

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday August 26th 2018

Sermon: “The Endless Human Quest”

“Marvin?’ said Arthur. ‘Is that you?’

“You were always one,’ groaned the aged husk of the robot, ‘for the super-intelligent questions, weren’t you?’

“What is it?’ whispered Fenchurch in alarm, crouching behind Arthur and grasping his arm.

“He’s sort of an old friend,’ said Arthur.

“Friend!’ croaked the robot pathetically. The word died away in a crackle, and flakes of rust fell out of his mouth. ‘You’ll have to excuse me while I try to remember what the word means. My memory banks are not what they were, you know, and any word that falls into disuse for a few million years has to get shifted down into auxiliary memory back-up. Ah, here it comes.’

“The robot’s battered head snapped up a bit as if in thought.

“Hmm,’ he said, ‘what a curious concept.’

“Arthur,’ hissed Fenchurch in his ear sharply, ‘you never told me of this. What have you done to this poor creature?’

“Nothing,’ insisted Arthur sadly, ‘he’s always like this.’

“Ha!’ snapped Marvin. ‘Ha!’ he repeated. ‘What do you know of always? You say “always” to me, who, because of the silly little errands on which you organic lifeforms keep sending me through time, am now thirty-seven times older than the Universe itself? Pick your words with a little more care,’ he coughed, ‘and tact.’

“Between them they picked him up, despite his feeble protests and insults. The metal was so hot it nearly blistered their fingers, but he weighed surprisingly little and hung limply between their arms.

“They rounded the foot of the Quentulus Quazgar Mountains, and there was the Message written in blazing letters along the crest. There was an observation vantage point with a rail built along the top of a large rock facing it, from which you could get a good view. It had a pay-telescope for looking at the letters in detail, but no one would ever use it because the letters burned with the divine brilliance of the heavens and would, if seen through a telescope, have severely damaged the retina and optic nerve.

“They gazed at God’s Final Message in wonderment, and were slowly and ineffably filled with a great sense of peace, and of final and complete understanding.

“Fenchurch sighed. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that was it.’

“They had been staring at it for fully ten minutes before they became aware that Marvin, hanging between their shoulders, was in difficulty. The robot could no longer lift his head and had not read the message. They lifted him up, but he complained that his vision circuits had almost gone.

“They found a coin and helped him to the telescope. He complained and insulted them, but they helped him look at each individual letter in turn. The first letter was a ‘w’, the second an ‘e’. Then there was a gap. An ‘a’ followed, then a ‘p’, an ‘o’ and an ‘l’.

“Marvin paused for a rest.

“After a few moments, they resumed and let him see the ‘o’, the ‘g’, the ‘i’, the ‘s’ and the ‘e’.

“The next two words were ‘for’ and ‘the’. The last one was a long one, and Marvin needed another rest before he could tackle it.

“It started with an ‘i’, then ‘n’, then a ‘c’. Next came an ‘o’ and an ‘n’, followed by a ‘v’, an ‘e’, another ‘n’ and an ‘i’.

“After a final pause, Marvin gathered his strength for the last stretch.

“He read the ‘e’, the ‘n’, the ‘c’ and at last the final ‘e’, and staggered back into their arms.

“‘I think,’ he murmured at last, from deep within his corroding, rattling thorax, ‘I feel good about it.’

“The lights went out in his eyes for absolutely the very last time ever.”

This passage comes from *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, the fourth book in the *Hitchhiker’s Trilogy* by Douglas Adams. Arthur and Fenchurch have hitched rides on spaceships all the way from Earth, traveling to the distant planet of Preliumtarn to read God’s Final Message to Creation. They find that Marvin the robot is also trying to see the Message, but thanks to time travel he is now many times older than the Universe itself, and so he needs their help. God’s Final Message, as it turns out, is exactly what Marvin needs to finally find peace after his long life and its many inconveniences.

It would be nice to think that there was somewhere we could go to find a clear, simple message that made sense of everything, even if, rather than offering an explanation or telling us what to do, it just says “We apologize for the inconvenience.” Actually an apology might be the most honest thing that a such a message could be.

Of course, most adherents of what they consider to be holy books would tell us that all of the answers and explanations are to be found in their books. The problem for the rest of us is that there is more than one such book, and they disagree with one another. Sometimes the books disagree with themselves.

What’s more, it’s hard to get away from the fact that, well, somebody wrote the book. Even if the writer claims that they were just writing down what some divine voice told them to write, how do we know that’s true, other than taking the writer’s word for it, and how do we know nothing changed during dictation or subsequent copying? For that matter, even if it’s written in miraculous thirty-foot-high letters of fire along the crest of some mountains, there’s still the problem of interpretation, of understanding the meaning.

In short, it's not possible to be convinced by the claim of any holy book that it is the one true scripture unless you already believe that it is, in which case you don't need to be convinced anyway. So many theologians admit that whatever their faith identifies as scripture is not entirely sufficient by itself.

John Wesley, who co-founded the Methodist movement, is known, for example, for the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, given the fact that, even if scripture remains primary, tradition, reason and experience are also needed as religious sources, and that the four sources — scripture, tradition, reason and experience — need to balance and support one another.

Unitarian Universalism has Six Sources, though they don't get as much press as our Seven Principles. So I invite you to open your hymn book, *Singing the Living Tradition*, to a page or two before hymn number one, and let's have a look at our Six Sources, because there's definitely some correspondence with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

The big difference is that we name experience first, and I would argue that it is, in fact, primary, theologically speaking. After all, our knowledge of scripture, and for that matter tradition, comes to us through our experience, through our senses of sight and sound and touch and — since every good tradition must include food — taste and smell.

We may think that we're seeing or hearing what is actually there to be seen or heard, but it's filtered through layer upon layer of sensory and cognitive processing. Just think about how the world might be experienced by people with different visual or auditory abilities and challenges, let alone different backgrounds in terms of how they try to make sense of the world, and it's actually amazing that any of us can ever agree on anything as supposedly objective.

The First Source of Unitarian Universalism, then, is named as “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.”

Our Second Source names a form of tradition, at least in terms of the collective experience of humanity: “Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming

power of love.” Your hymn book probably says “words and deeds of prophetic women and men”, but we now recognize that “women” and “men” are not the only two options when it comes to gender, so our UUA General Assembly voted to change it to “people”.

Our Third and Fourth Sources consider more conventionally religious traditions, including their scriptures, given “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life” and “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Such religions do not hold the monopoly on teachings, however, and our Fifth Source also lifts up the importance of reason, thanks to “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.”

And last but by no means least is the Sixth Source of Unitarian Universalism, connecting to our Seventh Principle and reminding us that it’s not just about humanity: “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.”

Now some of you may be wondering why you’re not seeing that Sixth Source in your hymn book. That’s because the Sixth Source was added in 1995, so if you have a 1993 hymn book, it’s not in there. And that wasn’t the first time Principles and Sources were changed. In 1984, the UUA’s original Six Principles were rewritten to make the male-centered language more inclusive, and at that time the Seventh Principle and the first five Sources were added to them.

Furthermore, this isn’t just something Unitarian Universalists do on a whim, because we have short attention spans and get bored. Rather, it’s intentional, written into the UUA’s Bylaws that the language of the Principles and Sources will be studied every fifteen years and, if appropriate, amendments will be proposed for the General Assembly to consider and vote on. So when our Fourth Principle refers to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”, that’s not just talking about Sunday sermons and armchair philosophy. It’s also talking about how we understand and identify and name ourselves as Unitarian Universalists.

This is an example of what has become known as the First Smooth Stone of liberal religion. This is one of five theological principles, as described by UU minister James Luther Adams, that are both foundational to all progressive faiths and their best defenses against authoritarianism. Here's what Adams said about it:

“[Liberal religion] depends first on the principle that ‘revelation’ is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism. Liberalism itself [...] is patient of this limitation. At best, our symbols of communication are only referents and do not [encapsulate] reality. Events of words, deed and nature are not sealed. They point always beyond themselves. Not only is significant novelty both possible and manifest, but also significance is itself inchoate and subject to inner tensions of peril and opportunity.”

To put this in simpler terms, there's always something more to be learned, not just in secular matters such as science, but in religion, too. There is no limit to “truth” and there's always room for our understanding to grow. In other words, there is no end to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, no point at which we can say we're done, that we know it all, that we have it all figured out. In seeking out the spirit's wholeness, we reject idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Now as liberating as that is, it does come with its own challenge. After all, it means we can't get too comfortable with what we think we know and how we understand what we think we know, because there's always the possibility that our knowledge and our understanding might have to change. Our certainty can only ever be provisional. But as daunting as that reality may sometimes be, we face it openly and bravely, and we have not only our faith but also one another to help us to that.

Now earlier this year, the Membership Committee and I held a series of Wednesday evening discussions around the subject of the Five Smooth Stones, considering one of Adams' theological principles each week. So the first of those sessions was on the First Smooth Stone, that “revelation is not sealed”. And in discussing it, one of our newer members made the observation that our religion has a “growth mindset”. And he was right, because it does, whether we think of that in terms of the First Smooth Stone or the Fourth Principle or the Six Sources.

A growth mindset, for those of you who are new to the phrase, stands in contrast to a fixed mindset when it comes to learning and the ability to learn. As described by psychologist Carol Dweck, who coined the terms,

“In a fixed mindset, students believe that their basic abilities — their intelligence, their talents — are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that’s that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset, students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don’t necessarily think everyone’s the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it.”

In other words, success comes from a willingness to try and then to respond to mistakes not with shame but by seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn, and from always striving to improve. Consider how someone with a fixed mindset might respond to something not working for them: they might feel bad and decide never to try it again, doing their best to forget about it. Someone with a growth mindset, on the other hand, might still feel bad that it didn’t work, but then they’d figure out what they learned from what they did and the fact that it didn’t work, and they’d think about what they would do differently next time.

So my daughter starts First Grade in a little over a week, and over the Summer she’s been practicing her reading. For the most part that’s entirely voluntary — I think I’ve now heard *Green Eggs and Ham* a few dozen times when we’re in the car together — but sometimes we actively encourage it. Generally she does fine, sounding out some words or asking for help with others, but sometimes she gets frustrated.

I try to encourage her, of course, praising her when she figures out the words as well as helping her when she gets upset with herself for not figuring them out, but knowing about the growth mindset, I try not to talk to her about reading in terms of being smart. I say “try” because, well, what parent doesn’t think their own child is a genius at this age? Rather, I talk to her about it in terms of trying, of taking a break from it if needs be, reassuring her that she’ll be able to read all the words some day, and agreeing with her that the word for the number eight really should be pronounced ee-ig-hæt.

Telling her she's smart but then she can't do something, that'll mess with her mind. But praising her for trying and making the effort, then she can believe in herself when she gets it. In other words, I'm trying to instill a growth mindset in her, because that will serve her way better than a fixed mindset.

Within any group of people, particularly within a religious community, there are plenty of opportunities to try, to make the effort, to learn from our mistakes, and to grow. You know what tops the list of church excuses for not doing something is? "We tried it once and it didn't work." That's a fixed mindset talking.

So last Sunday, we handed up envelopes, each containing a five dollar bill, and I challenged you, if you were willing to accept the challenge, to find a way to turn it into more than five dollars and then bring it back here later this Fall. I've already heard a number of ideas that people are trying — buying ingredients to bake cookies to sell; buying a big tub of candy from Costco and selling each piece of it; buying used but collectable toys and selling them on eBay — but what is of more interest will be finding out what people learned by doing those things. How did they feel doing what they did? What did they learn from doing it? What might they do differently next time, should there be a next time? That's a growth mindset talking.

As well as the "Five Smooth Stones" discussions by the Membership Committee back in the Spring, Joanne and I have been facilitating discussions this month about "Being a UU Parent". The Adult RE Committee is planning to offer "Owning Your Religious Past" this Fall, a curriculum about integrating our prior experiences, both good and bad, whether in a congregation or unchurched, into our whole selves. What all of these have in common is that they were, are and will be preceded by a simple community meal, allowing people to come from work or parents to bring their children without having to worry about dinner first, and building connections by breaking bread together.

We think this will work, and we think it will make Wednesday evenings as much a time to be part of the UUFP as Sunday mornings, but we don't know that until we try it. And starting with these separated programs, it'll be a process of building up, until there's something every Wednesday evening, until there's more than one program every Wednesday evening, something for adults, something for youth, something for children, maybe even a committee meeting happening in the office building, but all of us

beginning in one place to lift up our common humanity through the simple act of sharing a meal.

And at every step, we'll be asking ourselves: How are we feeling about this? What did we learn this time? And what will we do differently next time? Because we may never do it perfectly, but growth is about continuing to try to get closer.

Poet Adrienne Rich wrote that “No one ever told us we had to study our lives — make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history or music — that we should begin with the simple exercises first and slowly go on trying the hard ones, practicing till strength and accuracy become one with the daring to leap into transcendence. And in fact we can't live like that: we take on everything at once before we've even begun to read or mark time, we're forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement, the one already sounding as we are born.”

The good news of liberal religion is that we can learn as we go along. It's not about always getting it right. But it is about being willing to try, seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn, and always striving to improve. And the even better news of liberal religion is that we have companions to go with us.

May it ever be so.