unitarian.]

But liberal religion has its weaknesses.

It is a complicated faith, filled with possibilities and with ambiguities. It's a faith that is hard to explain to others.

Someone commenting about us in 1912 said: “Oh, I have a great deal of respect for the Unitarians. They don't believe a goddamn thing and they live up to it every day of the week, Sundays included.”

Of course, there is the old joke:

What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a UU?

Someone who knocks on your door repeatedly, week after week, and when you finally answer, doesn't know what to say.

We sometimes say: “Oh, you can believe anything!”

A kid comes home from Sunday School [and I do call it Sunday School – not RE, or Religious Education or Religious Enrichment. Sunday School is a term everybody can understand].

His mom asks him what they talked about that day.

“Cannibalism,” he tells her.

“Well, what did the teacher say about that? Was she for it or against it?” mom asks.

The kid answers: “She said we had to decide for ourselves.”

We talk and talk about issues, but sometimes find it hard to come to a decision.

“How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb?  
None. The light bulb must change itself.

“How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb?

Well, we’ve got a discussion group going, and a committee’s working on it, and they’ve written a questionnaire and tallied all the responses, but they can’t come to an agreement on the exact number.”

“How many member of a UUA committee does it take to change a light bulb?” [Back when Canada and the US were one entity called the UUA – the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and we were divided into 20 or so districts.]

How many member of a UUA committee does it take to change a light bulb?

Ten, of whom at least five must be women, two African American, three ministers, one Canadian, one youth, two elderly, two gay or lesbian, one Christian, one disabled, one UUA board member, and no more than there from any one District.

Or this one:

“We choose not to make a statement either in favor of, or against, the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way long-life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.”

We can be paralyzed by choice.

On the other hand, we can be too swift to judge. We can cut off someone else’s comments, or say “That’ll never work!” we can be downright judgmental at times.

Indeed, we are a passionate people – at least intellectually, and can come down hard on the Process side of the spectrum [wanting to consider every available option], or the Judgment side of the spectrum, knowing exactly what ought to be done. We are quite human.

We sometimes focus on the individual to the exclusion, or the detriment, of the community. So individual that we are reluctant to take a stance as a community. Reluctant to put boundaries around the very vocal individual.

[Have you ever been at a meeting where one person’s voice can stop the proceedings flat? Or in which everyone has their say until, after 3 or so hours of meeting someone says: Enough!]

Sometimes, indeed, that may be a prophetic voice – a voice that tells us how we are falling well short of our best selves and best ideals.

One person – obviously an outsider – reminds us that “No other denomination allows for a period of public disagreement and rebuttal after the sermon. And calls it Talkback.”

Otherwise,

We sometimes say UUs can “believe anything.” Really??!! That abuse or rape are okay? That bullying should go unchallenged? That racism and homophobia and sexism are accepted ways of acting? [To paraphrase MLK, “I can’t change another man’s hate of me; what I do want are laws saying he can’t lynch me.”]

We can be elitist, always checking out each other’s educational background, social justice background, and such. Quite daunting to a person with a blue collar, working class background [like me].

We can be word-phobic – “worship,” [you might have noticed we used that word several times already – we are here not to worship someone but to “shape worth”], “sermon” [I give sermons, not talks], “sanctuary,” “prayer” [the joke is, we UUs pray “to Whom It May Concern”]. [My personal word-ouch is “sin.”]

But the person sitting next to us may need exactly the worlds we hate. [sin, salvation, God]

Once upon a time, at a Sunday service in one of the very big Unitarian churches in Boston, a newcomer came in and sat in the back pew.

During the minister’s sermon, he began making a ruckus. After every sentence the minister said, the guy shouted, “Amen!” “Preach it, Brother!” “Halleluia!”

One of the ushers approached the man and spoke to him quietly. “Sir, uh, we just don’t do things like that here.”

“But I got *religion!*”

“Well,” the usher replied, “you certainly didn’t get it here.”

We can be metaphor-challenged – stories with God or angels may be hard for us to hear. We may see no benefit in any story with a supernatural being. Only the facts, ma’am!

But “only the facts” leaves us with a thin representation of what lived life feels like.

We can flippantly make fun of other religions, or look down our noses at them, as if folks from other faiths were stupid to believe or belong.

We can even look askance at each other. In many of our congregations Christians and god-believers [however they describe that God or their belief] are closeted. Especially in staunchly humanist groups, we may have a “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy. [And, by the way, I think of all of us – whether theist or non- or whatever – all of us are humanists here: we know that the work of the world must be done by our heads and hearts and hands.]

So, not a simple faith, indeed.

But a wonderful faith. A faith riddled with potential pitfalls. But a faith trying to keep its doors open and spread its tent wide and wider.

A very human faith.

And what brought you here?  
What makes you stay? Keep coming back?

Whether we are talking about our strengths, or our weaknesses, or the opportunities in this faith to broaden and deepen our lives, theologian Paul Rasor tell us that “liberal theology is not for the faint of heart. It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make.

The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation.... Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology; openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.” [185]

May we walk together, eyes-wide-open, in this faith of ours.  
May we make of this place a place just right. A valley of love and delight.

May we celebrate justly and do justice work joyfully. ‘Dance for pleasure and the good of the [community].’

May we learn to follow, learn to lead.  
Discern what is wrong, and what is right.  
Through the good times and the bad times, too.

May we here cook up a storm of tender mercy, hope and courage.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.



