

Embracing Our Tea-ological Diversity  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship  
Julie Stoneberg  
November 20, 2005

I come from a culture of pretty low tea-ology. If there is to be tea, and this is not a particularly common or sacred thing, it is usually served in individual portions...a plain ceramic mug of hot water and an array of tea bag choices...black, orange, herbal, green, decaffeinated. My personal choice is usually something herbal ...a mint, a spice, or if it's near bedtime, a cup of chamomile. In this low tea-ology, you pour milk from the carton, or spoon sugar directly from the jar. Perhaps it's the British influence, but I've found Thunder Bay to have a much higher tea-ology. One particularly sacred tea, Red Rose, is served in pretty china pots, pots that are warmed before-hand and which then sit all perky and cozy-ed, on a tray surrounded by proper sugars and creamers. Several times I have been served tea in beautiful china cups that rival the collection of teacups my mother kept on a special shelf...and never ever used.

I've found your tea practice to be charming. It seems a thoughtful, intentional, loving practice...a way of life, a familiarity. It's just how it's done, and I suppose that you don't even think about it. If someone asked you about the culture of Thunder Bay, I don't imagine that this ritual tea practice would be the first thing that you thought necessary to share.

I've noticed something else about this practice ... it assumes that everyone will like the same kind of tea. There's a common pot that everyone pours from, and drinks from, and shares. It's almost invisible...unless it's unfamiliar. Your tea-ology is quite visible to me...and I've come to expect that when the common pot is poured, I'll get Red Rose Tea, or something similar. I also know that you'll accept that when I have the need, I will quietly heat my own water and steep an individual bag of something of my own choice.

Some people must connect with the warmth of the common pot, and even feel that to use individual bags is sacrilegious. Others may be offended when there is only one kind of tea...because it's not what they like or what speaks to their culture. Maybe we need a tea committee to decide what kind of tea practice is acceptable here. Should it be brewed in large quantities, or by the cup? What variety of teas should be provided? Should we have a list of all the sources and brands, claiming to be inclusive of all teas, whatever their heritage? Would the jasmines and oolongs have a certain exoticism and the Earl Grey be poo-pooed as common or even oppressively predictable? And don't forget about the accoutrements. Honey, sugar, or sugar substitutes? Milk or cream? What about Lemon? Who on earth will we get to chair this committee?

Okay, in writing about this, I started to think of that character on Saturday Night Live... was it Rosanna Rosannadanna?...who got off talking about something until she was interrupted by someone saying.... “not TEA-ology. It’s THEOLOGY!” Her face would go blank, and she’d say, “Oh. Never mind.” Well, actually, we do mind, and the UU Commission on Appraisal recently completed its report on our theological differences. The report is entitled, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, and it was released in May of this year. The Commission on Appraisal is a committee of the UUA, and their role is to review any function or issue it decides would benefit from in-depth study, to suggest approaches and reforms, and to report to the General Assembly. This appraisal is a result of four years of interviews, surveys, hearings and workshops...a collection of wisdom from individuals, congregations, and constituents worldwide (that includes Canada.) Mark Hamilton from Toronto served on this Commission on Appraisal. This particular topic, our theological diversity, was chosen by the Commission because it felt that finding the unity in our theological diversity is necessary for our very survival as an association of congregations.<sup>1</sup> The concern is, that despite consensus that the liberal message of UUism is important in this troubled world, we find it difficult to articulate exactly what that message is.<sup>2</sup> After reading and studying this report, I agree that finding our center, what unifies us, what binds us together, is critical for a vital future. And, this is as important on a congregational level as it is on a continental level. What is it that binds this group together as Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship?

I wanted to get to know you better, so several weeks ago I asked you to tell me how you self-identify as religious persons. I gave you a list of about twenty possible identifiers, along with the ‘other’ category that is necessary in any effort to label UU’s. There were thirty-seven responses, seventeen of whom did find it necessary to write something in the ‘other’ box. Of the total, just three respondents identified solely as Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist. Two others wrote in hyphenated identities in which UU took one part of the equation. Another eighteen checked the Unitarian Universalist box, plus as many as eight other boxes. Alarming, fourteen didn’t check the Unitarian Universalist box at all. I don’t really know what to make of that. Maybe we had a lot of visitors that day. Maybe it’s because UU’s are averse to drawing lines and marking boundaries, and this makes it difficult for us to define ourselves.<sup>3</sup> But more likely, maybe Unitarian Universalism is such an unknown quantity, that we can’t be sure we can identify with it. It’s a conundrum really. We want

---

<sup>1</sup> *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, 4

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 12

Unitarian Universalism to be big enough to embrace all of the possible theologies we have, yet we cannot identify with Unitarian Universalism because its definition is too amorphous and broad to be compelling. It has been suggested that one reason many young people leave the church after high school is because they've never formed a deep identification with our faith tradition. How should we expect them to do that if we ourselves cannot name or claim exactly what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist?

(A quick aside here to clarify this UU stuff for those of you who might be wondering ... Unitarian Universalism is a religious movement that was formed as a merger of two denominations in 1961. That merger produced the Unitarian Universalist Association, UUA, which was a continent-wide association of congregations with headquarters in Boston, MA. At that same time, Canadian Unitarians and Universalists also formed their own national association, the Canadian Unitarian Council, or CUC, which remained under the UUA umbrella until just a few years ago. At the time the CUC was formed, there were only about three congregations remaining in Canada that had originally been Universalist congregations, and it is my understanding that the name Canadian Unitarian Council left out the Universalist part more for simplicity than anything. Since I come out of the UUA, the American, setting, I'm more comfortable using Unitarian Universalist where you might simply say Unitarian.)

See? Just explaining our name is confusing enough, so how are we to talk about what we believe? To start with, to consider what we believe requires some historical reflection. We are doggedly a movement without dogma, a creedless faith that believes vehemently in the right and responsibility of each person to conduct hir own search for meaning. Even so, both sides of this denomination have tried repeatedly to understand and define our theological center.

The Universalists were perhaps more successful at this. In 1803, they adopted the Winchester Profession which acknowledged a belief in the revelation of the Bible, a certainty of eventual salvation and the moral imperative of good works. At the same time, it forbade churches to require a credal test and contained a liberty clause, which said that a church was free to adopt other articles of faith as long as they didn't disagree with the profession. The Winchester Profession was used by the Universalists for 96 years.<sup>4</sup>

What Unitarians believed was first articulated by William Ellery Channing in his Baltimore Sermon of 1819. Then, the Unitarian Western Conference adopted a "non-binding explanation of its

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 23

theology” in 1887, called “The Things Most Commonly Believed Today.” But the first adoption of a general statement of belief by the Unitarians didn’t happen until 1894, and was contained in a preamble to the constitution of the National Unitarian Conference. After clearly stating what the churches accept...the religion of Jesus, and that practical religion is summed up in love of God and love to man...this preamble also maintained that nothing in it was to be construed as an authoritative test.<sup>5</sup>

In 1936, the very first Unitarian Commission on Appraisal report suggested that “it would be of incalculable benefit to the denomination if we could contrive to state in definite and explicit terms both our agreements and our points of tension.” That Commission then offered an example of about six statements each of agreement and disagreement based on its own polling and research.<sup>6</sup>

Even with this long history of insistence on religious freedom, some have suggested that the underlying problem, of an inability to define ourselves, was created, or at least institutionalized, at the time of consolidation. When the UUA was formed in 1961, another study commission produced a document entitled *The Free Church in a Changing World*. That report said:

“In most other churches, theological quandary is personal. It is not institutional. With us, on the contrary, theological quandary is not personal, it is institutional. We have set at the heart of our church, not a creed or a statement of faith, but the principle that theological questions shall be kept open. We, therefore, have no creed and can have none.”<sup>7</sup>

With the goal of a smooth consolidation, and faced with possible messiness and contention in identifying a core, that 1963 commission decided to leave a question mark at the center of our faith. Hence the popular joke about question marks being burnt on the front lawns of UU’s.

And so, here we are again, another Commission, another report, another attempt to define just who we are. The problem does not lie in a dearth of commitments. Unitarian Universalists tend to have strong individual viewpoints, and many, even in this congregation, assume that their individual convictions are, or should be, representative of the whole. But the reality is that, even giving full homage to the grand historical traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism, our current membership is a very diverse bunch. Are we to exclude some by claiming a theological unity? If we can’t define who we are, why should we join together?

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 25

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 27

If we want to effect change in this world, if we want to spread this liberal faith beyond its current boundaries, we need to grow. Paradoxically, to grow effectively, a religious organization needs clearly defined boundaries. We get caught up in these terms. We're afraid of being boxed in. But, we would do well to remember that boundaries are not necessarily impermeable. Rather, they define our edges and differentiate us from that which we are not. There has been encouragement recently for each of us to craft our personal 'elevator speech'...that is, how do you explain Unitarian Universalism to a stranger in an elevator...you have only a few floors before this opportunity passes. What is the most important thing to say, how do you express the core of this faith? I suspect that many of you have tried to do this exercise, and have found that it's not an easy thing to do.

Imagine this...We have a product to sell. Let's say...tea. This is a tea that we have become familiar with, it's the tea that we prefer to drink, yet we cannot say why. We have difficulty putting it in any one container or bag. We can't agree on how to package it, so we have a mish mash of boxes and jars. We can label them, but we can't make them distinguishable. How are we to present such a product in our marketing? One-of-a-kind boxes of tea are hard to associate with any brand name.

Still, we believe in this tea. We believe that this tea has healing properties, and that when it is consumed regularly, it can change the world. But when pressed for how it will do this, what it contains, we have no answers. Other teas make the same claim, some of them come in prettier packages, or even cost less. Why should anyone choose our tea?

In order to distinguish this tea from any other, in order to identify this tea as unique, attractive, even salvific, we have to define it. It's not enough to say that it's not the same as what's in the neighbor's teabag. Our difficulty with self-definition has indeed sapped our ability to be successful. We can't seem to say what it is that we have to sell. If Donald or Martha were judging us, we would certainly be called to the board room and fired.

One thing I know for sure about our tea is that it is a blend. There is no question that we are theologically diverse. In fact, our theological diversity is part of the answer to what defines us. But this is not enough. As we become ever more inclusive, the circle widens, and we court the danger of becoming "a mile wide and an inch deep."<sup>8</sup>

The Commission on Appraisal dug deeper and tried to find ways to identify us. They worked with our current Principles and Purposes, with the surveys from previous commission reports, with a psychological profile presented in 2003, with a 1976 values assessment, and with the statement of agreement from the 1936 report. They looked at what we share in common in worship elements and

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 89.

styles. They delved into our history to more clearly identify our roots. From all of this, they concluded that theologically, as diverse as UU's are, what unifies us far outweighs what divides us.<sup>9</sup> Quickly, here are a few items they feel define our common ground:<sup>10</sup>

- 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 responsible faith. We understand that humanity must take responsibility for the state of the world.
- We are a free faith. We recognize the authenticity and integrity of each individual's life journey.
- We are a covenantal faith. We are held together by our chosen commitment, and
- We are a hopeful faith. We insist on seeing possibilities for justice and an inclusive beloved community.

This, for me, is a heartening list...it gives me hope and empowers me to embrace all of what we are. Still, though this list tells me who we are and what we have in common, and it expresses beautifully how we choose to be in this world and in relationship with each another, it doesn't really tell me what is the core of our faith. Ultimately, the Commission sidesteps this question and suggests that there needs to be another study. That may be true, but I felt a bit like I had been led on a treasure hunt while reading this report, expecting to find the Holy Grail, and once again, found only a tiny folded note with yet another clue. The search continues.

Here's the exciting part, though. The clue I found in this report led me to the upper room... (no, not THAT upper room!) I mean the one at the back of this building...where on this past Monday night, I was part of a conversation with would-be theologian/parents, a group of courageous UU's who are willing to enter into a deep listening dialogue with one another. I sensed that for several of them it felt scary, like going out on a limb, to say what they believe, outloud, in the company of those who might not believe the same things. Yet, they did it, they were willing to step out and take a chance, and it was transformative. Maybe the center we seek is in our relationships...in our acceptance of one another and our willingness to learn in community with those who see things a bit differently. I'm beginning to wonder if the center is the liminal space in which we meet and cross boundaries. Like Kenneth Patton suggested, maybe at the center is a void –an openness - the ever-fecund matrix out of which being emerges.<sup>11</sup> It's as if an openness to difference creates an empty space, a space where we can truly connect, a space that both invites us to share of ourselves and to bridge differences, yet also provides us with something to stand upon...the common ground of community.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 90

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 90

This is a relational theology. To hold a theology of relationship is to elevate relationships to the level of ultimate worth and meaning and to believe that in our connections we are changed, that these connections can be generative of more care and well-being, and that making these connections builds true community. It is interesting that this Commission found that while we agree that being part of an inclusive and covenantal religious community is important, we disagree on whether building the beloved community or supporting the quest of the solitary individual is the true goal.<sup>12</sup> No matter...I would be content to put the power of relationships at the center of our faith.

It's like the statement at the end of our Principles and Purposes... "Grateful for the religious pluralism that enriches and ennobles [us], we are inspired to deepen our understanding..." We are inspired to deepen our understanding of one another. We must both engage and embrace our theological diversity, and those very movements, to engage and to embrace, are what draw us together... and change us.

Now, I found one aspect of this report troubling. That is, that theological conversation is rarely a part of our congregational life. Without these conversations, we are not tapping into the real life-changing power of connections...we are neither embracing nor engaging our differences. It is as if we are too nice, scared that we'll say something that will offend, afraid that we'll find out we don't agree and that we'd fall apart. I'd like for us to challenge that unspoken supposition, and to find ways to have frank and honest discussions about what we truly believe. There's a Program Council meeting after the service today, and I'm going to propose a series of circle suppers where we can gather in small groups, ask each other some hard questions, and really learn something about one another. The dialogue is the thing. We have to come to the table.

We can do this over tea.

So be it.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 157