WISDOM WITHOUT CREEDS (September 19, 2010 by Ronn Smith)

Unitarian Universalists like to say that we respect and learn from all religions, that we practice pluralism in its deepest sense. Our statement of principles and purpose cites as an important source, "Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." But what about our own religious tradition? Does it offer any wisdom apart from what it has inherited or borrowed from other religions? Do we have a unique identity? If not, is UU destined to fade into obscurity?

We all sense that wisdom is more than knowledge or intelligence. To me wisdom is an impassioned sense of proportion – a capacity to separate what really matters from the inconsequential. It is that lofty place where a clear mind meets a committed heart. I like the metaphor of the mountain, where one's highest thoughts and purest desires converge at the summit. The view from the mountaintop is expansive and unobstructed; it brings the big picture into focus.

You've no doubt heard Reinhold Niebuhr's famous prayer, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Wisdom occupies a higher place than other virtues, for it must arbitrate between them. It weighs the pieces of our lives in relation to the whole.

For most religions, myths and creeds have served as important media for distilling wisdom and transferring it from one generation to the next. Our denomination doesn't have this kind of tradition. Any wisdom it offers must be rediscovered by each generation. We have heeded Oscar Wilde's admonition, "Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." For UU's it is not sufficient to listen to someone who has been to the mountain. Each of us must make the climb.

While I'm convinced that most religions offer something profound, their symbols and creeds tend to eclipse those deeper truths. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit Society, pledged, "What I see as white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it." Such is the blinding power of creeds. To much of Christendom believing that Jesus was born of a virgin is more central to church membership and more crucial to salvation than following his life's example. The commonly accepted Apostles' Creed contains 12 articles that say nothing of Christ's message of compassion. They deal only with the supernatural circumstances of his birth and death, and with the promise of personal immortality. As with most religious creeds, this one is certainly important *if true*, but I find it lacking in meaningful insight. It is intended as a test of credulity, not as a conduit of wisdom.

The absence of an official creed may actually contribute to the wisdom of Unitarian Universalism. William Ellery Channing, the founder of American Unitarianism, underscored the value of intellectual freedom. "I call that mind free, which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically repeat itself and copy the past, which does not live on old virtue, which does not enslave itself to

precise rules." Another famous Unitarian, Clara Barton said, "I cannot afford the luxury of a closed mind." Wallace Robbins, a contemporary Christian UU, sums it up this way: "Ours is a non-creedal church – not because we have no beliefs, but because we will not be *restrained* in our beliefs." The common thread among these exemplary individuals is not creed, but *conscience*.

So what is the difference between a belief and a creed? A creed is imposed on the mind by an external authority, such as a parent, an institution, or a holy book. A belief is imposed on the mind by an internal authority, such as reason, intuition, or conscience. It can be shaped by external forces, but it must pass this internal screening. Beliefs and creeds may coincide as for example with orthodox churchgoers (orthodoxy means "right belief"). But UU's and other religious liberals are more apt to give credence to humanitarian principles than to sacred text, holy sacraments, or specific definitions of God. I think you would agree that belief in an ideal or principle is different than a creed. UU historian Robert Hemstreet defined "creed" more narrowly as "a definitive statement of a church doctrine to which one must subscribe to become a full member of a particular church."

The seven UU principles serve as a statement of belief, but they do not meet Hemstreet's definition of a creed on at least two counts: (1) they are not definitive; rather they are broadly stated and subject to continual revision; and (2) they are not used as a test for membership. They came about democratically, in the presence of a dissenting minority. Let's review these seven principles:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Obviously, these principles do not fully capture the UU heritage. But I believe they contribute to the wisdom of a UU faith in at least three ways:

1. They have undergone a winnowing process that has broadened and at the same time, refined the ethical tradition of Unitarian Universalism. Remember that breadth and clarity of vision are rewards for climbing the mountain.
2. These principles stress behaviors over beliefs, practice over theory. We often associate wisdom with first-hand experience. British philosopher and Buddhist Alan Watts said, "The principal ideas of religion and metaphysics … become intelligible and meaningful – not as beliefs, but as valid symbols of experience."

3. While these principles are surely difficult to implement, to most of us they simply ring *true*. In the words of poet George Santayana, “It is wisdom to believe the heart.”

I’d like to share a story I heard as a child. Many years ago there was a Native American tribe living on the Great Plains. Its members relied heavily on the horse for transportation, hunting and fighting their enemies. The horse was their symbol of wealth. One of the wealthiest young warriors in the tribe fell in love with a young woman and they wanted to get married. She was not regarded as exceptional in any way, and went virtually unnoticed by the other braves. It was customary in this tribe for the would-be groom to offer a horse to the father of the bride, as compensation for taking her from the father’s lodge. If the bride was particularly attractive or her father was very shrewd, the price might be two horses. But in this case, the father sensed his weak bargaining position. So he asked for only one horse, provided he could choose among the five top-quality horses which the groom owned. The young man made a counter offer that astonished the entire tribe. He offered the father all five horses! Of course, the father gladly accepted and the young couple married. They were quite happy together and as the years went by the woman became widely admired for her beauty and character.

Overlooking the primitive practice of bartering for human beings, I believe this story illustrates the kind of wisdom I’m trying to get at. Why did the young warrior choose this particular woman? He possessed the clarity of vision to see past superficial qualities to the authentic person beneath. That’s what the first UU principle asks us to do. The celebrated Unitarian educator Sophia Fahs said, “The religious way is the deep way…the way that dips into the heart of things…that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see.”

Why did the groom give up more than necessary to earn the bride’s hand in marriage? He recognized that she was more important to him than all of his possessions. He wanted *her* to know it and for the tribe to see her in a different light. He grasped the larger picture and understood that we dignify others by treating them with dignity. The hidden wisdom of the first UU principle is that when we accentuate the good, it expands. I’ve observed this in my years of teaching college students. When I assumed the best and showed confidence in them, they generally worked harder to match my expectations. Conversely, I had professors who announced on the first day that half the class would fail. They turned out to be excellent prophets, but not very good teachers.

There may be as much wisdom in what the seven principles *refrain* from saying as in what they say. To paraphrase Socrates, a wise man knows better than to make claims he cannot defend. These principles do not constrain the mind or the imagination, even though they serve as a helpful guide. They leave room for doubt – for the critical thinking essential to wisdom. UU minister Robert Preston said, “A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief. Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false. It is to the wise as a staff to the blind.”

Of course, ambiguity offers little comfort when we are desperate for answers. But consider that a system of ethics is most useful, not when we have a choice between good and evil, but when we must balance competing goods. It is precisely in these situations that absolutes or clear-cut rules tend to fail. The seven principles provide a context for working out the answers when we need them, but they do not spare us the *effort*.

These principles underscore the values of honoring human dignity, promoting healthy human relationships, and caring for the natural world. At the same time, a more expansive view suggests that humans and the earth they inhabit are insignificant on a cosmic scale. UU wisdom challenges us to embrace *both* perspectives. Seeing deep into the heart of the human condition inspires compassion, while beholding the breadth of the universe instills humility. Eliza Galaher, the UU minister in Austin, Texas, said, "Ours is a necessarily paradoxical faith: We are called to honor opposites, to reconcile and to integrate them every day of our lives. Not to do so is to make idols of the parts, while neglecting the whole."

As I've suggested, concern for the "whole" is paramount to wisdom. The vastness of this whole causes people to feel wonder and even generosity – not out of ignorance or naiveté but out of intense awareness. The greater our understanding of reality, the greater the mysteries we must contemplate and appreciate. The Rev. Joyce Smith observed that mystery "leads us to stand in awe of the fact that we do exist, that the world in all its beauty is." Before his premature death from cancer the UU visionary Forrest Church acknowledged the capacity and the destiny of human beings to suffer. But in the next breath he marveled that "against unimaginable odds, we have been given something that we didn't deserve at all, the gift of life, with death as our birthright." Yes, wonder and wisdom go together. Ralph Waldo Emerson surmised, "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common."

Like Emerson, many UU's make no distinction between the secular and the sacred. For them, gratitude and wonder provide ample ground for spiritual growth. Rev. Doug Muder explained this connection: "Spirituality is an awareness of the gap between what you can experience and what you can describe. I have faith that the mysteries we can experience are infinite and our powers of description are finite. We'll never run out of mysteries."

With this connection to the spiritual comes a responsibility to act, a mandate implicit in all of the UU principles. One might ask what difference our actions make in the grand scheme of things. Wouldn't it be wise to spare ourselves the trouble? The evidence says our actions do count, at least on the scale of planet Earth. The great Unitarian activist Theodore Parker went even farther when he proclaimed, "The moral arc of the Universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Thanks to Parker's devotion to abolition and women's rights, that arc bends a little bit more.

Whether or not we ultimately make a difference, I always fall back to an existentialist notion perhaps couched in the fourth UU principle: Responsibility is the inevitable consequence of freedom, and failure to choose responsibly leads to a loss of freedom. Creeds may alleviate the anxiety of choice; they may prevent what Soren Kierkegaard dubbed the "dizziness of freedom." But occasional dizziness is a risk that comes with high altitude. The mountaintop and its wisdom will elude those who surrender their freedom for the sake of security.

Wisdom may be possible when one is free from creeds, but it is by no means assured. Pentecostals have all but abandoned creeds in favor of direct experience of supernatural gifts from the Holy Spirit. Some of the evangelical sects have subordinated creeds to a personal relationship with Jesus. Is this wisdom? I submit that retreating into such private realities represents what author Stephen Prothero calls an "insurrection of the heart against the mind."

By contrast, most UU's are searching for a unity of heart and mind, whereby we embrace fundamental values without renouncing either free thought or deeply felt experience. As an example, you might endorse the 1st principle from both perspectives. Your heart may believe it out of reverence for life, empathy for other people, and an instinctive conviction that their status as living human beings entitles them to respect. Your mind may believe that as a strategy for interacting with others, the 1st principle yields the best opportunity for personal growth and social harmony. We could analyze the 7th principle in similar fashion. Spiritually, one appreciates the beauty of nature and feels a kinship – perhaps even a mystical connection – with the natural environment. Intellectually, one recognizes the inextricable link between human fate and the health of our planet, and observes that excessive consumption does not make people happier.

A recent attempt to update the UU statement of principles failed to garner enough votes. But history says that statement will change sooner or later. Why should every generation of UU's agonize over a list of principles when they could simply adopt the Utilitarian ethic, which calls us to "seek the greatest good for the greatest number of sentient beings?" It is a noble goal with rational appeal. It certainly manifests a global viewpoint. But it doesn't gain much traction. To arm a principle with passion you need the spiritual. That is why I see the possibility of wisdom only in the merger of these two dimensions – where the clear mind meets the committed heart. May we be lifted to that place by the power of our principles and by the helping hands of this fellowship.