

Exploring Our Sources

Sermon for September 17, 2017

Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church

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We just sang about a freedom that “bids the soul, in search of truth, adventure boldly and explore.” That’s what we’re going to be doing this year, and what I hope we are always doing together, in our search for truths —not one single truth but many truths that can co-exist in our creedless faith.

One of the things this congregation made clear in the survey conducted when you were in search for a minister is your theological diversity and how you understand that to be a strength.

Some of you identify as Buddhist Unitarian Universalists, some as Jewish, some as Christian, and so on.

Some of you were raised in this faith and don’t add any modifiers to “Unitarian Universalist” when you name your religious or spiritual identity. Nonetheless, most of us lean into certain theologies more than others.

Let’s think about that in the context of our Unitarian Universalist Sources, which are going to be our worship themes this congregational year.

Some of you may not have been at all familiar with the Sources until you heard Shay read them a moment ago; they are much less widely known than our Seven Principles, though they appear together in our bylaws and in the front of our hymnals. (In fact, both of our hymnals are organized by the Sources!)

Some of you may have a particular connection to one of the Sources—and that may either make that Source powerful for you, or painful.

Many Unitarian Universalists arrive in our congregations carrying heavy emotional and spiritual baggage from other religions. Perhaps they grew up hearing that being gay was a sin, and part of their coming out process was to have to leave the faith of their childhood to be true to themselves.

Perhaps they were taught damaging theology about redemptive suffering that told them they had to stay in abusive situations to be Christ-like. It could be any of a number of messages that sent them —perhaps sent you —away from the faith they were raised in and into our congregations.

We are still learning how to help people heal from those religious wounds and reclaim what was good from those earlier faith experiences. That's a topic for another day—the important part of it for today is to recognize that both for individuals and in many congregations, the woundedness I just described led to a pretty thorough rejection of whatever faith had been the site of those wounds, most often Christianity. For people still carrying those wounds or residual bitterness about them, hearing that faith named as one of our sources may be difficult.

I invite us to consider that to entirely avoid certain sources of wisdom and inspiration because people associated with them once hurt us is to deny us not only a part of our history, but a part of our current search for truth and meaning.

Let's get back to the sources as a whole, and what they might mean for us now. For me, the key is a phrase I just said: sources of wisdom and inspiration. They are all ways of “dancing with the Holy,” to borrow the words of our reading by Kathleen Rolenz.

Now, I'm not a dancer, unless you count father-daughter square dances when I was a Girl Scout or awkward school dances in junior high and high school, but I do know that there are many ways to dance. Some people like to waltz. Some like to tango. Some prefer contra dancing. Some are members of professional ballet companies. Each dancer finds the style that suits their personality and their body.

Similarly, each of us is drawn to Sources that “fit” for us.

Human beings are creatures of habit. We tend to find something comfortable and stick with it—just think about how many of you sit in “your” specific pew each Sunday! This is true theologically, too.

That can mean that we each tend to focus on one of our six Sources and kind of ignore the others. Hopefully it doesn't mean that we put on an air of superiority about our source being the best one, or disparage anyone else's source of inspiration and connection to the Divine.

There **is** no best source. There is, perhaps, a best source for **you**, or maybe more accurately, a best source (or sources) for you *at this point in your life*.

There are certain Sources I tap into more regularly than others, but over my lifetime I have drawn strength, wisdom, and inspiration from all of them. As I share a few stories with you, I invite you to consider what stories **you** have about one or more of the Sources.

1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life

Beginning in childhood, I felt mystery and wonder in nature, as my family camped, canoed, and hiked. I still feel that way when deep in a forest, or walking by a river or ocean.

In my late teens, when we lived in Europe, I was surprised to discover that I found that same sense of mystery and wonder in what I now think of as sacred spaces, no matter what religion those spaces were associated with.

2. Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

[A quick note: this summer at General Assembly, the first of two votes required to change a UUA bylaw passed, starting the process of changing “prophetic women and men” to “prophetic people” to be inclusive of those who are gender non-binary. From this point forward, you’ll hear me use the new language when I talk about this source.]

In elementary school, my favorite part of the school library was the biography section. I worked my way through every book on those shelves, and was inspired by many of their stories. I was especially delighted to find people who were part of our religious “family tree”—the first I remember is Clara Barton, whose family was Universalist.

I continue to be inspired by prophetic people both within and beyond our faith tradition: I think not only of many of my ministerial colleagues, but also of people like my friend Kenny Wiley, who was a religious educator in the Denver area at the same time I was in seminary there. He coordinated the first event I attended after the killing of Michael Brown, and is a leader in both the Denver chapter of Black Lives Matter and the national group Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, as well as an editor at UU World magazine.

The prophetic voices we hear need not be religious. Some evenings, watching the Rachel Maddow Show for my dose of news, I am aware that I am hearing prophetic voices (both hers and her guests) “challeng[ing] us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

I mentioned earlier that my sense of awe and wonder spread from the natural world to sacred spaces when I was a young adult. Even before I knew much about other world religions, I could feel the same sense of the sacred in places of worship ranging from cathedrals, to ancient circles of stone or wood, to mosques, to synagogues, to Egyptian temples. Though the faiths practiced there were different, there was something universal about the holy as I felt it in each place. Its power would stop me in my tracks, take my breath away.

In adulthood, and especially in seminary, I came to know more about the religions themselves and to draw wisdom from them. We'll explore some of those in January.

4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves

My parents were both raised in Protestant Christian faiths, but that was not part of my unchurched early childhood, and even when we found Unitarian Universalism, it was in the Humanist Midwest of the 1970s and 1980s.

Although we talked about world religions, I don't remember much discussion of either Hebrew or Christian scriptures as part of that education.

One of the reasons I chose to attend a progressive Methodist seminary rather than a Unitarian Universalist school was to steep myself in Christianity for a while, which also meant exploring the Hebrew Bible and understanding the Jewish faith from which Christianity emerged. In my Hebrew and Christian scripture classes, I came to more fully appreciate the wisdom and inspiration available in those texts. I, who had previously been not only unlikely but entirely unable to quote any scripture from memory, found verses speaking to me, including one of my favorites, Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Even as a non-theist, I draw upon this as one of the touchstones of my social justice work, which is grounded in my own understanding of the divine—and so my way of walking humbly with the Divine is to do justice and to love kindness (or, in some translations, mercy).

5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

Do you remember when I said that people sometimes toss out the faith they were raised in if it has been problematic for them? I have to admit that there is one part of this Source that prompts me to have a little internal flinch. It's the end, the part about idolatries of the mind and spirit. Too often I have heard that used to justify statements that imply that reason and spirituality are mutually exclusive. Our opening words, written by a humanist, talked about scientists and mystics as if they could never be the same person.

I said that I was raised in a Humanist Unitarian Universalist congregation—and I would go so far as to say that many of those humanists were, as so many of that era, truly secular humanists. Although I always welcomed reason as part of faith, and certainly appreciated the truths revealed by science, my younger self balked at that particular form of Humanism because I couldn't feel anything sacred in it. It was only when I read William

Murry's "Reason and Reverence" in seminary that my understanding of humanism shifted, allowing me to reconcile being "rational" with being "spiritual."

6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Just as Christianity and Humanism were once the sources I struggled most with, this is the one I have resonated with most throughout my life. I already told you about feeling wonder and mystery in the natural world beginning in childhood. It was in my 30s that I discovered how I could experience that in the context of earth-based spirituality, and in a group of others whose spirituality is grounded in the natural world and its rhythms.

When I was a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane, Washington, there was an annual Winter Solstice Singing Ritual. The ritual was performed by a women's choir made up partly of members of the congregation and partly of women from the local pagan community. I

attended that ritual, which was open to the public, my first December in Spokane, and felt my connection to the Earth and the seasons in a more potent way than ever before. I'm still not a Pagan Unitarian Universalist—but I am a Unitarian Universalist who draws on earth-centered traditions for my personal spiritual sustenance. One of my joys this year is that we will perform that same winter solstice ritual here, under the leadership of our talented Music Director, Marybeth Hallinan. We had our first rehearsal about a week and half ago, and singing those songs again reconnected me to this part of my spirituality. I was dancing with the Holy in a way I hadn't in the six years I've been away from Spokane.

I imagine, as you heard me talk about each of the sources, some of them resonated more for you than others. Perhaps you thought of your own stories about some or all of the Sources and how they have been meaningful in **your** life.

As we explore our sources together across this worship year, let's keep in mind that these sources are important not just to our history and our theology as a movement, but to the people who gather in this sanctuary each Sunday. If there's one that leaves you kind of flat at this point, as Humanism once did for me, consider that you might learn something about it that shifts your perspective, as happened to me when I read "Reason and Reverence." Even if that doesn't happen, it's likely that at least one person here resonates most with the Source you like least. By being open to what each Source has to offer, you will have learned more about what is meaningful to others in this community, and that can only strengthen our congregation.

Let us dance with the Holy, in its many forms.

Amen, and blessed be.