

**TWO READINGS AND AN ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE ON
NOVEMBER 27, 2016**

FIRST READING:

I'm going to take us back in time, to the beginnings of Unitarianism in the United States. It's 1826. The American Unitarian Association is one year old. It started in 1825 as a tract society (pamphlet society). What is happening is that the Puritan Church in Massachusetts is splitting apart - one part Trinitarian/Congregationalist - the other part Unitarian Christian. William Ellery Channing, a preacher in Boston, was the prominent articulator of this early form of Unitarianism. On Thanksgiving Day, December 7, 1826, he went to NYC to deliver a sermon on the occasion of the building dedication of the Second Congregational Unitarian Church of New York (which today we know as Community Church). Channing used occasions like this to articulate the theological differences between the more orthodox and liberal Christians of this time period. This is an excerpt of just 2 paragraphs! Sermons in his day often went on for 90 minutes, and dealt with meaty theological topics - this one - different theories of the Atonement.

(Atonement refers to the forgiving or pardoning of sin in general and original sin in particular through the death and resurrection of Jesus, enabling the reconciliation between God and his creation.)

It is commonly said, that an infinite atonement is needed to make due and deep impressions of the evil of sin. But He who framed all souls, and gave them their susceptibilities, ought not to be thought so wanting in goodness and wisdom, as to have constituted a universe, which demands so dreadful and degrading a method of enforcing obedience, as the penal sufferings of a God. This doctrine, of an Infinite substitute suffering the penalty of sin, to manifest God's wrath against sin, and thus to support his government, is, I fear, so familiar to us all, that its severe character is overlooked. Let me, then, set it before you, in new terms, and by a new illustration and if, in so doing, I may wound the feeling of some who hear me, I beg them to believe, that I do it with pain, and from no impulse but to serve the cause of truth.

Suppose, then, that a teacher should come among you, and should tell you, that the Creator, in order to pardon his own children, had erected a gallows in the center of the universe, and had publicly executed upon it, in room of the offenders, an Infinite Being, the partaker of his own Supreme Divinity; suppose him to declare, that this execution was appointed, as a most conspicuous and terrible manifestation of God's justice, and of the infinite woe denounced by his law; and suppose him to add, that all beings in heaven and earth are required to fix their eyes on this fearful sight, as the most powerful enforcement of obedience

and virtue. Would you not tell him, that he calumniated his Maker? Would you not say to him, that this central gallows threw gloom over the universe; that the spirit of a government, whose very acts of pardon were written in such blood was terror, not paternal love; and that the obedience which needed to be upheld by this horrid spectacle, was nothing worth? Would you not say to him, that even you, in this infancy and imperfection of your being were capable of being wrought upon by nobler motives, and of hating sin through more generous views; and that much more the angels, those pure flames of love, need not the gallows and an executed God to confirm their loyalty? You would all so feel, at such teaching as I have supposed; and yet how does this differ from the popular doctrine of atonement? According to this doctrine, we have an Infinite Being sentenced to suffer, as a substitute, the death of the cross, a punishment more ignominious and agonizing than the gallows, a punishment reserved for slaves and the vilest malefactors; and he suffers this punishment, that he may show forth the terrors of God's law, and strike a dread of sin through the universe. — I am indeed aware, that multitudes who profess this doctrine, are not accustomed to bring it to their minds distinctly in this light and they do not ordinarily regard the death of Christ as a criminal execution, as an infinitely dreadful infliction of justice intended to show, that, without an infinite satisfaction, they must hope nothing from God. Their minds turn, by a generous instinct from these appalling views, to the love, the disinterestedness, the moral grandeur and beauty of the sufferer; and through such thoughts they make the cross a source of peace, gratitude, love, and hope; thus affording a delightful exemplification of the powers of the human mind, to attach itself to what is good and purifying in the most irrational system. Not a few may shudder at the illustration which I have here given; but in what respects it is unjust to the popular doctrine of atonement, I cannot discern. I grieve to shock sincere Christians, of whatever name; but I grieve more for the corruption of our common faith, which I have now felt myself bound to expose.

SECOND READING:

*From the concluding chapter of **A Religion of One's Own** by Thomas Moore:*

People like lists. I like lists. So let me add a list of items you can keep in mind as you make a religion of your own.

1. ***Redefine traditional terms and ideas.*** Don't unconsciously assume the old meanings and old language. Feel free to reinvent and redefine. Don't accept the usual meanings of "God" and "religion." Don't think of ethics the way you always have. Don't imagine rituals and gatherings in the old archaic ways. Reinvent. Reimagine.

2. **Don't be too literal about community.** Remember that your community includes all beings and objects in the universe. Don't be narrow in your view of who or what is in your community....Remember the paradox: local community works best when you are mindful of the earth and cosmic community, and vice versa.

3. **Feel that you have a right to learn from and practice anything from the world's spiritual and religious traditions.** They are yours. You can be a member or not, focus on several or just one or two, try one after the other or several at once, remain close to your family tradition or move away from it, embrace the traditions or explore your agnosticism.

4. **Understand that many things, if not everything, that are usually considered secular are sacred, if you have the eyes to see it.** A religion of your own is different in that you can keep the sacred and secular bound to each other tightly, seeing the sacred in all secular activities.

5. **Be a mystic in your own ways.** This is not an option. To be fully human you need some sort of mystical experiences regularly. Nature and art become especially important in this regard.

6. **Don't think of ethics and morality as a list of things you shouldn't do.** Think of them as positive things you should do, often unique to you, that contribute to and help the human community.

7. **Wisdom, compassion and method.** You can borrow my three central factors — wisdom, compassion, and method — themselves borrowed from the East. You can add the two from Glenn Gould I mentioned — wonder and serenity. Make a religion of your own out of them. Add two more of your own.

8. **Use the arts for your spiritual education and welfare.** Approach them in a special way, as routes to spiritual insight and experience. Don't go to a museum for education but for *darshan*: make it a pilgrimage, contemplate the images.

9. **Be intelligent about everything involved in your spirituality,** but also use your intuition, trust it, and develop it with concrete methods.

10. **Embrace eros; don't be afraid of it.** Make it part of your everyday life. Follow your desires and cultivate solid pleasures. Build your religion on joy and bliss...

Our society does crazy thing routinely because it has forgotten religion. It is trying to go it alone. It thumbs its nose at mystery and suffers the consequences. We need to be skilled at dealing with the mysteries of love, illness, work, intimacy, and death. It's difficult to imagine, but if we could turn things around and become a wisdom culture instead of an information culture, we might have a chance.

ADDRESS:
SEASONS OF THE SEARCH
Sunday, November 27, 2016

Thomas Moore quotes this one line from Emerson several times in his new book — *“Every church has a membership of one.”* Moore says what Emerson means is that every experience of religion is singular, personal, uniquely fashioned by the needs and imagination of the individual. Moore says we are each called to create our own personal faith, to develop a “religion of one’s own.”

I find Thomas Moore’s “Call” to do our own religious or spiritual seeking very Unitarian Universalist like. I’m not saying Thomas Moore is a UU “without knowing it,” which back in 50’s and 60’s, as you may remember, was one of our Association’s marketing messages. But after reading his book I feel he is advocating the kind of spiritual work that a lot of UU’s - and not just UU’s — have been engaged in for decades — creating a “religion of one’s own.”

So how does one develop a religion of one’s own? His book offers many suggestions - Phyllis’s reading articulated some.

This morning I want to raise the question “In developing ‘a religion of one’s own’ are there Stages in our personal religious development?” Are there “seasons in the search,” this ongoing quest of ours for meaning, relation and direction in our lives?

I think there are — I think there are different Stages, and I need your help to see if this theory holds water.

Most UU’s were not born UU’s. So in the process of becoming a member of a UU community one goes thru several distinct Stages. (Even if one is born into a UU family one goes through these Stages.)¹

¹ Even if born into a UU family you make a conscious decision to remain a UU or not.

Here's my description of the four stages one goes through in becoming a UU. Each stage is identified with an essential question. The question for the First Stage is, "Is it really okay not to be a Catholic, Methodist, a secularist etc?" Here we separate ourselves from something.

The question for the Second Stage is "What is a Unitarian Universalist?" Here we begin to soak in this new religious path we have chosen.

The question for the Third Stage is "How do other people express their religion?" At this stage we begin to explore, positively, various expressions of religious awareness as a preparation for finding our own expression.

And the Fourth Stage question is "How do I express my religious path?" Here we find our own voice, and feel comfortable affirming what we find worthy.

STAGE ONE

When William Ellery Channing gave his address at the Second Congregational Unitarian Church of New York in 1826, the American Unitarian Association was only one year old. Channing was one of the principal architects of this new religious vessel.

Channing was worried what he had to say that day might offend some of his fellow Unitarian Christians, but he felt he had to draw a clear distinction between the Calvinist/Trinitarian image of the atonement and the beliefs of the Unitarian Christians.

I've picked Channing's words because they suggest, I believe, how one arrives at Stage One. In the beginning some root religious metaphor, belief, image, no longer compels us, or seems unfair or grotesque. (Maybe, as a young child, you were appalled by the claim that if you weren't a Christian, you and all the Hindus and Buddhists etc, would go to Hell.) Some belief no longer compelled.

In the beginning you find yourself adrift. Using the analogy of the ship, a religious vessel, — at the beginning of Stage One, it feels like you've been tossed overboard, or if the change takes place more slowly — we awake to discover they have put us in the dingy. For Channing the beginning of the sense of change came when he felt it really was okay not to believe in the Gallows's God image of the Atonement and still consider himself a Christian. It was okay to affirm a nobler, more loving image of God.

I think, in Stage One, you discover yourself adrift before you are aware you wanted to disembark. Suddenly it dawns on you that you are on the outside of what you used to be (used to believe) and you can't comfortably go home again.

I remember the Italian humanist and writer, Ignazio Silone, explaining to his Catholic friends why he left the Church and could never return. Silone wrote to his Catholic friends:

“Why do (I) continue to remain outside/...To understand it, we must not consider only the initial motive for the break, but we must examine what happens afterward through the mere fact of breaking away, in the mind of the one who leaves the Church, or any equivalent organization, even a political one. Unless one falls into a kind of catalepsy, it is inevitable that, as time goes on, the area of one's dissent is gradually extended. Why does this happen? Not always and not necessarily because of the bitterness, the resentment, the rancor, the 'renegade' feels; but simply because any reality looks different seen from the outside.”²

We can't go home again, yet neither can we totally leave our previous home behind. What shapes our identity — particularly in our early years is seldom a matter of personal choice — it is more a matter of accident — where we were born, the family we were born into, the people who inhabit our early world — teachers, extended family, neighborhood friends.

In the beginning we do not deliberately choose to be Catholic, Baptist, Methodist or Unitarian Universalist.

Adrift now at sea we carry our memories of our former religious (or secular) homeland and the particular vessel that carried us this far. Some day we may want to go back to visit, but as Ignazio Silone suggest, it won't feel the same — looking at it from the outside, having been on a journey in the interval. (My dad studied for the priesthood, left the Catholic Church just before completing seminary, endured a lifetime of correspondence with his older sister, a nun, who prayed for him to return to The Church. Yet, in his later years, he enjoyed attending Christmas Eve Midnight Mass at Our Lady of Notre Dame in Worcester MA —although he complained the priests used too much incense.)

STAGE TWO

² Story of a Humble Christian, “What Remains” p.31.

We make it to Stage Two and ask, “What is Unitarian Universalism?” Adrift at sea in our dingy, we latch onto a passing vessel. The crew seems pleasant enough, but is this vessel sea-worthy?

Channing gave us a glimpse of how the keel was laid. Our Seven Principles gives us a quick description of how the ship stays afloat today. But 190 years at sea is a long time, and it doesn't take long to notice that our vessel has been overhauled a lot since William Ellery Channing's day. Unitarian Universalism comes from old theological controversies and beliefs, going back to the beginnings of the Christian faith; in one case, an affirmation of the unity of God; in the other, an affirmation of universal salvation. Today, we barely remember these old theological controversies, which at different times in European history were literally a matter of life or death. Today Unitarian Universalism is open to a wide range of religious perspectives, but practically, it is still remains an affirmative, soberly optimistic faith.

At various points along our 190 year voyage the crew of this ship has decided to dissociate itself from various classical Christian beliefs — such as predestination, vicarious atonement — and has instead, rested its hopes on such things as “salvation by character,” “the interdependent web,” “the worth and dignity of each individual,” etc. Such (theological) turns have led our ship away from mainline Christianity, but we never forget that our roots are in the Judaeo-Christian harbor we started from.

A continuing characteristic of Unitarian Universalism is its potential openness to insights from all the world religions — (an affirmation that Thomas Moore echoes repeatedly) — which began with Emerson, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists. Paradoxically, the crew of this ship finds unity in its open diversity.

How do you buy into a history that wasn't yours to begin with? You are bound to approve of some things and not of others. This is true for both those who come to Unitarian Universalism and those who were born into the faith, and choose to continue in it. At some point all of us choose the community of faith we feel comfortable in and compatible with. The choice is not made for us by the ship-owner, the captain, or the majority of the crew — but by the individual crew member.

STAGE THREE

Having soaked up some of the history and climate of Unitarian Universalism one arrives at Stage Three and begins to wonder, “How do people, not just UUs — express themselves religiously?” Now you are journeying into uncharted waters

(Waters, at least, that you personally have not yet charted). Your curiosity has been aroused. A quest, a search begins. Perhaps study and experience with other world religions will interest you. Perhaps study in some area of the humanities — where you reflect on what it means to be a human and how other people define what it means to be human/what it means to be a humane person, and how others make moral, spiritual and intellectual sense of the world.

The key point to emphasize about Stage Three is, on this leg of our voyage, we are more interested in what others say and do than in ourselves.

On this portion of our journey we let our thinking and our feeling roam, relish and wonder at the differences among us, and other religious seekers, and are surprised by the similarities. On this portion of the trip we look, dabble, experiment and try on for size. And if we stop at various isles we want to sample what the locals are marketing, see how they live, and learn what sustains them. Then we move on to some other location.

You'll discover that not only are you engaged in this searching, but so are many other members of the crew. This gives our ship an appearance of moving in a zig-zag direction³ (or, slowly forward by circles). Those who like to make a beeline for their destination will find this pattern of movement distressing/disconcerting. Some will get discouraged and leave for another ship at the next port of call.

STAGE FOUR

After a certain amount of Stage Three one begins to feel sated, full, weary of travel, tired of looking/sampling all the time. You begin to feel a strong need to digest, to distill the essence of all this curiosity. You begin to want to exalt and exult, rather than quest and query. You begin to want to personalize your findings. You begin to want to give the exploration your individual stamp.

At the same time you feel this way, you probably will be questioning your motivation. Are my longings to digest and distill just a sign I'm getting too old for travel? Is sea-weariness settling in? Is my curiosity drying up? Maybe. But maybe these new longings to pare down, simplify, make good sense: paring down is an acknowledgement of limits, and personal mortality (I have only so much time left.) (My father, sometime in his mid 60's made the radical choice to stop reading books and put aside his favorite authors - Thomas Merton, D. T. Suzuki, Teilhard de Chardin, Joseph Campbell — and in place of reading he started tracking his

³ UU trends.

dreams. He kept a dream diary. And he always carried with him a little notebook in which he kept track of his own thinking.)

When you encounter this kind inner dialogue, it's time to shift from Stage Three to Stage Four, and ask, "How do I want to express religion?"

I think of Stage Four as the time to search for trustworthy belief. A time for us to drop anchor by the isle of our dreams.

But never expect the entire crew to drop anchor and settle for Stage Four. Just as we individually pass from Stage Three to Stage Four, the portion of the crew that came on board two stops ago is just getting all excited about Stage Three — the Exploration. So, Stage Four expresses the desire to settle down, to set anchor, but on the UU vessel Stage Four has to be accomplished at sea. But this is good — it protects us from stagnating as a landlubber.

Stage Four is the desire for some content to our personal faith without being doctrinaire about it. This is a recognition that personal commitment needs personal content, and personal content means some alternatives are ruled out. William Ellery Channing ruled out the Calvinist theory of the atonement, the image of God as executioner. We rule out biblical literalism, faith without reason or doubt, faith without works. We are not just making a commitment to diversity, but to content. We must be able to say what our commitment is commitment to.

For example:

- .the idea that God is a God of love;
- .that there is a spark of divinity in each person;
- .that meaningful statements of belief are personal statements;
- .that "truth" grows and changes;
- .that people should be free to judge whether to accept the pronouncements of a church;
- .that a broadly inclusive tolerance in religion is better and an enforced uniformity;
- .that doubt can help winnow truth from untruth;
- .that suffering is a part of life and not a punishment for a way of living;
- .that religious literature gives us symbolic rather than literal truth;
- .that the individual must develop a trusting reliance on her/himself and her/his capacity to make sensible, life improving choices;
- .that responsibility is real;
- .and that religion ought to involve not only ceremony, but reflection and action for justice and goodness.

It's hard to hone a personal theology: to create a religion of one's own. It's easier to adopt someone else's. And because different members of the crew are appreciating different Stages all the time, you have to create your own support group within the crew.

Stage Four invites the risk of landing somewhere, even while being curious about what's over there — beyond the horizon.

CONCLUSION

We are a diverse community. We also want to be a supportive community. Our faith puts a lot of trust in the individual, but it doesn't want to leave the individual alone. The best honed personal theologies are those we test out in public. Personal experience requires the testing of others. We wish to share with one another in a mutually supportive way. A crew is a group of people working together on a task. A crew is community. We may be on our own individual journeys, but we are also part of a crew on a particular religious vessel called Unitarian Universalism.

I've never forgotten a remark a young woman made to me in one of my Massachusetts congregations. She was the high school babysitter for our children. I think she was reflecting the attitude of her parents who were nominal UUs — they never stepped in the church except for family weddings or funerals. "I don't need a church," she said, "My spiritual life is a private matter between God and myself." Yes, I could agree up to a point — but I know her personal faith would have benefited if she had been a part of a religious community, sharing her spiritual insights with others and listening to their spiritual insights. Our questions, reservations, prodding and support of each other helps to sharpen and clarify what each of us believes in a wonderful communal process of sifting and winnowing. "The woods are my church," some say. "Yes, we know: but the trees don't talk back, and the squirrels never argue."

Again, in sum, the Four Stages:

Stage One: "Is it really okay not to be a Baptist, Methodist, etc." Here we are dealing with some emotional insecurity felt at leaving the religious home where our hearts were formed. (It may also be we are leaving a purely secular world for a more spiritual one, and our insecurity is about appearing too religious to our friends.)

Stage Two: "What is Unitarian Universalism?" Where we seek to understand and soak in this new religious home we have chosen.

Stage Three: “But how do people express their religion?” When we explore, positively, various expressions of religious awareness as preparation for working out our own personal faith.

Stage Four: “How do I express religion?” Where we affirm what we find worthy.

I conclude with some advice for the journey. A favorite quote from the writings of Dr. Seuss, that I used to have pinned to the bulletin board in my office in Charlotte. It's a graduation address he gave at Lake Forrest College, in 1977. This is the graduation address — in its entirety:

“My uncle ordered popovers from the restaurant's bill of fare. And when they were served, he regarded them with a penetrating stare. Then he spoke great words of wisdom as he sat there on that chair. ‘To eat those things,’ said my uncle, ‘You must exercise great care. You may swallow down what's solid. But you must spit out the air.’ And, as you partake of the world's bill of fare that's darn good advice to follow. Do a lot of spitting out of the hot air. And be careful what you swallow.”