

SPIRITUAL RESOURCES OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

I am going to start this morning with one of the great stories told about Buddha. Before the birth of the one who was to become Buddha, his parents were told that their son would grow up to be either a great emperor or an extraordinary religious leader. They responded in much the way that each of us would. They did everything in their power to make sure that he became a great emperor. The parents built three palaces for their son and surrounded him with only young healthy people. They figured that if he never came in contact with old age, disease, death or any of the ugliness of the world he would never become interested in religion. Whenever the boy went riding, a group went ahead of him to clear the path of anyone old, sick or dying.

Despite all these efforts, one day, while out riding, the prince saw an old man. He was bald, toothless and puny. The prince was told that there was nothing wrong with the man, that everyone lost their hair, their teeth and their strength as they became old. Another day, the prince saw a person with an incurable disease and discovered for the first time that pain and suffering were the lot of humankind. On yet another ride, he saw a funeral procession and learned that all humans eventually die.

These discoveries deeply troubled the young prince. He asked "How can life be happy and joyful if we suffer pain and illness and eventually become old and die?" Since he did not receive a satisfactory answer he decided to devote his life to a religious quest to free humankind from the miseries of old age, disease and death.

Religion MUST deal with the tragedies of life in a significant way. Some people have felt that our Unitarian Universalist faith falls to do that. There is certainly a feeling within the religious culture that we do not adequately deal with the reality of death. Sometimes those of us who proclaim and practice liberal religion have portrayed a fair weather religion. We are great at affirming life but sometimes fall short when we offer comfort to those facing the death of

a loved one or their own mortality.

If those who claim that we have little to offer in times of crisis are right, then I would agree that Unitarian Universalism fails us badly. However I do not believe that this is the case. I believe that we do have resources for, and responses to; the struggle for purpose, facing the pains of life, and the crisis of loss and death. At other times I have addressed how our religious faith can sustain us through specific life crises, and I am sure that I shall return to this general theme again and again.

Being human means that we must face and endure through; uncertainty, pain and the separation that death brings. No religious belief can eliminate pain, loss, separation and death from human life. No religious belief can prevent these human realities from causing people grief and suffering. Unitarian Universalism, like other faiths, helps people to find meaning, comfort and strength in times of crisis. The most any faith can hope to offer at the human crisis points is a reduction in the anguish, and resources to help us fumble our way through.

I frequently use examples from being a hospital chaplain. While I am with a family in crisis and observing their religious faith acting in their lives, I frequently think about how UUs would deal with similar circumstances. These are terrifying thoughts because I project that UUs would expect a more active role from me. I worry that I would have greater expectations of myself. I should be able to say or do something to make their situation better or at least more bearable. In my more rational moments I know that is unrealistic, I know that I should not place unrealistic expectations on myself, but even so.

I am indebted to William Murry, minister of our church in Bethesda, and his writing for helping me to systematically look at these issues.

Part of our humanity is to question "Why!" in the face of Life's crises. The answers that Unitarian Universalism offers may be somewhat different from the answers given

by what we are always calling "orthodox" religions but they must be both honest to our faith and satisfying to our souls.

Sometimes a superficial tolerance may lead UUs to say that it doesn't matter what we individually believe. I don't think that is true. Our beliefs shape our attitudes and responses to life. What we believe about life influences how we live and our responses to crises. Faith really matters after life kicks us in the groin. Sometimes, especially in our past, UUs have pretended that our intellect is all important. There are any number of books dealing theologically with life's crises. Being human is both thinking and feeling and our faith must minister at both levels.

I am going to address crisis from both humanist and naturalistic theist perspectives because they come out pretty close together. Humanists doubt the existence of a supernatural Creator, and maintain that we are responsible for ourselves and the world, and that we cannot expect either power or comfort from this Creator when we are suffering. This humanist would say that the resources within ourselves and our community are sufficient.

Earlier humanists tended toward dogmatism in their rejection of theism. Recently a more open form of humanism has developed. A humanism which is more open to the mystery of life and to a sense of transcendence in life itself. God-language is still rejected but mystery abounds. The mystery of life, the mystery of the universe, the mystery of human intelligence, the mystery of love. There will always be much that remains unexplained and un-understood. Most humanists today are with Dag Hammarskjöld: "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

Naturalistic theists also believes that humans are free and responsible for our actions. Their God is not a Calvinistic God who predestines everything, nor the God of a pietist

who believes that everything that happens is the direct will of God. Their God will not violate human freedom to save us from our mistakes or our meanness. Bonhoeffer insisted that God does not get our fat out of the fire, but expects us to solve our own problems.

For our naturalistic theists, God is like a magnetic field. The force draws us toward goodness, truth and beauty. God inspires us to act to promote goodness, truth and beauty. The power of this God is the power of love, never brute force or coercion.

Feminist theists among us would say that we have rejected the masculine image of God i.e. a God of strength and force, dominating humanity and demanding subservience. The replacement feminine image of God emphasizes the attractive power of love, working with humanity by nurturing our growth and creativity.

Unitarian Universalist theists see God as immanent in life and the world. God is identified with the universe and the universe with God. Since all language about God is symbolic and metaphorical our ability to discuss this, or any God, is limited. Metaphors are still useful, for example: Thinking of God as like the air we breathe, it is everywhere, it is invisible and we depend upon it for life. The word for breath is the same as the word for spirit in both Hebrew and Greek.

What is missing in this metaphor is a moral dimension, this is very different from the image of an all powerful Father. Two sources which illustrate this shift are: Albert Einstein; "The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. it should transcend definitions of god, and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things as a meaningful unity." then Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, has Shug respond to Celie's rejection of God as white, male, distant and unhelpful. "Here's the thing..... The thing I believe. God is inside you, and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for It inside can find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you

looking for... " Celie questions, "it?" Shug responds, "Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a it."

Then Shug recognizes our interdependent web when she refers to the "feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.."

The important thing to note about the world view Implicit in the kind of God we are talking about now is the interconnectedness of life, particularly human life. This is not a God which "is, was and always will be". This is not the "Being" of classical Greek thought, unchanging and forever. This is not even a God which is included in most dictionary definitions. This is a God in process. A God which participates in evolution just like all of the universe. God is a concept that can be used to point toward the mystery in the universe and in life. A concept which can point toward the tendency of everything to be attracted toward the good, the true and the beautiful.

Those of us who are liberally religious, like all religious people, are filled with awe and wonder at the vast and beautiful universe. Words both fail us and flood us when the wonder cries out for expression. This is why we worship, why we gather for worship.

Individual freedom of belief is so important to UUs that any articulation of THE Unitarian Universalist response to life crises is bound to fall short. I am hopeful that my attempts will be helpful in starting and continuing your own efforts.

The Chinese ideogram for crisis has two parts. One means danger and the other means opportunity. At moments of crisis in our lives we are in danger. In danger of having the very foundations of our faith, upon which we have built our life, crumble under severe shaking. At the same time, when our lives are in crisis, we have an opportunity for growth, for strengthening our faith, so that we can be of more help to ourselves and others.

I want to unpack a story by way of getting on with where I think I want to go. In the early days of flying, before communication equipment became as sophisticated as today's, there was a flight from southern France, to North Africa. The few radio messages from airports

in the desert clearly indicated that this flight was way off course and their instruments indicated that they were low on fuel "We had no means of angular orientation.... Overhead the sky was filling with clouds, and we flew henceforth between cloud and fog in a world voided of all substance and all light. The ports that signaled us had given up on trying to tell us where we were."

The fliers' emotions were suddenly raised when they sighted a point of light. They turned the plane toward the light only to lose it. They saw other lights but each time their hopes were dashed as it turned out to be only a star. "And with that we knew ourselves to be lost in interplanetary space among a thousand inaccessible planets. We sought only the one veritable planet, our own. The planet on which alone we should find our familiar countryside, the houses of our friends, our treasures."

This is a great metaphor for our situation in the midst of a crisis. We feel lost, groping in the dark, hoping for a light to show us the way and finding none. Or even worse, like these fliers, finding one light after another but learning that none of them save us. Back to the story:

Our fliers are flying blind and in dense fog, they don't know where they are and so they set a course that they feel will not bring them down in the sea. Then, suddenly, the airport at their destination makes contact with them. So now they know the direction they must go, but they are still sure they haven't enough fuel because they had gone so far off course. "The other airports, one by one, began breaking into our dialogue..... Suddenly, Into this conclave burst an airport 3,000 miles away. Without a word of greeting they said sharply, 'Your reserve tanks bigger than standard. You have two hours fuel left. Proceed to your destination.'"

Several points in this story suggest resources available to UUs in time of crisis. "Your reserve tanks are bigger than standard." I believe this is true of all of us. We each have reserves of strength and stamina which we rarely even touch. Sometimes we don't even know

they exist, but they are there, we only have to dig deeper than usual to find resources within ourselves.

Some people face their last months of life with cheerfulness and courage, being open to help others clear up to their death. Somewhere they find resources the rest of us are unaware of. Now, some people credit God with providing the strength and the grace to face these circumstances. Others will insist that God was not involved, that only human resources were available. It doesn't matter what we label this resource, we only need acknowledge that there is a reservoir from which strength comes in time of crisis.

Unitarian Universalists believe in the worth and dignity of each person, including themselves. This includes faith in our own ability to tap into this inner resource, or draw strength from the Power of Love and Creativity. This is not the same as stoically "toughing it out" in resignation. What I mean has more to do with grace. It affirms that life is good and worth living, though sometimes unfair and full of pain and ultimately death. It shows gratitude for what is, without bitterness for what is not, and what cannot be.

Sometimes we think faith is giving assent to a set of teachings or principles, with little empirical evidence. That's belief. Faith is trusting that life is good and gracious and trustworthy. To me faith is trusting that life is a gift, a gift to be enjoyed and perhaps used, in part for the benefit of other humans. I can't use reason to prove that this trust is not misplaced. This is not doctrine, just attitude, a loyalty to life. This can be a deep resource in facing and surviving crises.

in the story about the fliers, others were reaching out to them trying to help. The caring community is another resource available to UUs. In times of our deepest crises we need the help of others and others are there to help us. Few of us can get through a serious crisis drawing only on our own inner resources and none of us can do it so well as when others help us. We need support, encouragement, advice, reassurance and comfort from others.

Sometimes we just need another perspective on our problem. Sometimes we need the caring presence of others. I will never underestimate the value of that. Sometimes it is enough that someone is there, silently sharing our grief. This does not change the situation, nothing can do that, but it somehow brings comfort. Schweitzer said, "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person." We too infrequently express thankfulness for those who, over the years, have helped to keep our lights brightly burning.

Unitarian Universalism is not just a way of looking at the world. It is also a community. Nothing can substitute for a caring community in times of personal crisis. When Martin Luther proclaimed the priesthood of all believers he didn't only mean that each person had direct access to God but that each of us can and should minister to others. Professional ministry is not a substitute for the ministry of the whole community.

Back to the fliers, they had at least two pieces of false information. They had more fuel than they thought and they were not as far off course as they suspected. All of us sometimes operate with false information which makes it harder to resolve our problem. Sometimes, after a death or other crisis, we think that we shall never find joy again. What we believe matters. When our fliers thought they could not make their destination they followed one course, when the truth was known they flew another course. If I believe that having a lot of money is the only way my life can be happy I will live one way. If I believe that my daily actions toward others will determine my happiness I will act another way. Our beliefs about suffering affects how we respond to suffering. What we believe about death influences our response to the death of a loved one, and how we anticipate our own death.

One last return to the story. Even though the fliers were not sure where they were, they set a course that seemed the best they could do. They flew on in the hope that a better way might be found. Sometimes that is the very best we can do. In a difficult situation, when we don't know where we are, where we want to be, or how to get there; we do not have to

give up or lose our hope. Instead we can plod on in what seems to us the best way, always alert for new information, and always ready to make adjustments as more information becomes available. We do this in the hope that somehow we will make it through this crisis. Sometimes all we can do is hang in there with little hope and little faith. I remember coming back from Paris after visiting the Vietnam peace talks and all the people on the plane were discouraged about returning to their homes and the feeling that they were going to be alone again. No one had a plan as to what we could do but someone said "We will keep on keeping on."

At crisis times it is important to keep on keeping on. It is important to be able to draw on the faith of Unitarian Universalism, that life is sacred and worth struggling to live. It is important to know that there are resources deep within which will sustain us through the crisis. It is also important to know that you have the support of a caring community. Unitarian Universalism offers much when we face difficult times.

Don't give up on yourself and don't give up on this community.

Amen!!