

Ownership, Belonging, and the Myth of Like Minds
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship

April 23, 2006

(Comments about the children's story refer to "The Big Orange Splot" by Daniel Manus Pinkwater, in which a man living on a neat street where all the houses look the same decides to paint his house in a very unconventional way. The neighbors object...then one by one, come to decorate their own houses to reflect their own individual dreams.)

It was a week ago Saturday, the day before Easter. I was furiously working on completing my sermon for Sunday when there came a knock at my door. I opened that door to find two well-turned-out young men, white shirts and ties, satchels in hand. "We're ministers," they said.

"Great," I replied. "So am I." I detected the slightest hesitation, an uneasy blink.

But their mission was not assuaged. "Can we come in and share with you the message of salvation?"

To make a short story even shorter, they did not come in, and I went back to my work. But I couldn't help imagining a potential conversation with these ardent youth. What could I have said or shared that would offer them a picture of my faith, of Unitarian Universalism? I admire their commitment and wondered what I could learn from them. How might my beliefs engage with and influence theirs? Am I able to clearly and passionately express the good news of Unitarian Universalism?

One of the reasons this is difficult is that we, as a faith tradition, draw upon the whole spectrum of world religions. When asked to articulate what we believe, we seem to be left with the choice between expressing our own personal beliefs, which doesn't carry the punch of a denominational creed, or of saying that we can believe anything, which is mighty watered down, and not at all representative of the richness of our movement or the depth of our commitment.

Last fall I spoke to you about the UUA Commission on Appraisal's report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. That report suggested a series of questions to be discussed in small groups, and so we had a series of Circle Supper conversations to do just that. The questions are listed in your Order of Service; I hope that those of you who were unable to attend the suppers may enjoy pondering these questions. Their common thread is in encouraging us to articulate Unitarian Universalism and to name why we are drawn to being a part of this community. One

premise is that if we can figure out why we are here, we can also figure out why others might like to join us.

Let me recap the COA's findings, and preface this by saying that they conclude that theologically, as diverse as UU's are, what unifies us far outweighs what divides us.¹ Here is the list of what they feel defines our common theological ground:²

- We are a grounded faith. Our roots go back well over 200 years on this continent.
- We are an ecological faith. We have placed the interdependent web squarely at the center of our shared worldview.
- We are a profoundly human faith. Our primary focus for religious action is the well-being of this world.
- We are a responsible faith. We understand that humanity must take responsibility for the state of the world.
- We are an experiential faith. We focus more on our experience than on beliefs.
- We are a free faith. We recognize the authenticity and integrity of each individual's life journey.
- We are an imaginative faith. We engage with image and story in order that creativity can flourish.
- We are a relational faith. We ground our individual journeys in a caring community.
- We are a covenantal faith. We are held together by our chosen commitment.
- We are a curious faith. We acknowledge that we live in the midst of uncertainties and are ever open to new insights.
- We are a reasonable faith. We encourage the practice of disciplined inquiry, and...
- We are a hopeful faith. We insist on seeing possibilities for justice and an inclusive beloved community.

A wonderful list really, and in my opinion, quite accurate. It is interesting to note that this list names our common theological ground, not our common theology. This reinforces the fact that we are not bound together by commonly held truths, but by our commitment to question and to find what truth might lie beyond.

I took the list of theological traits prepared by the COA and tried to compare that to the responses received at the Circle Suppers. Admittedly, this meant doing some subjective guesswork, because the questions did not ask for categorical answers. This is also, I'm sure, not a very accurate picture of the whole Circle Supper experience....it's actually quite arrogant of me to think I can capture it all here. But here goes. As near as I can figure, in order of number of responses, first and by a long shot, you are a part of LUF because this is a *free faith*. You come

¹ Ibid, 118.

² Ibid, 91

because of your respect for and in service to the belief that each person is responsible for their own search for truth and meaning, and because you believe that we should be tolerant of, even accepting of, the diversity this engenders. You are a UU because you flourish in a creedless atmosphere where there are no strings that bind us in guilt. You appreciate the free exchange of ideas where there is respect for each voice.

Second to the free search, the participants in the Circle Suppers expressed their commitment to UUism because it is a *relational faith*. You find here familiar faces and networks of friends. Here, you say, is a loving community where people sincerely care for one another. LUF both provides a place to gather and fulfills your need to be part of a religious community.

Next on the list, you believe this to be both a *responsible and human faith*. You believe that we have a responsibility to work for social justice and to be welcoming of all people. You believe that through our actions it is possible to achieve heaven on earth, although you understand that this is a great challenge due to the limits our humanity imposes. You believe that our individual talents can be used to the benefit of others and that the way in which we move through the world makes a difference.

You also embrace the fact that this is a *curious faith*. Openness is one of your compelling characteristics. You are willing to live with uncertainty and you believe that the process of questioning is empowering.

Then you go off the COA chart. I felt it necessary, when compiling the Circle Supper results, to add a category for *spirituality*. You are a spiritual people, and were quite generous in commenting that you go in search of something beyond yourselves, a greater meaning, something transcendent. Apparently, for many of you, Unitarian Universalism is a faith that serves the quest for the spiritual.

Returning to the COA list, there were a good number of comments that supported the fact that we are an *ecological faith*, one based in *reason* or disciplined inquiry, one that is held together by our *chosen commitment* to one another, and one that is *imaginative* in its use of wisdom of the world's stories and images.

The rest of the categories had few responses. They are probably statistically insignificant, but may indicate some areas where we could use some deepening and education. Just a couple of responses referred to our historical *grounding*, and perhaps this reflects the fact that Thunder Bay is quite isolated from seeing and interacting with a larger picture. Likewise, just a handful

made comments that mentioned our personal *experience* as our religious authority. I would guess that this is 'assumed' and just didn't happen to be teased out by these particular questions. My greatest concern in doing this comparison is the very few responses that I could place in the *hopeful* category... I'm actually not sure what to make of that. My concern is that it could imply a lack of vision or purpose. I can't address that issue today, but certainly want to bring it to your attention for your thought and reflection.

Obviously the COA report was of a much larger scope than our Circle Suppers, and certainly more reliable statistically than anything we could do here. The purpose of having these conversations was not to be able to definitely answer the question of what lies at our core, but to begin or continue to deepen, as Marge Piercy says, our understanding of who we mean when we say "we". There are several reasons why I feel this is important.

First, as a tradition which honors the individual search for truth and meaning, and the building of our own theologies, to understand the movement as a whole and why we choose to be a part of it is a key ingredient in our personal inquiries. It gives us something relatively solid with which to build, something that helps us to understand ourselves. In other words, this dialogue can have personal benefit...on an individual level.

Another reason is that if we believe that what we do and what we believe matters, then being able to articulate what we stand for can be transformative, not only for ourselves, but for those with whom we interact. In our interconnected web, our effect is heard more clearly and felt more broadly when we are able to name who we are. This dialogue is interpersonal and therefore benefits the whole community.

On an institutional or denominational level, this work is key in our ever-evolving communal theology. Since the questions are always open, the process of the search is seminal. As we each evolve, so does this faith. Unitarian Universalism is not the same as it was 200 years ago, or even 20 years ago.

But the fact that we are ever evolving is no reason to abandon the naming. Hopefully we will always be like a tea box with a "new and improved" bullet on the label. Perhaps we will always be redesigning our logo and changing our colours. This is not an indication that we are indecisive or unable to commit, but rather that we are embracing the continual flow and evolution that's necessary when living in a diverse and open community.

This is not an easy way to exist. It is the insistence that there is no absolute truth, the sincere commitment to remaining open and fluid. We have walked into the stream, intentionally entered the process of evolution, and we trust that the stream will be changed by our presence and that we will be changed by the stream.

I recently received an email containing several UU jokes. One asked, what you get when you cross a Unitarian with a Jehovah's Witness. Answer? Someone who comes knocking on your door for no apparent reason.

I can understand why we are the brunt of such jokes. We are unwilling, for good reason, to state universal truths. We have no one sacred text that we claim to hold the final word. Our authority comes from personal experience and reason, and not necessarily from a higher power. This is not a neat religion. It cannot be packaged in traditional form. It is not easily understood. People scratch their heads, saying that we have popped our corks or that we have knots in our noodles. We build and paint things in a way that is different than the mainstream.

As was true for Mr. Plumbean in today's children's story, it takes both courage and creative energy to take a bold stand. It takes a long evening under the palm trees, slowly sipping lemonade, to express our dreams. But in this way, taking the time to share, one with another, this living faith will grow. We might not be able to be succinct, but we can be passionate. Others will see the beauty we see in the free expression of beliefs and ideas. As is often expressed in UU Sunday morning welcomes to newcomers, it is necessary to attend several times before a person can begin to understand who we are.

When I titled this service, I was thinking about our quest to expand our circle, to knock on doors, if only figuratively. I have some fears about our ability to do this, not because we are unable to express what we believe (because this can be learned), and not because we don't have a saving message (because Unitarian Universalism does offer a message of freedom and love), but because sometimes we get tripped up by wanting some assurances.

And so I titled this service "Ownership, Belonging, and the Myth of Like Minds." Each of these things is desirable, yet each is a double-edged sword which must be handled and used

with great care and awareness. They bind us to this community as they simultaneously make the circle less permeable. We long for them, even as their attainment closes the door for others.

You see, ownership is about possession. Western society places a high value on ownership and teaches us that when we invest in something, we are given rights in return. You make a financial pledge to LUF, and you have a right to vote in its decisions. You spend a good deal of time working on a project, and you are granted some control over its outcome. When we introduce new concepts or ventures, we try to get 'buy-in' so that people will have some 'ownership' in it. All good things perhaps, but it does set up a hierarchy of owners and non-owners, big investors and small investors, those whose voice should be heard and those who aren't granted a voice. When we enter into ownership, we must be very careful of what edge of the sword we are using...is it an edge that will engender participation and equality, or is it an edge that cuts some out? Ideally, it would be wonderful to have an attitude that says, "I own this, I invest in this, in order that I might freely share it with others."

Belonging presents another conundrum. Most all of us want to experience the feeling of belonging, of being in the right place, of fitting in. But once we belong, we don't want things to change, and the human temptation is to close off association with the outsider or the boat-rocker. If you're someone who does puzzles, you will have had the experience of holding a piece that just doesn't seem to fit anywhere...wrong colors, wrong pattern...yet eventually you find that it does, in fact, belong. Belonging and ownership can contribute to a need to protect what we have...to put in security systems and thicker doors. Maybe it's another of those antithetical things, but I'd like to suggest that a sense of belonging should encourage us to have larger and more open hearts. It should encourage us to give others that same feeling...and to trust that every piece of humanity fits into the cosmic puzzle.

And finally, to be with like-minds is a common expression of why you're part of this community. Yet most on any given topic, I'm sure you will find some agreement and some disagreement. Yes, we might be like-minded in quality...in our willingness to remain open, but we cannot assume that we are like-minded in our beliefs. I have seen many of you hurt by an assumption of agreement, and that includes words I speak from this pulpit. You won't always agree with me, nor I with you...and isn't that wonderful! I am hopeful that the experience of

the circle suppers gave many of you a chance to really listen to one another, to respect each person, and to expand your picture of all that LUF contains.

We do not exist as a religious community simply to grow. We are not here to make ourselves into something that others want to join. We are certainly not here to homogenize our beliefs into a common creed. But we are here to make the most meaning out of our lives as is humanly possible. We are here to be part of a loving community that supports and enriches each life. We are here to give all of what we are to make this place and our ideas accessible to others. We do have a saving message, and sharing that message will necessarily enlarge our circle, and enlarging the circle will shake things up a bit.

This is my challenge for you today...to engage in your own search always interested in the path another takes, to commit to this community with an unconditional love even as the known slips away, and to embrace this circle with arms outstretched in welcome.

So, picture this room as the circle that is LUF. Picture that door as the opening into our circle. Whenever you enter that door, be intentional about carrying with you the largest heart and the most open mind. Whenever you enter the circle (as if you ever leave it), release your need for security and predictability in order to celebrate all that is here for us. Encourage in yourself open arms of ownership and a fluidity of belonging. Recommit, whenever you open that door, to a respect for the inherent worth and dignity of each person you find here. Know that when you cross this threshold, you will be changed by this circle, and the circle will be changed by your presence.

So be it...the incredible ever-changing circle that is Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship.