SMOOTH STONES AND JAGGED ROCKS: UU THEOLOGY

Janelle Gray

This year, the Worship Committee decided to try out ‘theme-based’ worship, by exploring 12 themes, one each month, using as an umbrella the question: “What do UU’s do?” So what do UU’s do in regards to the Environment, which is the theme for April? What do UU’s do about Forgiveness, Mercy and Grace? And so on.

September’s theme is UU Theology ? (question mark). So far we’ve had a Water Communion, in which I shared how it might represent one aspect of our “theology”. Then last week, we heard a sermon about the Theology of Evolution. UU Theology, question mark, was not originally the theme for September: it was at one time going to be Living With Ambiguity. But I think that UU Theology and ambiguity might be exactly the same thing!

My inspiration for this topic was, in large part, Michelle and Bill’s kids. They have, from time to time, shared their frustration with UUism, which was that it didn’t tell them what to believe. Not only were they not told what to think, they also did not have an easy way of explaining our “faith” to their friends.

Those of you who have kids will probably understand my mental huff of exasperation when I hear this, because Phil and I—and I reckon Michelle and Bill, too—consciously CHOSE this church for our family, in a sense, BECAUSE of the ambiguity! We did not want to shove theology down our kids’ throats; we wanted them to have the option to explore spirituality as they saw fit. And like most things parenting, it just goes to show you can’t win! Or rather, like most things parenting, it goes to show that things, like ambiguity, will work great for some people and not so great for others, be they kids or adults.

So do UU’s have a Theology? I guess what we need to ask in the first place is ‘What is theology’? The actual roots of the word theology are “logy”—study—and “the”—God, so study of God, which is how Webster’s defines it. Funk & Wagnalls defines it as “The study of religion, culminating in a synthesis or philosophy of religion: also, a critical survey of religion, especially of the Christian religion.”

If we don’t believe in God—and I know that some of us do and some of us don’t—should we even be talking about theology? I came across this quote in my research: ‘Philosophy is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat. Metaphysics is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that doesn’t exist. Theology is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that doesn’t exist and shouting, ’I found it’.” By the way, sometimes one more line is added to this quote. It goes: “Science is like being in a dark room looking for a black cat with a flashlight.”

I think that the meaning of the word theology has outgrown its Greek roots. Today, I would argue that theology deals with many things: surely the nature of God, whether or not there is a God, what happens when we die, how we should live, what is the source of morality, what is the source of evil, where do we come from, why are we here, what is true, etc. In this expanded definition, then, I think UU’s definitely should talk about theology.

I don’t think it’s only the Bradshaw children who have had trouble explaining UUism to someone of another faith! I have found that in this context, citing the 7 Principles is pretty lame. Take, for example, the one that says: “We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations”. I mean, who doesn’t, or if they don’t, who’s going to admit it? Or how about “We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person”? That is hardly disagreeable, on the face of it. In some ways, in these types of discussions, our principles seem inadequate to express what we believe in a deep and meaningful way. And they say nothing of heaven, hell, god, sin--topics in which most other religions and religious people are keenly interested.

Some of this ground I’ve covered before, but I think it is worth repeating and expanding upon. It also was a topic you requested more on in last year’s survey.

In a workshop at a Youth Con in September of 2012, Nancy Bowen—our MDD Executive—said that the problem is that when we cite our 7 principles in these types of discussions, we end up talking Behavior to Theology, not Theology to Theology. But again, do UU’s HAVE a theology? If yes, what is it?

One of our great Unitarian—yes, THEOLOGIANS, we do have ‘em—James Luther Adams, defined what he called the five smooth stones of liberal theology. This was based on the biblical story of David and Goliath, where David slew Goliath with 5 smooth stones. Nancy Bowen resists this battle imagery and has refined these 5 ideas, which I will get to in a minute. But first, Adams. He says:

1. Revelation and truth are not closed, but constantly revealed.
2. All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not coercion.
3. Religious people have a moral obligation to establish a just and loving community.
4. Virtue and good must be consciously given form and power within history**.** In other words, good things don’t just happen, people make them happen
5. The resources (divine and human) that are available for achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate (but not necessarily immediate) optimism. Simply put, resources available for change justify an ultimate optimism.

Nancy Bowen calls her 5 theological points the Five Jagged Rocks, as a nod to our mountain west. Metaphorically, they are the peaks that we struggle to summit over a lifetime. They are:

1. Truth continues to be revealed.
2. All souls are sacred and worthy.
3. Salvation is in this lifetime.
4. Courageous love will transform the world.
5. There is a unity that holds us all.

For those of you who will print this talk out or read it online, I tried to put Nancy Bowen’s “Five Jagged Rocks” in an order that I thought roughly corresponded to Adams. Of course, they don’t track each other exactly, although with some “theological” wrangling, I think you could show how they’re all related!

What I’m going to do this morning is expand upon those theological points that I think really set us apart from other religions. We definitely share theological viewpoints with other religions, but today I am going to highlight our differences.

I’ll start with one of Bowen’s points, and my personal favorite: Salvation is in this lifetime. This a HUGE theological difference between us and most Christian, and possibly Islamic, religions. Many of us simply do not believe in an afterlife, and even those who do, I think, would agree that all we can know for sure is the present. Marilyn Sewell, in a sermon entitled “The Theology of Unitarian Universalists” said it best: “Unitarian Universalist theology is of this world, not of the next. Jesus, in fact, taught that the Realm of God is within and, contrary to most Christian practice, his teachings were centered on relationship, not salvation. Unitarian Universalists do not emphasize an afterlife. For one reason, we simply don’t know anything about it. No one as yet has come back to report. But we do know about suffering and injustice on this earth, and so we try to create the Kingdom of Heaven here and now, with real people.”

Adams put this as the moral obligation to direct one’s efforts towards establishing a just and loving community. Our principles tell us to behave with “justice, equity and compassion in human relations”. Theologically, then, UU’s focus on the here and now, not on some distant hope of heaven; we focus on bettering ourselves, our communities and the world in the present, not on behaving well to gain a pleasant afterlife.

Another extremely strong Theological point of difference between us and other religions is “Truth continues to be revealed.” Fundamentalists of any stripe, and even mainstream religions to a great extent, believe that all has been revealed and further, all is conveniently mostly contained in one book. Truth is known, is absolute and should not be questioned. If a scientific discovery or ‘truth’ comes along that conflicts with the truth as divulged in this book, you’ve got a big problem. If your attitude is that everything is known, then you have little choice but to throw out the science, something that we see happening with discouraging frequency these days.

Here is Marilyn Sewell again: “…another theological perspective that Unitarian Universalists have concerning truth: we believe in evolution—not only evolution of life forms, but evolution of thought and evolution of moral and ethical understanding. So the truth that I embrace today may not be the truth I embrace tomorrow. Revelation is not static, but is ever unfolding. More and more will be revealed. Our part is simply to be open, and thirsty, thirsty for the truth that would be ours—but just for the time being. Such a stance keeps us humble—and awake. When we venture into the Mystery, we are entering the ground of the infinite with the powers of a finite mind. An awe-filled agnosticism is perhaps the better part of wisdom.”

Last week, in the sermon Bill read called “The Theology of Evolution”, we heard how the Universalist minister Dr. Marion D. Shutter, speaking over a hundred years ago, argued that religion had actually GAINED from science. He made three points:

First: Science quickened the sense of truth in religious thought, awakening it to the real nature and value of truth, and the right methods for its discovery. Science has taught theology to look at facts as they are, and not as it wishes or hopes or imagines or guesses them to be.

Second: Science has taught Theology something about right methods of reasoning. There are not two distinct methods of reaching objective truth. We cannot receive by direct revelation that which depends upon study and research. We cannot accept by faith that which contradicts our common sense.

And Third: Science is also delivering Theology from the wretched habit of defending doctrines on account of their supposed usefulness.

I was talking theology with a Christian friend and shared our principle “we believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. She asked: So how does a UU know when they encounter the truth?

Whew, what a question. Caught a little whiff for a moment of my religious/intellectual arrogance, and had some chagrin that I’d never really thought about it that way before. In this context, I found the theological principle of “Truth continues to be revealed” to be a very helpful out, as helpful as two of my favorite quotes: one is by Walt Whitman who said something like “I am wide, I contain multitudes” and the other by Emerson, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”!

Flippancy aside, I really did think about an answer to her question. I realized that for me, things ring true when there is a convergence of intellect and spirituality. That is, pure rational thought is sometimes too cold, doesn’t account for things like love, compassion and hope, which certainly exist, despite how inadequately we can rationally explain them. I want a faith or spirituality that can satisfy on an intellectual *and* emotional level.  And since life, by definition, is ever-changing, I find this UU Theology of continuous revelation to be very satisfying and, well, true!

I couldn’t decide if Bowen’s point that “All souls are sacred and worthy”, and Adams “All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not coercion” were two different theological statements, or two sides of one coin. Doesn’t matter; they are, like all of these “theologies”, intrinsically related.

Probably many religions think that all souls are sacred and worthy… IF those souls are about to be or have been converted.

But we, on the other hand, have a strong tradition from both our Unitarian AND Universalist sides that souls are *inherently* sacred and worthy.

From our Unitarian heritage, we get the theology of supremacy of the individual in matters of faith. The idea that people could have a personal relationship with god, without the intercession of a priest, was really radical in its time, and very threatening to the all-powerful clergy. On a deeper level, this theology stated that god is within, and this was one of the primary heresies that got the Unitarian, Michael Servetus, burned at the stake. Marilyn Sewell speculates that if Servetus would have changed just one word in his book—if he would have been willing to say “Jesus is the son of God” rather than “Jesus is a son of God”, he wouldn’t have been killed.

Universalism, of course, gives us our philosophy of universal salvation, which is arguably where the idea of the inherent worth and dignity of all souls mostly came from. Although we are inherently worthy, we *choose* good or evil.

Here is how Marilyn Sewell puts it: “… Unitarian Universalism has always emphasized freedom as a core value. It follows that human beings have a choice. . We are not predestined by god before our births, to be saved or unsaved. We are not mired in original sin by the very fact of our birth and therefore have to go through a ceremony called baptism, even as babies, to cleanse ourselves of that sin. We do not have to have someone sacrifice himself by dying on a cross to save us from hell. Yes, human beings have a propensity to do evil, but we also have the propensity to do great good. We have a choice. Unitarian Universalists prefer to think of ourselves as being born into ‘original blessing’.”

And more from Sewell: “To become a Unitarian Universalist, you make no doctrinal promises, but you are required to do much more. You are required to choose your own beliefs—you promise, that is, to use your reason and your experience and the dictates of your conscience to decide upon your own theology, and then you are asked to actually live by that theology. You are asked to take your chosen faith very seriously.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we all have the freedom—and duty—to make our own choices; and because we are free, we should grant this to others. It should not be our goal to convert another. If we all must make our own choices, then how can we coerce someone else into sharing our beliefs? Many fundamentalists might discuss religion with you, but they can’t allow you your own beliefs. Theologically, freedom of choice is a no-no for them. This was very evident in the online “comments” that followed the posting of Sewell’s sermon. New\_Yorker said, “I am sure choosing your own theology, as the author suggests, makes everybody in her church feel all warm and fuzzy. The problem is that God has a specific theology and it is our purpose in life to seek Him, and Do what He wills, not do things, “My Way”, as the song says.”

To be fair, there were also comments from UU’s objecting to the very idea of discussing a Unitarian Universalist Theology!

Another of Nancy Bowen’s theological points is that “There is a Unity that holds us all.” Another way of stating this is to say that God--if there is a God--is one! The ‘Unitarian’ half of our name, of course, reflects this idea of unity, and has a deep, rich and fraught history. In 325, the Nicene Creed was adopted and the ex-Biblical—that is, not in the Bible—concept of the trinity was born. Unitarians, still believing that God is One, became heretics and were hounded throughout Europe until, in the 1500’s, they gained sanctuary in Transylvania.

Since we no longer necessarily even believe in a god, the controversy over the trinity is moot, at least for us. But the fundamental idea of unity remains strongly with us today. As Sewell says: “If God is One, then the God of the Jews and the God of the Muslims and the God of the Christians is One. God is One. …As Unitarian Universalists, we respect other religious traditions—we don’t think we have the market on the truth.” Dr. Forrest Church put it this way. He said that “truth is like light shining through the windows of a great cathedral, in different colors and shapes. The light comes from the same source. But it looks different, depending upon which window it shines through. So it is with the various religious traditions of our world….Truth is where you find it. There is no single scripture that holds all the truth.”

Hmmm, I guess we’re still heretics after all…!

The “unity that holds us all” also applies to the way we view the environment. We are not separate from it or in dominion over it, but part of it in a deep and fundamental way. If you can get past the “God” language that Sutter used in the sermon Bill read last week, the theology is pretty spot on. He said: “The God of Evolution is inside of Nature and not outside of it.” And then “we must find ‘God resident in nature, at all times and in all places, directing every phenomenon, a God in whom, in the most liberal sense, not only we, but all living things have their being, in whom all things exist.’”

Unfortunately, just as the theology that God is One is radical, so is this idea of being one with the earth. We believe that this is our Blue Boat Home that we sang about today. We don’t abandon it for the “streets paved with gold” of an imaginary heaven. It *is* Eden, it is heaven, and we can’t survive without it. As goes the web, so go we.

Nancy Bowen’s last ‘rock’ is that Courageous Love will transform the world. I don’t find this as theologically different as the other jagged rocks, because many churches work long and hard to make the world a better place. But among fundamentalists, there is clearly an idea that the world is pre-destined to end in apocalypse AND that only the second coming of a savior will save the faithful AND that only the faithful can be saved. Perhaps Adams was trying to convey a theology in stark contrast to this when he expressed a belief in an ultimate optimism.

So, do UU’s have a theology? As Marilyn Sewell puts it: “our contemporary churches are populated with Christians, atheists, humanists of various stripes, Jews, Buddhists and even Wiccans. Whoever will, may come. Nevertheless, when we look at our history and the practice of our faith, certain theological themes dominate, and so I will argue that, yes, we do have in fact a theology of sorts, a theology that has been relatively clear and consistent through time.”

I encourage you to read Sewell’s sermon on theology, as well as others, on the UUA website. She makes more than just the theological points I’ve discussed today. But hopefully, what I’ve covered today will help you begin to define UU Theology for yourself, and aid you in talking about it with others. In summary, here is the “UU Theology According to Janelle”:

1. We believe in salvation in this life.
2. We believe that truth continues to be revealed.
3. We believe that relations between people should be free of coercion.
4. We believe in the inherent sacredness of all souls.
5. We believe in a unity that binds all things.
6. We believe that we have the power to transform the world.

I want to say first, though, that I don’t think our principles are lame at all. I just think they are of limited usefulness in religious discussions. What we need to do is get to the philosophies, or theologies, behind them, and that’s what I’d like to attempt, in part, today.

Tolerance, freedom of choice and original blessing are connected in my view, and represent huge theological differences between us and most mainstream religions. All evolved from our belief in the sacred and worthiness of each soul.

And from another reader: “These Brand X churches are about insulating one from suffering and [not] revealing the truth about man’s nature. Stick with Christianity where Jesus is Lord. You will still suffer in your life span…but will not suffer for the eternity. That Universal Church is of the Devil.”

In last week’s talk, Dr. Marion D. Shutter, said:

“To the principles of evolution, we must add the discovery of the conservation and correlation of forces. The ‘total energy of the universe is constant, no energy being created or destroyed in any of the processes of nature, every gain or loss in one form of energy corresponding precisely to the loss or gain in some other force or forces.’ We must, therefore, find God in connection with this one eternal and unvarying energy. But what if there are but one power in nature, and not two or ten thousand? And what if this one power be the Infinite and Eternal God? It is precisely to this point that Science is driving us. In this view there is no room for a devil or spirits of evil. In this view there is no room for a Trinity. In this view there is no room for natural evil. The sterner and more violent operations are necessary parts of the same system.”

After all, gut reactions—which is at least my first step in identifying truth--often have a basis in fact, even if it is subconscious.