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The Larger Faith: Thoughts on Our Universalist Heritage
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READING

Richard Trudeau¹

Let me (Richard Trudeau) tell my own story. I was raised in a mainstream Christian denomination in which--I say in retrospect--I was religiously violated. When I discovered UUism it was with a tremendous sense of relief and homecoming.

Over the better part of a decade I fashioned a new UU faith for myself out of bits and pieces drawn from many sources, including humanism, Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the study of nature. But one day I started asking myself, "Richard, if your new faith is so inclusive, why does it include nothing of Christianity? Richard, if you're so tolerant, why are you so intolerant of Christianity? Richard, why are you so *angry*?" Logic told me that Christianity couldn't be *all* bad. And so I embarked on the delicate and exasperating process of taking my childhood religion apart--of separating all the toxic things from the few things that still felt good, of separating all the things I thought were silly from the few that still made good theological sense.

The midwife of this process was Universalism. Its use of Biblical language and traditional symbolism challenged me to make new distinctions--

- between the religious right's understanding of the Bible as a single book expressing a single point of view, and modern scholarship's understanding of the Bible as a library of many books expressing different points of view;
- between the Christ of mainstream Christianity and the Jesus of history;
and
- between the cross as a symbol of a myth about a god dying for our sins, and the cross as a warning that defending the oppressed is risky business.

¹ Trudeau, Richard. <http://www.nmuc.org/WhatOffr.htm>

The process of taking my childhood religion apart was hard work, and took a long time. But when it was complete and my childhood religion lay before me disassembled, I noticed that it had lost the power to hurt me. I felt healed. And I was free for the first time to incorporate elements of my childhood religion into my new adult faith--elements that I treasure because they come from so far back in my personal past.

Universalism led me to see my UU church not as a "decontamination chamber" where I should try to forget my former religion, but as a workshop where I could confront it.

SERMON: The Larger Faith: Thoughts on Our Universalist Heritage

The other day I had a funny experience. As I was standing in my kitchen drinking my morning coffee, I was vacantly staring at my refrigerator door. I have one of those doors that has snapshots stuck on with magnets collected from long ago trips, postcards, and memorabilia from various and sundry occasions—not necessarily important but in some moment they were stuck there...and there they have remained. I don't really look at them; they are just there like wallpaper—sort of an informal history of Maddie, if you will. But the other day, I actually looked, and there, amidst pictures of my son at various ages, slogans to live by, and advertisements for plays or concerts was a snapshot of the sign out in front of our building, reading First Universalist Church, followed by my name and March 9. The first time I led worship here in 1997 I was a couple of years into seminary, and I had never had my name outside a house of worship for any passerby to see. I must have been impressed. So I took a picture of it and stuck it on my refrigerator. Imagine my surprise to see it there in my refrigerator “archives” while I was drinking my first cup of coffee! Now that I am serving as your minister and interested in your history, you have become part of mine. Was that photo preying on my unconscious mind for all those over ten years?

The second time I visited you, which was in 1998, I lead worship talking about our Universalist history through words and a number of our hymns, as well as some gospel songs of the 1800s. Today we are singing three of the same hymns we sang on that day. On that occasion, I believe it was Carl Brown who gave me an article about this, “the oldest meeting place in Wakefield”, which gave me the bare bones history of this building, which I still had in my UU Wakefield file folder when I looked in it getting ready for this morning.

So here we are this morning, gathered together once again, as generations have been gathering. Gathered to be in community with each other—gathered to think about the larger things of life, and to think about how to be together in good times and difficult times. Now that I am here as your minister, I am interested in this particular congregation and its roots, wondering about its path to today, what its guiding vision was and what it will be, and what might be symbolic of that vision. Each week I get to know you a little better, and I look forward to you sharing more of the history of this place and your own history with me, not to mention your vision for what we do together here. And equally as important—what do you have on your refrigerator?! A little history lesson mixed with symbolism, all in less than twenty minutes.

As you know, this congregation organized in 1813 as the First Universal Society, later to be the First Universalist Society of Wakefield. It was not really a church at first but more of a religious study group. After all there were a number of hot theological issues being bandied about in their day. However, they began to hold worship services pretty soon, because, as your former minister Edmund Robinson who did some research on the subject tells me, “the town records for fall 1813 show that the Society was given permission to occupy the Centre School ‘one Sabbath per month, next preceding the full moon.’”²

On March 29, 1839 the congregation voted to build a meeting house, this building we are now in, although it looked much different at that time than what we see today. That was almost 170 years ago, after all. By that summer in 1839, they had erected their meeting house on the main road near the center of town. That building looked like a Greek temple, as you can see in this painting of the early church that hangs in my office. You can see the large columns in front of the Greek revival style.

Twenty years later the congregation had the building moved fifty feet back from the road and raised and the front portion of the church was added. A steeple was added at that time—that same steeple that you removed in the fall. But that was not the end of it, the whole building was raised about six feet in 1877 and new pews were added. Then in 1900 in the summer the church was badly damaged by burning embers from a fire in a nearby building. There was considerable damage to the roof and the steeple, as well as water damage. However, it is said that it was quickly restored and that the congregation used the opportunity to make changes in the pulpit platform and its positioning. There was another fire in July 1939 after which the building once

² Robinson, Edmund (May 4, 2003). From sermon preached at UU Church of Wakefield, *190 Years Young*.

more needed repairing. It is said that our stained glass window depicting the “Good Shepherd” replaced an earlier more standard window at that time.

So, that’s interesting. I wonder what that earlier window depicted. And it is interesting that the congregation of 1939 would have chosen a stained glass window of Jesus as the Good Shepherd for the front of their sanctuary at that time, although my anecdotal experience has been that many small Universalist churches did have a stained glass window depicting Jesus in the front of the sanctuary. Perhaps one of you knows what the previous window looked like. And for those of you who don’t like this window, it is interesting to know that it was not always part of this sanctuary.

Which brings me to the words of my colleague Richard Trudeau I read earlier. They are potent words of someone struggling to come to terms with his religious upbringing and the search many of us go on, especially in our young adult years. You remember Richard’s trek through “humanism, Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the study of nature.” What path has your trek taken? Perhaps yours has included womanist theology, astrology, spiritualism, or earth-based theologies? I know that I certainly walked a path similar to Richard’s, reading widely in Eastern Philosophies in my twenties, dabbling in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, thinking I was spiritual but organized religions was not for me. Eventually, I found Unitarian Universalism and realized that there was a place for me, as many of you have found for yourselves. I loved talking about the worth and dignity of every human being, the justice seeking, and the many sources of our tradition. But I realized at some point that even though we SAY that one of our sources is our Judeo-Christian heritage, in practice many have great difficulty with it. It drags with it all the ways we may have been damaged by a faith tradition of our childhood or it seems hopelessly unrelated to life in the twenty-first century. But I, like Richard, have come to terms with my own upbringing and the root of our Unitarian Universalism and think it is a grave mistake if we don’t recognize that heritage as part of our universe. And that our Universalist heritage has something to offer us as a liberal religious movement.

Let me digress for a moment. On our altar, I am told, for many, many years, sat the Universalist Off-Center Cross. I asked that it be there today for this service. I have long known that the Off-Center Cross was the symbol of Universalism but I didn’t realize until doing my research for this sermon that it was only invented in 1946 during the Universalist General Assembly where a number of Universalist ministers pooled their ideas. I guess I thought perhaps

John Murray or Hosea Ballou might have come up with it in the earlier days. Albert Ziegler, one of the ministers there for the invention of the off-center cross, described it this way: “The circle is drawn to represent the all-inclusive faith of universalism which shuts no one out. In that circle is placed the cross, symbolizing the beloved faith out of which our wider insight has grown. We feel that universalism is not the product of any one cultural or religious tradition, but is in fact implicit in all the great faiths...we consider ourselves to be ‘Universalists of Christian descent.’”

When I officiate at a wedding, when it comes to the exchanging of rings, I often speak about the symbolism of rings with words like these: “A ring, as a circle, is known as the symbol of the sun and the earth and the universe of wholeness, and perfection and peace.” A circle is a traditional symbol of infinity because it has no beginning or end, representing the universe. In the off-center cross, the empty space at the center represents the mystery at the heart of the universe which some people call “God.” By placing the cross off-center, we leave room for other points of view and acknowledge the validity of many paths toward the holy.

So our Universalist off-center cross is a symbol. Which got me thinking about what a symbol is. The definition in the dictionary for “symbol” is: “something that represents something else by association, resemblance or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible.”³ Carl Jung differentiated a symbol from a sign, in that a sign stands for something known, while a symbol stands for something unknown and which cannot be made clear or precise.⁴ Swami Harshananda in the introduction to his book “Principal Symbols of World Religions” says: “The fundamental concepts of any field of knowledge which form the basis of its complicated super structure are essentially abstract. Unless these abstract principles are made concrete following the principle of ‘From the seen to the unseen’, ‘from the known to the unknown’, they cannot be comprehended. He goes on to say that in religion they are particularly necessary since religion deals with such topics as God or the holy, creation, our ultimate destiny, problems of good and evil and so on which are highly abstract.

When I was ordained in 2002 in Wayland, there were many symbolic parts of the ordination ceremony. For one thing, I was ordained during a normal morning worship service, symbolizing that, in our tradition, it is a congregation who has the power of ordination who can call someone out to the ministry, as I was called out of the Wayland congregation. There was a

³ Answers.com

⁴ Wikipedia, symbol.

laying on of hands, where all present, colleagues, friends and family, laid hands on me, blessing me as I took this new path. On that occasion, I gave to those who participated a little gift, which I think some found surprising coming from one that seems to many to be far from a traditional Christian, revering the Jesus of history as a model for ministry but not as the Christ who died for our sins. However, I gave each person a bullet shell cross which came with the words from Micah (4:3): “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” For me, these crosses made in Liberia from the discarded bullet shell casings from Liberia’s civil war in the 1990s symbolize how the worst of what man can do to each other can be transformed through the force of good and of hope.

Today I am wearing a stole that I received from one of our ministers from Romania, one the birthplaces of Unitarianism. On it you can see symbols from many world religions, as every religion has one or many symbols. Here on the left you can see the cross representing Christianity. There are many other symbols representing Christianity. For instance, if you take the cross and turn it upside down, it represents St. Peter. I was fascinated during a field trip to the Museum of Fine Arts while I was in seminary by the professor of our History of Christianity showing us the great wealth of Christian symbols hidden within the masterworks.

This next symbol you know as the flaming chalice, a symbol that was chosen by the Unitarians and which we light each week being part of that living flame. I often use this stole when I do interfaith work. Last year when I wore it at an Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, a colleague of mine who is a Methodist pastor admired it and actually borrowed it to wear while he was officiating at the wedding of his son who was marrying into the family of another faith. The symbols alone signified to him the openness to other traditions which draws the larger circle. I am told by several of you that this sanctuary once had many symbols of the world’s religions affixed to its walls. Apparently they were made of a material that didn’t last and were taken down. I would love to know what they looked like, if any of you know. I imagine being surrounded by the symbols of many traditions would signify to the visitor here that they were welcome.

Our Universalist heritage was founded during the time of Calvinism on the thought that all were saved, that no one is outside of the grace of God or the holy. This was a huge departure at the time. Heaven was not limited to the chosen few. Justin F. Lapoint wrote at the time of the Bicentennial of Universalism in a sermon, “Universalism for Such a Time as This”: “Whatever

one believes about the after life, there can be no doubt that there is plenty of hell in this life. Much of this hell is created by people determined to shut other people out of the 'chosen' circle.

Unitarian Universalists identify some of these partialisms with such labels as racism, sexism, homophobia. There are many forms of this partialism. It all boils down to the need of a group to keep out the 'unacceptable'." Lapoint goes on to reminisce about learning in Sunday the poem by Edwin Markham"

He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to float.
But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle and that took him in.

So here we draw a circle together and we hope to take in all who wish to search with us. We will look together through our Universalist heritage in our time together in the coming months. We can imagine the symbols of all the world's religions on our walls. Perhaps we will consider putting new ones in their place one of these days. We can put different symbols on our altar, as I will put a statue of Buddha there when I speak about meditation in March. And we can change back to the Universalist cross which has special meaning to many among us. We can sing the hymns and songs that will bring alive this place, including the ones which may not be our personal favorites but which may be a gift to someone further down the pew.

May we be tolerant of each other as we are on our spiritual path together. May we not be allergic to our Judeo-Christian roots, just as we stay open to wisdom from all sources. May we pick and choose from Christianity, just as we pick and choose from other traditions. May we draw a wide enough circle with love to draw a place for all of us. Blessed be. Amen.