

THERE'S A THREAD

By Janelle Gray

This is a little sooner than I originally planned to give my talk; I was aiming for as late in the year as possible to give myself time to develop a Daily Spiritual Practice!

I think you'll hear most of the speakers this year express a similar sense of inadequacy in light of the theme. I know I certainly do not feel that I've arrived. I'm still a raw beginner when it comes to spirituality.

So I want to thank Ronn for taking the plunge first, and all of you who have subsequently spoken, because I gradually came to realize that NOBODY felt super-comfortable with the topic, yet everyone has managed to express something key about spirituality. I realized we're all in the same boat, and I could probably pull this off... Which, of course, remains to be seen! But I also want to thank the Worship committee for picking this theme BECAUSE it's been so challenging. Not only have we had some very thought-provoking presentations but speaking for myself, it has forced me, as a presenter, to go deeper than I otherwise might have.

My talk is going to be part "Why I'm a UU" and part a report on the MDD Intergenerational Con—called Big Faith, No Borders—that I attended with Maya, Owen and Sam, in September. Thirdly, I'm borrowing a question Jack was asked at Kay's High School reunion by one of her oldest friends, now involved in Fundamentalist religion: "What is your Spiritual Path?" It's essentially our theme for the year, re-phrased. As well as asked in a more appropriate setting...

By the way, Jack was also asked something like "How are you preparing for Redemption?" and his answer was: "Hoping for the best."

HOW I became a UU happened like this: it was about our third time attending the Cascade Unitarian Fellowship in East Wenatchee, Washington. It was the early 1990's, Brenna was a toddler, and as usual—*because* Brenna was a toddler—we were late! When we walked in, the Pastor was just finishing up inviting those who were interested in joining to come forward and sign the membership book. We hadn't yet sat down, but a quick glance at each other, and we continued to the front and signed. From the moment I encountered Unitarian Universalism, I knew it was right for me, and I think Phil felt the same way. That impulsive trip to the front of the church happened almost 20 years ago and I'm still amazed that such a snap judgment turned out to be so right for me.

Flash forward to September this year. Owen, Maya and I attended a workshop conducted by our District Executive, Nancy Bowen, called "Get Religion". One of the first things she did was pass out the poem "The Way It Is" that we read for Opening

Words. She asked us to examine it, just as I asked you to do in the Moment of Reflection, and think about why we're UU's. What phrase in the poem resonated with us, and why? Some people focused on "it doesn't change". Others were drawn to "you can't get lost". Several keyed in on "You have to explain" or "People wonder about what you are pursuing." For me, it was the first three words: "There's a thread..."

Before this exercise, Bowen commented that Unitarian Universalism is a difficult religion. Here in this Fellowship, we've often talked about how deceptively simple our principles seem – until you try to put them into practice. Then they are anything but simple or easy. Michael Servetus, considered one of the founders of Unitarianism, learned this the hard way. He lived and wrote during the time of Calvin, in the 1500's. He was eventually burned at the stake for his "heretical" essays; you can read all about it in a book in our library called "Out of the Flames". The radical thought that got him killed was that individuals could have a direct relationship with the divine; it was no longer necessary for priests and holy men to intercede on the individual's behalf. This theological tenet was one of the reasons Unitarians were persecuted.

So, Unitarianism started out heretical and hard, and although we're not in danger of a fiery death for practicing it today (well, I guess that depends on who you ask...!), it still isn't easy. For one thing, we don't give answers. We don't have a theology that tells us step by step the way to salvation. In fact, there's even doubt that we have a theology at all, but more on that later.

Yet despite UUism being hard, despite its dearth of answers, I recognized in that moment at the Con that I can't be anything else. Which is not to say that UUism is a default choice, that I'm a UU because everything else is worse! It has always resonated with me. "There's a Thread" means that because of my psychological make-up, my abundance of doubt, my orneriness, my whatever, I couldn't, I wouldn't have chosen any other religious tradition. And something else struck me: I also couldn't have chosen NO tradition. I have a need for spirituality. And a need to work on it in a formal setting such as this Fellowship.

In our group at the Con was a man who said he was an atheist and a member of the Boulder UU, but that he didn't feel that he fit in there. So I thought, "Wow, the Boulder UU must be hyper-religious. How strange for a UU church in Boulder...!" Then later, he mentioned that a Christian friend of his who'd attended the same Fellowship ended up feeling so out-of-place she'd quit. Now I'm not sure WHAT to think of the Boulder UU! Then in the afternoon, he admitted that the feelings of not belonging were HIS; the people in the Fellowship were open and welcoming. While I was pretty relieved that the Boulder UU met my expectations after all, I was equally fascinated by the fact that this gentleman was at the Con. I mean, Cons are kind of a lot of work. He was obviously seeking something, to the point of hanging in with a Fellowship he didn't feel quite at home in, and attending these intense workshops.

This same idea came up during the discussion of Phil's talk. If we feel our most spiritual in nature, for example, why do we come here? Just like the gentleman in Denver, I don't think we always consciously know why. But I think we are seeking a sense of connection and meaning. I was struck by something Victor said, that we are all incomplete spiritually and psychologically.

Why do so many of us have this drive to spirituality, or as some people call it, self-transcendence? Jonathon Heidt of the University of Virginia, explored this question in a "TED Talks" lecture. He cites William James, who in a work called "The Varieties of Religious Experience", identified a commonality in people's peak religious experiences. James described this as a door opening to a secret staircase. When the steps were ascended, the self melted away and was replaced by a feeling of ecstasy, love, forgiveness and connectedness.

Heidt pointed out that there are many ways to achieve self-transcendence, or that state where "I" becomes "us". Religions use ritual and ceremony, prayer and meditation. Some traditions rely on drugs, and some individuals, such as our good friend Bob, experience an unforgettable peak that way! A lot of us find self-transcendence in nature. Even war has been described as self-transcending, when combatants find a sense of community in battle.

Heidt calls us "Homo Duplex", an idea he adapted from Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist who lived in the 1800's. Durkheim thought that we are all capable of being both profane—by this he didn't mean dirty or cussed or such, but profane in the sense of ordinary, everyday, filled with our own individual, selfish, mundane concerns—and sacred, meaning that we can transcend self. He thought that anything that unites us has the potential to become sacred, which explains the self-transcendency of war.

Heidt asks: is the staircase--or self-transcendence, spirituality—a feature of natural selection? That is, does it have an adaptive function in evolution? Or is it simply a mistake? Rather than a biological mutation, is it an idea—a meme (that dread word...)—that got into our collective heads and refused to go away? Heidt wonders, "How can it be adaptive to lose self-interest?"

Well, I've talked about this in past presentations, so I won't say much more today, except that losing self-interest is adaptive because *cooperation works*. We're stronger when we pursue communal interest. This theory is called Group Selection.

Being part of a religious *community* like this one is a critical component of my spirituality. That is, a major aspect of my spiritual path is coming here. Attending Fellowship, travelling to Cons, reading spiritual books from our library, thinking and talking with you about spirituality and the meaning of life-the-universe-and-everything—these lift me from the profane to the sacred. As Nancy Bowen said:

“Religion is an invitation to transcend self in community.” She also said, “Religion invites us to develop meaning and out of meaning, a purpose in life.” For me, the purpose of religion, even our unique Unitarian Universalist religion, is to set the stage for spirituality; I think this thought came from Ted during one of the discussion Sundays.

In his talk, Phil seemed to suggest that the profane – or everyday – can itself become spiritual. I had the opportunity to quiz him about this – imagine that! – and he explained that if you examine anything, even a rock, in detail, the miracle of it becomes apparent and thus, spiritual. But this requires us to act, to *do something* beyond merely seeing; we must invest it with meaning – or at the very least, with wonder. In his “TED Talks” lecture, Jonathan Heidt stated that he believes we *evolved* to see sacredness all around us – he thinks it was more than just an idea, a meme (that word again...), that got into our collective psyche. And he thinks our moments of dissatisfaction in life, those times when we feel that something is missing, further confirm the idea of a deeply-rooted biological impulse to spirituality.

Before I left for the Con, I took an action against one of my employees that will result in a fulltime job becoming parttime and benefits going away. I felt this was necessary for the company to move forward. My employee saw it as an attack. I think it’s safe to say that none of us felt particularly good after the meeting, unless you count my sense of relief at getting an unpleasant task out of the way.

That was shallow satisfaction at best, and in this most profane of states I arrived in Denver for a weekend of intense fellowship – and spirituality. Ugh. I felt like hiding in a closet. The inspiring music, the thought-provoking talks, the depth of the focus groups just grated against this act of having hurt someone. Was what I’d done necessary? Was there another way? We felt we had good cause for our actions. But maybe that was all just rationalization. Could we have worked harder at making a go of it? I was in a sort of anguish. I felt alienated from the Con happenings. I wondered how to resolve these messy aspects of business with the spiritual quest taking place around me. Am I primarily spiritual, or primarily a business-person? Do I deserve the spiritual blessings offered here? What is the meaning of this?

As much as I hoped for revelation, this situation did not right itself while I was at the Con. But Bruce’s presentation helped. He made the point that our less-than-stellar moments can be springboards for spiritual development. I wondered again if there was a spiritual lesson to be learned here? My initial impulse was to have an “all or nothing” approach to the profane and sacred in myself. But maybe it’s more of a continuum. Maybe it’s not that we are profane one moment, and sacred another, but that we travel back and forth between the two, and each informs the other. Now I am more in the sacred place, so I can do better the next time this real-life issue arises. Now

I am profane, so I can forgive someone else their foibles, and become more tolerant as a result.

The bit about not feeling deserving of the spirituality offered there kind of reminded me of what I do when I hire a house-keeper: I clean before they arrive! We don't need to be our sacred self, at our spiritual best, to receive spirituality.

Of course, I didn't figure this out at the Con. There, in my misery, I consciously decided to just go on, to learn as much as possible. And I did come away inspired. Now, with time and distance, I've come to believe that this, too, is a key aspect of my spirituality: to try, try and try again. That's what I did at the Con, that is what I do by coming here on Sundays. Each week, I renew again my commitment to the spiritual quest. And the trying, the getting myself up and dusting myself off, is somehow, for me, in and of itself, spiritual. "For us there is only the trying," said T.S. Eliot. "The rest is not our business."

Our principles, which I take as suggestions for right behavior, require constant trying on my part. Some are easier than others, like "we believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning". I understand and appreciate this on a visceral level, and it is in large measure why I'm a UU. Others, I hate to admit, are extremely difficult for me. "We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person" is something I accept intellectually, but can't yet say is heartfelt.

Do our principles have a theological component? It's often said of us that we have no creed, we can believe anything we want. But according to Bowen, circulating in UU circles now are 5 Big Ideas—5 theological principles. These Ideas were distilled from our seven principles and six sources and other crucial documents. The name of the Con, Big Faith, refers to these ideas and it is my understanding that this will continue to be the theme for district and national meetings in 2013.

If you've ever tried to explain UUism using our principles, you've probably gotten blank stares. I know I have. Your listener, for example, is likely to agree with "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." But they might be wondering about your take on heaven and hell, salvation, redemption. It doesn't work well to bring up our principles because you're trying to talk behavior to theology. The 5 Big Ideas are an attempt to talk theology to theology, to explain UUism to those who have theology as a reference. Here are the 5 Big Ideas:

1. Revelation and truth continue to be revealed. Unlike some religions, we do not believe that everything is known. We accept that new information is constantly coming to light from trusted sources, personal experience, science, etc., and we can adjust our spirituality or theology accordingly.

2. Courageous Love will transform the world. To me, this means that love, not salvation, not adherence to dogma and belief, will bring about change. It means we, as individuals, are powerful. It is WE who transform the world from the ground up, not a deity from heaven down. It also affirms our commitment to social action.
3. All souls are sacred and worthy. Here, again, is the difficult one for me. UU's believe that even monsters like Hitler, on a certain level, are sacred and worthy. That the behavior is the problem, but at base, there is that inherent worth and dignity. I seem to recall that the Quakers call this the light within? And still I struggle....
4. There is a unity that holds and draws us all, we're in this together. This is a direct contradiction to the "we are the chosen ones" theology of many religions. I think it can also be read as a rebuke to the idea of dominance over nature.
5. Salvation is in this life. Oh, I love this one! It means that all we can know is the here and now. We don't say that there is or isn't an afterlife; we do say that this life is all we can be sure of. Living well in it is our salvation.

Bowen asked us to consider whether we owned Unitarian Universalism, or it owned us. That is, is Unitarian Universalism a noun for us, or an adverb? Are you a Unitarian Atheist or an atheistic Unitarian? If being an atheist, an agnostic, a deist, a Religious Naturalist, a Christian, a Buddhist, a whatever, is the way you, in particular, get up the mountain, then are you an agnostic first and a Unitarian second, or are you first and foremost committed to the tenets of UUism?

In the Unitarian way, I leave you to answer that question for yourself, and explore what it means to you. For myself, I am happy to make Unitarian Universalism my noun. It has been the one steady force that has opened the doorway and inched me up the stairs, and allowed me to do so as many times as necessary, without condemnation. Unitarian Universalism is my spiritual path. Unitarian Universalism is my daily spiritual practice.