

*Sources: Wisdom From the World's Religions*  
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska  
UU Church of Minnetonka  
December 7, 2008

**Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism**  
**Responsive Reading**

**Leader:** Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources:

**Left Side:** Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures...

**Right Side:** ...*which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*

**Left Side:** Words and deeds of prophetic women and men...

**Right Side:** ...*which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*

**Left Side:** Wisdom from the world's religions...

**Right Side:** ...*which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*

**Left Side:** Jewish and Christian teachings...

**Right Side:** ...*which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*

**Left Side:** Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science...

**Right Side:** ...*and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*

**Left Side:** Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life...

**Right Side:** ...*and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

**First Reading (Choir Anthem):**

**All Lifted Hearts**

Lyrics: Kendyl Gibbons; Music: Jason Shelton

*Refrain:* Many windows, one light;  
Many waters, one sea;  
All lifted hearts are free

(1)

Narrator 1: In the Talmud of the Jewish tradition, the sage Hillel said:  
What is hateful to you, do not do to others.  
This is the whole of the Law; all the rest is commentary.

Narrator 2: In the Hindu legend of the Mahabharata, the divine Krishna declared: This is the sum of duty: Do nothing unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.

Narrator 1: It is written; it is taught; may it be so.

*Refrain*

(2)

Narrator 2: In the Gospel of Matthew in the Christian scriptures, the messiah Jesus says: Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Narrator 1: In the Buddhist text of the Udanavarga, the student is urged: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

Narrator 2: It is written; it is taught; may it be so.

*Refrain*

(3)

Narrator 1: In the Muslim Hadith of al Nawawi, the prophet Mohammed teaches: No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.

Narrator 2: In the T'ai Shang treatise of Taoism, the seeker is instructed: Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

Narrator 1: It is written; it is taught; may it be so.

*Refrain*

(4)

Narrator 2: In the ancient wisdom of Shinto there is a saying: The heart of the person before you is a mirror. See there your own form.

Narrator 1: The Oglala Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk wrote: All things are our relatives; what we do to everything, we do to ourselves.

Narrator 2: It is written; it is taught; may it be so.

*Refrain*

Ending Chant: Shanti, shalom; hasiti, salaam; heiwa, dohiyi; pax, paco, mir...Peace...

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Second Reading:      **Mark Doty on Ezra Pound’s poem, “In a Station of the Metro”**  
 (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19705>)

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
 Petals on a wet, black bough.

[Here is] another axiomatic statement about figures of speech: the further apart the elements within a figure are, the greater the tension and the greater the energy the metaphor has... The more these things do not have in common—at least on the surface—the greater the level of tension, the greater the sense of cognitive dissolution or dissonance for the reader...

In Pound's poem, [“In a Station of the Metro”] we're not confronting a symbol that stands for one thing, we're confronting a metaphor which is far more alive in its associations, far more ambiguous, though not so much that it doesn't point us in a specific direction. We are directed into a rich and complex territory of renewal and human connections.

[Ezra Pound writes that,] “An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such complex instantaneity that gives a sudden sense of liberation that we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.”

[The emotion of “In a Station of the Metro” is one, perhaps, that is something like wonder. It is also an issue of scale.]

That connection between microcosm and macrocosm is an idea with feeling attached... About our potential, our insignificance, and how our egos may not be the great monuments that we sometimes perceive them to be.

This imagery is used to point to a certain point of view about this subway experience and about human commonality. Which takes it, again, that much further from the merely decorative. This is not just a clever, artful way to say what faces look like in the dark. A point is being made here.

Again, this is a perfect example of what metaphor means and means intensely. Pound's poem stays with us because it yokes unlike things, allows us space to move, and it refuses to make a direct statement, which would determine the reader— it forces us to remain in the position of interpreter to something that is perpetually open.

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SERMON

***Sources: Wisdom From the World's Religions***  
**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

I am enamored with creativity and the creative process. It began with childhood play and curiosity, and continues today. I have taken lessons for piano, drum and guitar, sung in choirs and *a cappella* groups and I own hundreds of records, tapes and CDs; I've taken classes in Jazz dance, modern dance and clogging; when I have time I like to play with watercolor paintings; I acted in plays in high school and college; I've kept a journal since I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade; and last summer I took my first metal sculpture class at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts.

I am amazed at the creative capacity of the human being. Everything we do is unique. Even when something has been done before, it is new. The very cells and DNA in our bodies are unlike the cells and DNA in anyone else's body. And then there's the truly amazing creativity that occurs. I'm talking about the Peter Brook staging of *The Mahabarata*, or the choreography of the Alvin Ailey dance company, or the flowing stone of Michaelangelo's *Pieta*.

It is staggering to contemplate the vast creative capacity of the human heart and mind and hands. For a time in my earlier life, I was so captivated by art and the artistic process that I saw any emotion as good, and viewed any expression of any instinct or impulse as inherently artistic by nature. I took as my inspiration Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and the barfly poet, Charles Bukowski. Each of these people, in some ways, were not very likeable people, and each of them, in some way, owe some inspiration to Ezra Pound.

I remember studying Ezra Pound in one specific college poetry class. Pound was born in Idaho, but made his way to Italy prior to World War II. Eventually he became a leading propaganda writer for the dictator, Mussolini. Pound also had a regular program on Italian radio spewing fascist and anti-Semitic venom.

I found it difficult to reconcile the beautiful poetry I was learning with some of the people who created it. One poem by Ezra Pound sticks in my mind, even today. It is merely a simple, two-line poem called, "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
 Petals on a wet, black bough.

This is such a powerful, beautiful image, in so few words. Eventually in our class discussion our professor said, "Trust the art, not the artist."

I believe one of the reasons art exists is because it arises from an inherent human longing, perhaps even from a biological herding trait, to join with others, to form communities, to become part of something larger than an individual self. Art inspires us, as creators or observers, to either look beyond the mundane, or to see the beauty in the mundane. In either case, it helps us get outside ourselves to see that there is more to the world than our own ego. Trusting the art and not the artist frees me to be inspired by truth and beauty, to be open to new ways of being.

Creativity, whether in art or in science, often requires the telling of stories, or the use of comparisons or metaphors in order to communicate meaning. Mark Doty, when exploring the poetry of Ezra Pound's short poem, "In a Station of the Metro," writes:

...the further apart the elements within a figure are, the greater the tension and the greater the energy the metaphor has...The more these things do not have in common—at least on the surface—the greater the level of tension, the greater the sense of cognitive dissolution or dissonance for the reader...

In [Ezra] Pound's poem, we're not confronting a symbol that stands for one thing, we're confronting a metaphor which is far more alive in its associations [and] far more ambiguous...We are directed into a rich and complex territory of renewal and human connections.

It is no wonder my former life in theater and poetry led me to study theology and faith, people and systems. For what is religion, except a system for exploring one of the deepest metaphors of human experience? To paraphrase Mark Doty, religion and faith, by nature, confront us with symbols and experiences that are far more alive and far more ambiguous in their attempt to make meaning than almost any other element in our lives, or in human history. We are directed by religion, as we are directed by metaphor, into a rich and complex territory of renewal and human connections.

This year I am engaging in a series of sermons that address the six sources of Unitarian Universalism, using the appropriate section of the “Sources Cantata” created by Reverend Kendyl Gibbons and Jason Shelton as a musical illustration of each source. In September I addressed the first source: “Direct experiences 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.”

Today I am addressing our third listed source, “Wisdom from the world’s religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

In exploring this source, my interest is not so much in the specifics of each religion and what we get from them, but *why* we would choose wisdom from other religions as a source for our religion in the first place. This is an especially necessary question since, as Unitarian Universalists, we often value discoveries of science more than from any faith tradition. It is also a valid exploration since many Unitarian Universalists come to us because they’ve been hurt by other faiths, especially Christianity, and so are willing to explore the truths and any aspect of any world religion except for Christianity!

A statement that values wisdom from other world religions assumes at least two things: 1) That religion in general is valued and valuable; and 2) that our specific religion is valid and valuable. I will give another sermon another time about my perspectives on how we think about our own faith. This morning I confine myself to addressing the first assumption, the value of religion in general.

All religions, including Unitarian Universalism, have fundamentalist extremes. Or, since the word “fundamentalist” refers specifically to a movement in Christianity, perhaps a more accurate word to describe this religious perspective would be “literalists.” What matters most to these people is the rigidity of one specific interpretation of one specific body of literature.

The literalists of the right, like James Dobson, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (authors of the *Left Behind* series) argue with literalists on the left, like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. In our public dialogue then, we end up with a group of people on the literalist Christian Right who demand and articulate one particular definition of religion and

truth, and another group on the literalist secular left who reject the validity of religion as a whole because they reject the practice and definition of it from the Christian Right.

In one of the most famous quotes from his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

If James Dobson and Richard Dawkins had been in my college poetry class studying Robert Burns with me, I get the sense that Dobson would have argued that a red rose is actually, literally love, and Richard Dawkins would have countered by saying a red rose is not love, and therefore love does not exist!

Lost in this argument is an appreciation of the artistry used to express love. Lost in this argument is any recognition of emotion and beauty. Lost in this argument is a recognition and an honor of love itself.

Faith and religion are the two primary tools we use to discover and make some meaning about why we exist. Science is an amazing tool, too, bewilderingly beautiful sometimes, but it only tells us *how* we exist. Science cannot tell us, beyond the most rudimentary mechanics, *why* we exist.

Over eons, civilizations and cultures all over the world developed practices and traditions and religions to address the “why” of human existence. As conscious and self-conscious beings arising from local particularities around the globe, we humans developed stories based on our own experiences in our own localities about our origins and about our purpose. We didn’t know for sure, and we still don’t know for sure, why we are here, but we have glimpses and moments of profound meaning and purpose. Religion provides us with a framework to explore this meaning and purpose. The Reverend Forrest Church, one of our great Unitarian Universalist ministers and theologians, says that, “religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

This is as beautiful and concise a statement about religion as I have ever found. Of course there are practitioners of every faith who don’t fully live out the wisdom of their scriptures. But that doesn’t mean that faith itself or religion itself is inherently wrong or delusional. Taking a lesson from my poetry and literature classes, if we want to explore truth and beauty and wisdom from other world religions as one of our Unitarian Universalist sources articulate, then I suggest we trust the religion, and not necessarily the people who follow the religion. This holds true for us, as we look at our selves, as well.

Arguing for the existence of God, or the non-existence of God, misses the point. The truth is that something is bigger than our selves. Many things are. We can call them whatever we want – God, society, nature, creativity, the universe – but in our increasingly pluralistic world, we need to find healthy ways to engage that which is larger than ourselves if we are going to survive.

In his classic book on the *World’s Religions*, Huston Smith writes that two main approaches of his book are that it seeks to embrace the world, and that it takes religion seriously. While the primary intent of his book is to present enduring religions at their best, he also understands the corruption that occurs as fallible human beings attempt to practice their religions. He writes that, “This book is not a balanced account of it’s subject. The full story of religion is not rose-colored – often it is crude and barbaric. Wisdom and charity are intermittent, and the net result is profoundly ambiguous.”

I am struck by the notion of ambiguity. Perhaps this comes from my background in English literature, where we could write a paper arguing almost any perspective – even contradictory perspectives – as long as it was supported by the text, but it seems that one primary difference between a literalist Fundamentalist Christian and a true religious liberal is the level of comfort with ambiguity.

As I've observed it, neither James Dobson nor Richard Dawkins are comfortable with ambiguity. Both are extreme and unforgiving in their interpretation of their faith.

Scripture, like any literature, has multiple meanings. The stories and teachings in any scripture arise from human experience and human meaning making. Human experience is not limited to one rigid interpretation.

The second half of our source of “wisdom from the world’s religions” is the phrase, “which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” I take this to mean that we explore wisdom from world religions – just as we may explore wisdom from our own religion – because it challenges us to live our ethics more boldly and engage our spirituality more deeply.

In addition, by exploring the best of other faiths and discovering how their ethics may be similar to ours, we train our selves to look for common ground. In this increasingly pluralistic and divisive world, finding common ground is a valuable skill if we want to survive. In the choral piece we heard earlier written by Kendyl Gibbons and Jason Shelton, we heard one similar thread that exists in eight different religions: to love your neighbor as yourself, to rejoice in your neighbor’s gain, and to feel sorrow in your neighbor’s loss. Finding commonality creates space for a measure of kinship, a measure of support, a measure of compassion. Learning that people of other faiths have similar beliefs also helps us understand that we are not so alone.

It no longer surprises me that my study of poetry and literature in college led me to the study of theology and religion so many years later. Both subjects traffic heavily in the world of metaphor and meaning. I am drawn once again to Ezra Pound’s poem, “In a station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Mark Doty writes: “This is a perfect example of what metaphor means and means intensely. Pound's poem stays with us because it yokes unlike things, allows us space to move, and it refuses to make a direct statement — it forces us to remain in the position of interpreter to something that is perpetually open.”

At it’s best, this is exactly what religion does for us. This is exactly what the study of world religions does for us. Religion stays with us because it yokes unlike things – being alive and having to die – allows us space to move, and it refuses to make a direct statement – it forces us to remain in the position of interpreter to something that is perpetually open.