

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM: TENSIONS WITHIN OUR TRADITION

Rev. Steve Wilson

Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church

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Every year in early November I stop to take a broad look at what's going on in Unitarian Universalism. Today I want to highlight five tensions that have, do, and continue to define us as a religious movement. Essentially, I want to perform a bit of meta-analysis on our tradition (which I just chose to say mostly to sound smart). I'm not above that, you know. After I present some of these defining challenges, these polarities, I will close with some warm and fuzzy stuff about how cool we are and how this could be our time to shine.

A polarity, if you don't know or remember, is the word chosen to describe the dynamic interconnection between two different competing concerns that are permanently held in tension with one another. The tension and relationship involved with things that are opposites and yet bound together ensuring that no yes, no, or easy answers are possible are polarities. See, I do sound smart. I wrote that all by myself.

I believe I have mentioned before my fascination with these values that pull against one another, but that are forever stuck together. I'm only a few years into knowing that such a term exists, but I love it. I think about polarities a lot. There is a tragic wisdom to them. This may be because I'm a UU, and respect questions that don't have answers. Polarities teach that life is not static or simple. I respect people and institutions that accept rather than shirk the inherent complexity of life.

Most religions, instinctively born in another age, tend to be up or down, pro this, or anti that. Polarities, like Unitarian Universalism itself, demand an embrace of "both/and" rather than "either/or." We are unique in part because we understand that.

And like us as individuals, we as a unique religious movement have several unique concerns that we have and will continue to hold in tension with one another. I think our first couplet of competitive values is our intellectual commitment to skepticism and reason, our humanist side, and our desire to cultivate reverence and sacredness, our spiritual side. The way we balance our cool heads with our warm hearts is a tension unique to Unitarian Universalism.

The second tension that I think defines us is on one hand our commitment to individual and congregational freedom, and on the other, our desire to collectively be a movement and cultivate a unified UU identity. This is the place where congregational polity chafes against our desire to be a movement.

The third of our forever linked but competing values is very much like the organizational challenge just mentioned. That being our deep desire to be tolerant of diverse opinions, and the desire to feel a tribal kinship among ones peers at church.

Our fourth polarity is again like the two above. It is the tension between who we are culturally, racially, and demographically, and our commitment to cultivate a more equal, multi-cultural, and just world. Essentially, we are defined by the pull between who we are and the equality and diversity we wish to see in the world.

Our fifth is about the dynamic tension between our religious heritage and traditions and our religious innovation. For us UUs these polarities go a long way to defining who we are. How we manage these competitive values moving forward will largely determine who we will be.

Rationality and Humanism v. Spirituality and Reverential Language

I will begin with the natural tension between our rational instincts and inspirational, existential yearnings. These two camps are perhaps starkly defined as the humanism that dominated the first two-thirds of the 20th century, and the yearning for a church experience more open to spirit, ritual and even supernatural

ideas that feels a little newer. I don't want to overstate the generational nature of things. Said a different way, *how do those with skeptical minds seeking refuge from a more Christian church-oriented culture relate and interact with those in what is now a far more secular age who desire to re-engage with the lost sacred.*

Who here has some familiarity with the phrase and debate on the use of "Reverential language?"

An article, I found, in *The New York Times* two decades back wrote that ". . . within the Unitarian Universalist Association, a small movement long known as a home for people who would rather put their faith in reason and social action, than in God." ... "Lately," the author continues, "Unitarian clergy members say, their congregations are increasingly exploring ritual, forms of prayer and meditation, candle-lighting, and music drawn from Western, East Asian, [Native] American ... and other religious sources."

— Sunday, Dec. 8, 1996: *Unitarians Striking Chord of Spirituality: Response Reflecting a Sigh of the Times*"

Over the last fifty years the clearest expressions of this effort to re-embrace spirit and religion have interestingly not been a return to our Judeo-Christian roots that are the core of our heritage, the trunk of our tree, as it is often depicted, but the effort to turn back and re-claim early goddess images, and pagan rituals, and mix those in with the effort to ritualize the emerging science, physics, and truths of cosmology.

Perhaps the clearest expressions of this trend are the efforts over the last forty years to turn back and re-claim the *pagan traditions*, to *discover, reclaim, and give voice to the new forms of spirituality found when women's experience is honored*, and the efforts to lift up the truths emerging from ecology, physics, and cosmology. UUs have been on the edge of the organized religious movements in all these areas. However, as we know all too well, reclaiming and creating ritual as skeptics is hard.

Honoring the religious heritage of the world is hard. On one hand we want to hold up the wealth of feeling and meaning that is expressed every time a heartfelt religious act is performed. And on the other, we want to be sure to point out that delusion, exploitation, and inaccurate opinions are all a big part of what religion has always been.

Always, always, always, we must ask—where are we denying the movement of the or our spirits, where are we engaging in superstitions, and, how do we re-engage and honor the old and suppressed religious values of a lost age, without being trite, or culturally appropriating?

We are working through *how we might balance the wisdom of a humanism with our yearning and curious side*. There is obviously no easy answer to that. We as UUs easily see the destructive and distracting power of humans' faith in supernatural things and yearn for religious experiences that deeply move us. Essentially our desire to reject what feels superstitions and our yearning for the transcendent are trapped together for us, pulling us between our heads and hearts, is the first polarity needing management.

How do we in our enlightenment minded pursuit of truth and reason relate to rather than malign the metaphors those in the past have used to bring meaning is one of those tensions most unique to us.

Independence and Autonomy v. Our Collective Identity and Shared Fate

The second polarity we must always manage in our movement is the tension between our deep seated history and commitment of local control, and the truth that we UUs have a collective identity. Put into the form of a question that cannot ever be answered definitively, "Are we more a collection of individual churches, or are we one of many UU churches?" This is mostly a tension between the "congregational polity" we inherited from the pilgrims and puritans, and the effort to more efficiently market and clarify our voice and impact in ways each individual church cannot.

This is of course a balance all churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. face. And in a way it has already been answered. The fact is we are an Association of Congregations, and not as one might naturally think of us, as a denomination. This means that power for UUs always rests in the hands of the congregation,

not the layers of power and administration above. We, as we describe it, "freely associate" with one another in the UUA and our various regional structures and remaining district structures.

In the UU World, for better or worse, each church succeeds or fails on its own, survives or not on its own. In the UU world the individual and then the congregation are the two most important units. In other traditions the weight leans much more towards the synod and mother church directing from above.

We are libertarians in the original sense of the word. The way we function is on one hand the very nature of democracy. Congregations being in control of their own destiny, and having agency and flexibility of conscience, mission, and control, brings to us a freshness and an adaptability. We have a lot of grassroots control. However, lodged in the small print of our commitment to autonomy and freedom, is the truth that this model is an inefficient model for creating a market brand/identity, and not very conducive to us marketing our very important message to our very needy world. The desire to be free and the desire to be bigger are not always served by the same organizational structure.

Tolerance, Diversity, and Freedom of Conscience v. Kinship and Like-mindedness

If our second polarity is organizational and structural in nature, our third eternal dynamic tension is more theological and/or intellectual

Trapped together quite uniquely if not a bit clumsily for us UUs is our desire to be tolerant and open to everyone and our desire to feel and be a likeminded community that shares values. I'm sure you have felt this. Unitarian Universalism begs the question, "Can any church really share a vision, and be like-minded considering all the tolerance, diversity, and independent thought that Unitarian Universalism allows for and fosters?" And, the obvious answer would almost technically have to be no! Freedom of thought is in many ways the opposite of that warm and fuzzy sense that "I am in a religious community that thinks like me."

When I meet people and explain that I am a UU minister, the most frequent question that comes up about our open theology is how and why, if we don't all share a clear theology, we bother to go to church. It's a valid question that oddly works better in practice than theory. We have largely although not completely answered this question, without ever overtly doing so, bonded ourselves over a political and cultural ethos rather than a religious one. For better or worse, UUs share a cultural and political orientation now more than they do a theology.

This intellectual and cultural tension between being libertarian free thinkers and wanting to feel we are together with our people, our tribe, has a natural parallel with how we balance tradition and innovation.

It has been said by Unitarian-Universalists that "We don't stand for anything, we move." And it's true, we move faster and more freely than most. But how far, and how fast, is always up for debate and conflict.

The Need to Balance Tradition, Heritage, and History

That makes our fourth polarity, our need to balance our tradition, heritage, and our history—essentially who we have been and are with our desire to be religiously innovative, adaptable, and willing to incorporate new truths. We know this tension exists because we always have voices within our movement rising up to challenge that when they get out of balance. Too much novelty away from traditional. Whatever that style, ethos, and chief concerns happen to be in any generation. And we lose our sense of continuity and heritage. If we are too committed to tradition, then things become rote, dead, and our generally innovative edge gets dull. It's all a dance. And that dance of who we are, and who we want to be, can get sticky.

The tensest present example of this is the challenge of where our identity, cultural, instincts, and racial make-up as largely educated and white has come into conflict with our vision of a far more equal and diverse beloved community. I want to say that again. In most poignant terms, in recent years our

whiteness and the cultural and economic privilege often attached to that has emphatically been called into question for its connection to systematic oppression in society.

I want you to feel the rub between the truth that we are homogeneously white, and educated, and the deeply held part of our values that says it is our mission to build a more equal and diverse world. How do you build the beloved community when you are not that world yourself? That inconsistency has begged an almost schizophrenic look at oneself.

We are a ray of sun that wants to be a rainbow, we are vanilla ice cream that many aspire to be rainbow sherbet.

How broadly we feel this distress, and what we want to do about that, is probably the most poignant challenge on the table right now for us. Probably the degree to which you lean towards who we are demographically are and have been as to what defines us, or you lean more towards our vision of the world that should be, is the degree to which you lean towards our identity or towards our mission.

For us UUs these four dynamic tensions go a long way in defining who we were and are, but this is where raising all that conflict takes a pleasant turn. Perhaps the main theme of this sermon today is that because of our unique history of openness, cowardice, and a real desire to draw the circle bigger we are something that works in practice far better than it works in theory.

We understand in a way that I think is potentially incredibly healing to the world that individual freedom of conscience and a togetherness you might call the beloved community are polarities that need to be recognized and managed, rather than problems we need to take sides on.

Is there a clean way to navigate all this? No.

Is it really possible for us to sort out the tensions between our aspirations and our habits, between our church structures, and our dreams? No. The road will always be rocky.

My point of the sermon is not to get us to pick sides or to create debate as much as to say that our slow non-hierarchical way of figuring this polarity out could be a healing model for other religions. Today, with no authoritative sacred scripture to turn to, no pope, or fixed creed to chart our path.

The answer is no because, for us, different values are permanently held in tension with one another. In a way those tensions are us. Unitarian Universalism almost is the way our Judeo-Christian roots have evolved to integrate new revelations, truth, and innovation.

Within our tradition today we must continue to sort and shift the tension that exists between humanism and an openness to spirituality. Between reason, and our commitment to skepticism, and the yearning and curiosity that is centered in mystery, and our commitment to science, reason, and critical thinking. UU's have been on the edge of discerning the religious meaning of space exploration at the same time others in the same congregation are practicing Wicca. That's a stretch. And, as impossible as it may be in theory, it is in practice a stretch we do rather well. Part of the magic of Unitarian Universalism is that it works better in practice, than it does in theory.

Do you feel that

As modern intelligent people who don't shrink from the complexity of life, I simply think that coming to terms with the fact that most of our lives are bound between different values is a healthy idea. This is true for us religiously as well. We mostly accomplish this impossible task because among the first of those values shared is the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and a commitment to the freedom of conscience that goes with that dignity.

Our commitment to being inclusiveness is longstanding. Institutionally, and often personally, we know too well how it feels. To be said, "No you're out, you're not acceptable." At each stage of dissent, our institutional decision—at times reluctantly, at times cowardly—refused to say "NO, that is unacceptable."

As I mentioned in a prior sermon, when in the 1500s and the printing of the Bible led in just a few steps to a critique of the formal Catholic Church as a reliable source of certainty, we were on the cutting edge of truth. When more attention got paid to the Bible and how it was actually constructed, and that honest look at the Bible led to a critique of the authority of scripture, we were there reading ahead for what we didn't agree with.

And then the traditional Judeo-Christian story of creation was critiqued by the facts of science and the truth of evolution. We were the religious group that brought it.

When around the turn of the last century it became obvious that there were very, very many good people who although not believing in God lived impressive lives guided by a commitment to the cultivation of their characters and a commitment to live a principled life—I speak here of religious humanism—we were them. Does that make sense? We got to be the religious libertines we are today because we emotionally really don't want to say "You, out!"

Having an institutional memory of what it feels like to be said no to contributed to the tolerance to hold the complexity of the tension between opposing values or truths together.

Is Unitarian Universalism a movement vulnerable to the confusion created by our competing values? Yes! At our worst we are an indecisive lot of people who, in rejecting the religious traditions we have walked away from, find a place to hide that we never graduate from. Certainly some.

Regardless that I just laid out the landmines we must always navigate, I believe our odd manner of coming together is the best attempt at a new religion available to the world. I believe you are a participant in the most intentionally honest religious tradition the world has known. Yes, I believe that our self-awareness and transparency costs us, slows us down, makes us smarter, but less zealous. We are a tradition that knows the values that we hold, and our appetite to make change are bigger than we are.

Are we a religious tradition that holds itself back because of its commitment to independence? Yes. A place that even to itself looks different enough than the world we wish to see, that we always feel a guilt that borders on feeling hypocritical? Yes. A place full of our own inconsistencies? Yes!

As adults, we all know that life involves more compromise and inconsistency than our religious heritages have generally had the willingness to admit or pass on. For most of us our commitment to family and our independence is a polarity. Living in the moment and planning for the future is the same. Both valuable, both competing for our attention handcuffed to each other. In fact, the moment that best defines adulthood might be the moment when we learn compromise is real and required.

You are also a participant in the tradition that I believe holds the seeds of a peaceful, and just religious future in its hands.

Because of our odd process of evolving into who we are, we are the religious group most capable of being a bridge to peace.

Be proud. If the world becomes the world we need it to be you are participating in the future of religion.

AMEN