Strong Roots for the Spiritual Journey

by Linda A. Hart

I suspect that there are those of you out there who know this experience well: you've arrived in body, but instead of being right here, present to this moment and what's going on now, you're making lists and rerunning your own little home movies of the conversation you had with your daughter yesterday afternoon or the argument you had with your wife this morning. Your soul hasn't yet caught up with where you are.

This is one variety of insight that people are referring to when they speak of spirituality, a term that is as vague as could be, often difficult to decipher. It is one of the facets of the ongoing conversation that is happening in your congregation and across the United States and Canada in the Unitarian Universalist Association. It's a conversation that needs to be brought more clearly to the surface, to help us understand each other and see what it is that holds us together.

[*Editor's note: Linda's article contains material drawn from two different services—the material presented here includes readings as well as sermonic excerpts.*]

I

The Reverend Frederic Muir delivered a paper to group of colleagues on the development of humanism in Unitarianism. In it, he cites a paper by John Weston, which begins by claiming that "The humanist tradition is the common currency of our movement."[1] He further cites Weston in his description of seven historical threads of humanism: Renaissance humanism from which all others issued, Christian humanism, classical humanism, cultural humanism, humanistic psychology, religious humanism and secular humanism. After describing these seven types of humanism, Muir comments:

> Weston says there are three themes that hold all these humanisms together. First, a fascination with the human. Second, that as humans we each have a responsibility for our life and the world. And third, that we are put together in such a way that we can be responsible for our lives and the world. Humanism, regardless of which of the seven you choose, affirms these three threads. Taken as a whole, these statements are in stark contrast to the underlying premise of commonly accepted and understood orthodox Christian theology and dogma (as well as some other religions of the world), which states that humankind is depraved, careless, and irresponsible. This orthodoxy is also in contrast to the principles affirmed in Unitarian Universalism ("the inherent worth and dignity of every person). You can begin to see why Weston claims: "The humanist tradition is the common currency of our movement."[2]

John Dietrich wrote:

> … the simple fact is this: men are born into a world that is filled with dangers and temptations, they are beset by the material tendencies to ease and luxury and sloth, they

> are dazzled by the worldly ambitions for money and power and fame, they are assailed by the fleshly passions and bodily lusts that are theirs as the descendants of their progenitors of the jungle, they are animals as well as men; and the problem of salvation is not the problems of accepting the sacrifice of a savior by faith, but the problem of the knowledge and stability of character to overcome these temptations. Humanism knows nothing of sin as a natural inheritance; it knows only sins as acts that may be committed by men during the years of life as a result of ignorance or of weakness. It knows nothing of an inheritance of sin and its future punishment in hell from which a man can be saved only by the miraculous process of redemption; but it knows of the weakness and folly, the selfishness and lust of his own nature from which a man needs to be saved not by the consequences of sin that Adam committed yesterday, but from the consequences of the sins he is committing today. He needs to be saved, not from the devil but from himself, not from the terrors of the next world but from the temptations of this. And the only salvation from these things is education and character.[3]

II

In 1999, the City Council of Spokane passed a Human Rights Ordinance that included ten distinct groups of people whose access to housing, employment and public accommodation would be protected; included was the categories of "sexual orientation." It was hotly debated prior to the vote, and once passed, some people organized to have "sexual orientation" removed from the ordinance. A group of clergy was invited to be in dialogue with one another, around the initiative.

The room at Messiah Lutheran held mostly the usual liberal suspects. However, Bishop Walton Mize, one of those prominent in the "Equal Rights not Special Rights" campaign, and one of the most visible African-American ministers in the community sat near the front. He had been invited to participate.

When the program began, the co-directors of the Spokane Council of Ecumenical Ministries introduced the topic and asked some questions: How many of us knew more than twenty people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered? A few raised their hands. How many know fifteen to twenty? A few more. Ten to fifteen? Five to ten? Fewer than five? None? Each time a few hands went up. It was suggested that knowing gay and lesbian people had an effect upon how we viewed this proposition. We took time for worship. There was a reading from Ezekiel that focused on being open to one another, and a prayer was offered that we would be present to one another, listen to one another, and be open to change.

The program began, and the perspective was decidedly liberal. Very comfortable for me. But I wondered how Bishop Mize felt, and wondered who it was who was called to be open. I became aware that I was not especially open to revision of my opinion or stand on this matter. I knew I would vote no on the initiative because I believed it was the right way to vote and I was not open to changing that. I suspected that Bishop Mize would have come to a similar conclusion, only he would vote yes.

As I sat there, pondering my own position, and noticing the lack of clergy from conservative and evangelical churches, and the presence of Bishop Mize, I was reminded of the situation in many of our congregations. What struck me as familiar was wondering how it is that we bridge a gap that seems too large to bridge. I wondered about the assumptions that I brought to the dialogue that would make persuasion impossible. I wondered about the sources of truth that I

rely upon to discern the right path—I knew for sure that they differed radically from Bishop Mize's. I wondered how it might be that he and I could find some common ground around the concerns for civil rights for people of all sexual orientations.

Within UUism, the specifics are different. The difficult conversations aren't about sexuality, but around religious perspectives. There is a dis-comfort, a dis-ease among us that has been stewing for quite a while. It is sometimes called the humanist/theist debate, sometimes called the humanism/spirituality controversy. Conversations between the various sides can be contentious and often painful. I remember a colleague who had been asked to speak about his spirituality at a ministerial retreat, who said that he no longer recognized the denomination to which he had given his professional life. With revivals and enthusiastic singing and talk of the gospel of Unitarian Universalism, with a shift from discussion and debate of critical issues to circles in which we share our spiritual journeys, with a movement from critical thought to the necessity of healing, he felt lost and as if his whole ministry was now being repudiated.

In such conversations, I hope we all reflect upon our assumptions, especially those about what it means to be included in the family of Unitarian Universalists, upon those sources of truth that are most compelling for us: our own intuition, the teachings of science, ancient wisdom, or some combination of those. I'm persuaded that John Weston is right when he claims that humanism is the common currency of Unitarian Universalism. The three threads that he identifies focus well on the characteristics that seem central to diverse communities in Unitarian Universalism. He suggests that a fascination with the human, recognition of our own responsibility for our lives and the world, and a belief in our capacity to change the world are central to all types of humanism. Or, as Thomas Ferrick puts it, "To know and to love the human enterprise, to the extent possible, gives joy and purpose to our lives. That, in a nutshell is why we call ourselves *humanists.*" [4]

III

You can find this spirit reflected in documents written today, and in those written during the ascendancy of humanism within Unitarian Universalism. I was struck by the words of John Dietrich as he described what it was that constituted salvation for humanists. Dietrich's powerful image of the temptations and dangers that confront humanity rings more nearly true today than it did in 1926 when that sermon was first published. We *are* beset by material tendencies to ease and luxury and sloth, we are still dazzled by money and power and fame, and assailed by passions and bodily lusts. What can save us from those temptations and tendencies are knowledge and the stability of character.

Dietrich had a formidable intellect and a capacity for integrating information into compelling and comprehensive sermons. He and his colleague Curtis Reese were very much the spokesmen and visionaries who drew the American Unitarian Association into a powerful renaissance that lasted roughly from 1937 until 1958.

The stage had been set for this renaissance during the preceding seventy years, beginning, at least in part, with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species.* Darwin's work rattled the world, shaking the divine loose from the role of puppeteer, firmly locating the creation of life, in the realm of the natural, free from any intervention. Just as Galileo shook earth and humanity out of its central position in the universe, so did Darwin's work shake God out of the ongoing work of creation in the world, and turned over the work of creation to the random and violent process of natural selection.

There was a significant collection of ministers who believed that Darwin's work

revolutionized not only the study of biology, but the practice of religion as well. There was even a schism in the Unitarian church when a group of ministers formed the Free Religious Association in 1876, which affirmed the "adaptation of religion to modern culture," in particular, the rise of science in a new form.

The Unitarians, particularly the young ministers, took these theories places that the early theorists couldn't have imagined. Some applied evolutionary theory to the development of culture and religious expression. They also invested evolution with value: to evolve didn't just mean to change, as it did in Darwin's model. To evolve for these liberal religionists meant to improve, to become better. They sought for this progress in their religious life, as well as seeing it in the workings of the natural world.

Critical as well for the development of humanism in Unitarianism was the struggle at the Scopes trial in 1925. This trial over the teaching of evolution in the schools clearly defined the opposing visions of where to find the truth. The liberal perspective was lined out in bold relief: the methods of science were held up above the teachings of orthodoxy. The trial and the arguments for the primacy of science were an affirmation of a movement that had already taken hold in Unitarianism.

The creation of the first Humanist Manifesto was probably the event that firmly planted humanism into religious life and especially within Unitarianism. Though the number of ministers who signed that document was few—eighteen total—the impact of the ideas there represented was profound. The document denied special creation of the universe, affirmed humanity's place within the natural world, grounded human values within the realm of human experience and culture, and explicitly refused supernaturalism and dualism.

The 1937 election of Frederick May Eliot to the presidency of the American Unitarian Association opened the door wide to humanism. While not a humanist himself, he clearly welcomed this new thrust in religious life, and humanism grew within our movement until it was, "the common currency of our religious life together."

It is so much the currency that it is nearly impossible for me to discern its influence on my own life and religious development as a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. I've always known that it is my responsibility to discover and articulate what it is that I believe, and I've also known that belief is a human construct, not a given from some source outside of human culture and society. I learned early that the study of humanity was central to the understanding of who we are in the world, and that the study of the natural world isn't at best a dissection of forces and forms, but rather, the study of the natural world as a doorway to awe and deep wonder. I learned that questioning and exploring were the marks of an authentic religious life.

Fred Muir describes his experience of finding Unitarianism in 1968:

> First, it was a thinking person's faith. I don't mean rational religion—though this isn't excluded—but thinking. Unitarian Universalists are encouraged to think for themselves and not go with a prescribed, accepted view… It was a transforming experience to know that I could make religious decisions on my own, based on my deeds and experiences, and then be supported in the validity of those decisions. And second, I equated Unitarian Universalist religious humanism with liberal religion, a religion that was open and supportive of a person's need to explore, search, and journey. There was not one way to commit to this journey, but many ways. As a member of a UU congregation, we gathered to share and support each other in our searches as well as to act on those beliefs we held in common.[5]

It is this sort of experience—the commitment to this sort of an adventure in religion—that continues to draw people through the doors of Unitarian Universalist churches. So, if that's the case, what's all the contention about? My colleague Fred Muir suggests in his article that what is happening isn't so much a competition between humanism and something else, but rather, that there are competing versions of religious humanism, each of which claim the central ground in Unitarian Universalism. Because I believe that Fred has accurately described our situation, I'm going to take a long quote from his conclusions. He writes:

> [There] is a new version of religious humanism. It is a religious humanism that continues to value the role of science and asserts that orthodox religious belief and practice must be reformed—transformed—by modern and current insights. These insights, though, include a broad range of ritual, practice and belief, story, myth and study.
>
> What I embrace as the new religious humanism is a promise of the sort that first attracted me to Unitarian Universalism, the promise of very broad boundaries. I believe that this broadness accounts for the satisfaction and depth that has been the leading edge of our Association's nearly decade long growth at a time when other "mainline" groups have lost members. My experience is that most of my congregation's new members come for many of the same reasons I came: reason, rationality, responsibility and an opportunity and a promise of religious and spiritual openness to explore and journey in the company of others. They, too, come as what I call religious humanists.
>
> Most of these newcomers know very little of the humanism that brought us to this point… They come with a desire to explore, a willingness to listen and to learn, and the hope for religious depth, support and exhilaration. They come wanting to be "a human being, trying to discern and describe the beautiful, the good, the true, and to effect these, to the extent [they] can, in the world." To me, this sounds like they come for the progressive liberalism of religious humanism cast in a new language.[6]

We are rooted deep in humanism, still in the sway of the three R's—reason, rationality and responsibility—and we are bid to be on an adventure of discovery with few boundaries. We are bid to find the way to remake the world into a more just and humane place. We are invited into relationship with one another, too, to find the companionship that we need on the journey. It is a rich journey.

There is much common ground on which we stand. It is riddled with the roots of humanism which penetrates our religious movement so thoroughly that it may at times be hard to discern its presence, but it is there, rooting us firmly to this world, to these companions, to this life stretching with hope before us all.

IV

In their book *Spiritual Literacy*, Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat write:

> In the 1995 film *Smoke,* Auggie Wren manages a cigar store on the corner of Third Street and Second Avenue in Brooklyn. Every morning at exactly eight o-clock, no matter what the weather, he takes a picture of the store from across the street. He has four thousand consecutive daily photographs of his corner all labeled by date and mounted in albums. He calls this project his "life's work."

> One day Auggie shows the photos to Paul, a blocked writer who is mourning the death of his wife, a victim of random street violence. Paul doesn't know what to say about the photos; he admits he has never seen anything like them. Flipping page after page of the albums, he observes with some amazement, "They're all the same." Auggie watches him, then replies: "You'll never get it if you don't slow down, my friend."
>
> The pictures are all of the same spot, Auggie points out, "but each one is different from every other one." The differences are in the details: in the way people's clothes change according to season and weather, in the way the light hits the street. Some days the corner is almost empty; other times it is filled with people, bikes, cars, and trucks. "It's just one little part of the world but things take place there too just like everywhere else," Auggie explains. And sure enough, when Paul looks carefully at the by now remarkably unique photographs, he notices a detail in one of them that makes all the difference in the world to him.[7]

If you haven't guessed, it's a picture of his wife. She's walking past, distracted, far away in her own thoughts. She is present to Paul again in this picture taken just days before she was killed.

Learning to slow down. Learning to pay attention. It's a difficult task for any of us, and it seems to be getting harder day after day. There's a story that I often tell at the beginning of meetings when everyone is gathering and chatting about the traffic or the funny thing that happened in the office today, or complaining about the rush it was to get the kids fed before tearing out of the house. When I've been rushed and trying to get too much done and to be in too many places, it reminds me about getting someplace.

There was a traveler in Africa, who needed to travel a long distance very quickly with a great amount of cargo. He hired many men and one to organize them who spoke his language and theirs. They walked quickly from early in the morning until they could barely see, and then they would have a quick meal, rest, and be walking again as the sun rose in the morning. They did this for several days, and they were within a few hours of their destination. All the men who had been carrying the cargo stopped, set down their burdens and waited. The traveler was mystified and not a little annoyed. "Why have they stopped? Why won't they get up and keep going? We're nearly there!" he asked angrily. "Oh," said the overseer, "they say they must stop and wait for their souls to catch up with them." [8]

I suspect that there are those of you out there who know this experience well: you've arrived in body, but instead of being right here, present to this moment and what's going on now, you're making lists and rerunning your own little home movies of the conversation you had with your daughter yesterday afternoon or the argument you had with your wife this morning. Your soul hasn't yet caught up with where you are.

This is one variety of insight that people are referring to when they speak of spirituality, a term that is as vague as could be, often difficult to decipher. It is one of the facets of the ongoing conversation that is happening in your congregation and across the United States and Canada in the Unitarian Universalist Association. It's a conversation that needs to be brought more clearly to the surface, to help us understand each other and see what it is that holds us together.

There are several factors that brought about this trend toward spirituality. One very clearly was the women's movement, and the desire to claim a way of being in the world that was shaken somewhat loose from the workings of patriarchy. A curriculum written by Shirley Ranck—*Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*[9]—was a particular spark for the movement. *Cakes* was a ten or more week study of the ancient goddess religions. In it participants were invited to experience

rituals, and also invited to try on the images of the goddess in her many guises to see what it might be like to experience the divine as truly in your own image. It asked women to, paraphrasing Ntozake Shange, find god in yourself and love her, love her fiercely. It opened some holes into our community, holes through which practices such as rituals, meditation, prayer, even, might slip.

And slip they did. Our singing—long reputed as miserable because we were always reading ahead to see if we liked the words—began to improve, and people began to dance a bit, to sway and to clap their hands. It's gotten so that at one General Assembly after the closing ceremony, I was following a couple of African American women out of the hall where it had been held. One nudged the other and said, "Well, I never thought it could happen, but we were singing like we were all Baptists in there!" Both laughed loud and long, and they were right: we were singing like Baptists—loud and strong, with harmonies floating around, and tambourines rattling on stage. It is one of the marks of this new energy in our movement, and something that many who come through the doors of our congregations want to find.

Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing group of pagans within the movement. These are people who are seeking to reclaim the more ancient practices and beliefs including, and especially, rituals that celebrate the turning of the year.

In my congregation in the 90s, a prayer group gathered for half a year in which there were explorations of that discipline. Beginning as a study group, it shifted into a gathering of companions who joined together in prayer with one another.

[*The growing practice of Buddhist meditation, mentioned in articles by Ashmore and Barger, is also part of this trend–Ed*.]

What is it that is going on? Where does this come from? Some of it comes just from the cultural swing. Go into any bookstore and you can find shelf after shelf of inspirational books whose purpose is that of spiritual development or enrichment. Our culture as a whole is trying to find something that gives us a sense of groundedness and wholeness. If it can't be found in traditional churches, people will look for something that can do the job: books on simplicity, workshops on the soul, discussion groups, and all sorts of avenues and paths to find a center in the midst of fragmentation and meaninglessness. Our lives are increasingly filled with details and trivial matters, it seems, and the pace gets faster and faster as the days go by. Many go looking for a way to find what can help them to be at peace, to find themselves, and to be connected to those powers that are beyond our ability to control or command.

In his poem "A Timbered Choir," Wendell Berry relates:

> When my father was an old man,
> past eighty years, we sat together
> on the porch in silence
> in the dark. Finally he said,
> "Well, I have had a wonderful life,"
> adding after a long pause,
> "and I have had nothing
> to do with it!" We were silent
> for a while again. And then I asked,

> "Well, do you believe in the
> 'informed decision'?" He thought
> some more, and at last said
> out of the darkness: "Naw!" [10]

Wendell Berry describes that well as he reflects on his father and his life. His father acknowledges that he had less control over the shape of his life than he had thought. "I have had a wonderful life, and I have had nothing to do with it."

Berry's comment on his father's exclamation, "Naw!" continues:

> when we choose
> the way by which our only life
> is lived, we chose and do not know
> what we have chosen, for this
> is the heart's choice, not the mind's;
> to be true to the heart's one choice
> is the long labor of the mind.
> He chose, imperfectly as we must,
> the rule of love, and learned
> through years of light what darkly
> he had chosen: his life, his place,
> our place, our lives.

The work of spirituality is just this work: that we learn through years of light what darkly we choose, each day, each minute. We learn to love our lives again and again and again.

V

What the spiritual seekers are trying to find are those practices and ideas that help them to lead better, truer lives. What they seek is a sense of groundedness to the powers that be.

In *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith,* Anne Lamott writes about Ken, a man in her church who has AIDS:

> There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion when she looks at him at all… She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life—that he—is an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this… But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption of how safe and happy he feels these days.
>
> So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang "Jacob's Ladder," which goes "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with they hymnal in his

> lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing "His Eye is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen—only Ken remained seated… —and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up—lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me.
>
> (Lamott continues) I can't imagine anything but music that could have brought about this alchemy. Maybe it's because music is about as physical as it gets: your essential rhythm is your heartbeat, your essential sound, the breath. We're walking temples of noise, and when you add tender hearts to this mix, it somehow lets us meet in places we couldn't get to any other way. [11]

Later in the essay she tells us that as Ranola and Kenny sing together, they both begin to cry, tears streaming down their cheeks, with their faces pressed against each other, their tears mingling. She notes that it is a small miracle that she has witnessed there in the crowd at church.

What I think most folks are searching for is the practices and ideas that allow them to be each of the people in that story: Kenny, stricken by a fatal disease that is destroying his body speaks of grace and redemption, of hope and light and how much he loves his life. Would that I could have that kind of grace in my life were I in the same situation. Ranola, fearful of this man and his disease who is somehow opened to him, and they are able to touch in some deep way, connected across boundaries that no one expected could be crossed. And Anne Lamott as the third player who looks to see this rag doll man and this beautiful woman, leaning into one another weeping and sees in that moment the true miracle that has happened.

This search is, in my experience, grounded in those qualities that I mentioned earlier that distinguish humanism: a fascination with the human, recognition of our own responsibility for our lives and the world, and a belief in our capacity to change the world. The paths that seekers use are as varied as the people who search. They—we—seek the opportunity to discover and to create ways of being in the world that promote attention, thankfulness, and the possibility of transformation in the small moments where the deepest meaning lies. It isn't an escape from the human, but a means for exploring human experiences of loss and grief, of hope and promise, of pain and helplessness, of the power of loving, and of the possibility of healing. It isn't a giving up of power to a world that is unseen and unseeable, but rather the claiming of responsibility for our lives and our world, seeking to find those ways of living that focus our attention on what is most important. That focus is essential because what we do in the world, and how we live, expresses a hopefulness, an optimism that it is possible to change the world, and the capacity to make that change at its most powerful, lies in the simple and ordinary works of our hearts and hands.

Our paths are diverse, and we employ all the tools available to us: wisdom and practices from ancient times, the workings of science, the scriptures of our own lives, the companionship of community. Though our paths and tools are diverse, still we gather in the shared awareness that truth is still to be discovered, and that there is much that we can do to help one another along the path—whatever path that might be. We are enriched by the many visions and views, tools and intentions that we bring to this beloved community.

VI

I had just graduated from college, and was enrolled to start at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in the fall. At a party at my mother's house, I found myself in conversation with Roald Schrack. Roald was the father of one of my lifelong classmates in religious education classes, and was also a founding member of the Unitarian church in Rockville, Maryland where I had attended church since I was three. Roald had been in Chicago on business and took time to stop into Meadville for a visit. He wandered into the Curtis Room—the living room of the seminary—and sat at the round table near the windows, just next to the coffee machine. This was, I was to learn later, the place where students hung out and discussed everything that could be discussed, and solved all the problems of the world. Roald told me about his conversations there.

"I couldn't believe it—they were talking about God and such things. What in the world is going on in the seminary? Why are they talking about such useless nonsense?"

Roald was a scientist; he worked for the National Bureau of Standards. The genius of Unitarian Universalism, as he best understood it, was that it was shaped by a scientific process, and belief was grounded in the sort of facts which were discovered through that process. To talk of God was for him wholly meaningless, and he was shocked that in a school that was training ministers for his denomination, there would be such kinds of conversations.

This was the first time I had any inkling of the controversy that was brewing within our movement. At seminary that fall, I found myself surrounded with people who were thinking about religion in a different way than I had experienced it in my childhood. We were reading the Bible and exploring the rich imagery, talking about prayer and meditation, trying out our ideas with each other and our faculty each Friday evening at our Chapel services. We examined other religions to see what it was that tied them all together, trying to ferret out what it was that we were doing and how it related to all other people in the world. We discussed ethics and their place in our religious quest. We talked and read and wondered.

By my second year, a group of students began a second chapel service. There was one each week already, but some students found that it wasn't enough. Another student began offering yoga as physical discipline for spiritual development, and another started a prayer circle. I didn't think of any of these activities or conversations as out of line: we were engaging in what I understood to be the work that was the hallmark of Unitarian Universalism, that which separated it from other religious traditions. We were engaging in the free and responsible search for truth, trying to discover the truth in many different places. This was what I had learned in religious education: this search was the heart of a religious life. It was not, as Roald perceived, a betrayal of what I learned over those long years at the Unitarian Church of Rockville, but the living out of the faith I had taken as my own. While there were students for whom this was distressing, they were few, and seemed to tolerate (at least) the wide-ranging activities that were taking place.

What we experienced in those years was not limited to our seminary or our movement. Robert Wuthnow argues that beginning in the 1960s Americans of all kinds of faith traditions have been experimenting with diverse paths to understanding and meaning in their lives. He suggests that by the end of the 1960s that moderate mainline denominations, Catholics, Jews, and evangelical Christians sought to increase commitment to their communities of faith. They adopted two proposals: "that the faithful could gain knowledge only by being exposed to a variety of arguments and counter-arguments, and that faith was ultimately a matter of inner conviction more than of rational or scientific persuasion."[12] It was that same dynamic that fed

the spiritual explorations that my colleagues engaged in seminary. And it has only intensified over the years.

When I entered the ministry, newcomers to our congregations would talk about their anger about the religious tradition. Many of the new members I talked with in the early years of my ministry decried the superstition and dogma and fear that they experienced in other religious communities. Their religious beliefs were negative—I don't believe in God or Jesus as the Christ, I don't believe in the Bible. On and on and on they could list what no longer worked for them. Few could come up with a positive word to say about their own religious life.

In recent years, though, the number of that sort of newcomer has diminished. More often than not, people are coming into our doors because they have noticed some sort of lack in their lives. If they come from another tradition, there's rarely anger. Now a newcomer is more likely to acknowledge that the tradition of their childhood simply doesn't make sense anymore. They can still value elements and aspects, but needed a different sort of place. More and more visitors to our congregations have had no affiliation with congregations before, but want to see what this kind of community can offer.

Fred Muir describes it this way: "They come with a desire to explore, a willingness to listen and to learn, and the hope for religious depth, support and exhilaration. They come wanting to be 'a human being, trying to discern and describe the beautiful, the good, the true, and to effect these, to the extent [they] can, in the world.'" [13]

Over all the years and changes that have happened it seems to me that this is what holds us together the best: a willingness to learn, a willingness to listen, a hope for better understanding and depth, and the desire to bring more beauty and truth and good into being in the world. That's what we were, and what we've become.

VII

The struggle that we face as a religious movement has been lined out as a matter of belief and of practice. Humanism is by some thought to be dusty and dry, irrelevant to the concerns of the day. Spirituality is by some thought to be superstition and nonsense, nothing that is real and true, but a dangerous regression to worn out beliefs. A humanist service—if you could use that word for it—has been described as a lecture with an oboe solo. Spiritually focused worship is one of those woo-woo experiences in which people get all mushy and no one thinks straight. The struggle is about the right way to do religious life.

From my reading of the history of Unitarianism through the centuries and Universalism through the centuries, what I know to be the character of our movement is that we have always railed against any sort of orthodoxy. To be orthodox means quite literally to have the right opinion, the right belief. This religious movement has always held strongly to the idea that there is no one right way to believe. In Transylvania, the early Unitarians proclaimed that there should be religious tolerance, a state policy that no one should be forced to believe particular truths. Earl Morse Wilbur tells us that the decree of toleration confirmed in 1563 declared that "in every place where preachers shall preach and explain the gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them, but they shall keep the preachers whose doctrine they approve. Therefore none of the Superintendents or others shall annoy or abuse the preachers on account of their religion… or allow any to be imprisoned or be punished by removal from his post on account of his teaching." [14]

In 1563 they didn't require a particular belief, a particular way of being in the world, only

that preachers should preach the gospel, the good news that they knew.

In England, Unitarianism seceded from the Church of England over very similar issues in the late 18th century. Clergy began to question the need to assent to specific creeds and dogma in order to serve. It was the dissenters—those who took issue with the orthodoxy of the Church of England—who eventually formed the Unitarian Church in England.

Here in America, there was conflict in the early part of the 19th century over what were the right beliefs about Jesus, about the Bible, about God. Our religious forebears believed strongly that it wasn't rightness of belief that held us together in community, and they fought with those who demanded that each one subscribe to a particular dogma. It was what formed our movement, what created Unitarianism in the United States.

Our Universalist heritage is no less clear. Time and again, some among them sought to create creeds and confessions, but each time, the statements, if they were adopted were always preceded by an acknowledgment that none could be binding. The heart of Universalism also was a trust in each one of us to discover the truth and to live it out.

What has bound us together as a religious movement has *never*, *never* been ascription to a particular set of beliefs. We are declaratively and assuredly a heterodox movement, recognizing and affirming that what is most essential isn't holding a particular belief, but rather judging the goodness and truth of a life, of a community by what is created. We are judged not by the content of our personal beliefs, but by how they move us toward goodness, truth and beauty in our living.

This is a religious tradition that has fought to defend religious freedom, and which has kept a watchful eye for anything that might be construed as a dogma or a creed. We hold as one of our dearest truths that each person must discover for herself, for himself what seems to be most true. We hold deeply that we each have to struggle with an articulation of belief, seeking to speak it clearly. And we hold that the central expression of our deeply held values isn't in the rightness of that spoken belief, but in how it can be read in our lives. It should be read:

- in how we touch each other with care and compassion;
- in the goodness that we can breathe into the world, the works of our hands and hearts for what is just and right;
- in kindness lived in each moment;
- in the integrity with which we are able to live our lives;
- not in success but in faithfulness to our values, and in faithfulness to a vision of human possibility.

Not by our words shall we be best remembered, not by our elegantly defined statements of belief, but by our fruits, by what we can give, by the love we can embody shall we be known.

The question we need to be asking one another is what is it that we can do together? How is it that we can join our lives to create something greater than we can create alone?

Let us continue to ask each other always in love.

Notes

[1] John Weston, "The Seven Humanisms and How They Grew," *Voice,* Fall, 1996, p.5.

[2] Frederick Muir, "How We Got From There To Here: From Unitarian Christianity to Unitarian Humanism," *Selected Essays,* Boston, UUMA, 1999, p. 4.

[3] John H. Dietrich, "The Kind of Salvation Man Needs" an address given January 3, 1926 (Minneapolis: First Unitarian Society).

[4] "Symposium on Humanist Manifesto II: Reflections," K. Arisian et al., *The Humanist*, The American Humanist Association, Sept. 1, 1998

[5] Muir, pp. 18,19

[6] Muir, p. 21.

[7] Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, S*piritual Literacy,* New York, Touchstone, 1998

[8] From a story by Bruce Chatwin, in *The Soul of the World: A Mo*dern Book of Hours, edited by Phil Cousineau, San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.

[10] Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, Berkeley, CA, Counterpoint, 1999, p. 168

[11] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts On Faith,* New York, Pantheon, 1999.

[12] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s,* Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1998, p.80.

[13] Muir, p. 21. (Imbedded quote from Victoria Safford, *"Why I Am A Humanist,"* UU World November/December, 1997, Boston, UUA, p. 19.)

[14] Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism, Vol. II,* Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, p.38.