The Simple Gifts of Liberal Religion:
and How "Unitarian Universalism" has Betrayed Them

by Davidson Loehr

What I see as liberal religion is the opposite of literal religion; it understands religious teachings as symbolic and metaphorical ways, imaginative ways, of speaking to the human condition, our human condition. The authority for this, the authority for all honest religions, is ontologica—a truth that is not determined by what we do or don't believe, not determined by any church, creed or tradition. Saying something is an ontological truth is saying this is really the way life is, whether we like it or not.

Addressing a crowd of overeducated religious liberals at the Southwest UU Summer Institute, (SUUSI), I need to do at least three things:

1) something informational, so you could each learn at least two new facts;

2) something challenging, both intellectually and spiritually;

3) something heretical, to see if I can challenge orthodoxies you didn't know you had.

I'll attempt this by raising only two topics. The first is liberal religion, which, as I define it, has a history of at least 2500 years. That may be a longer time than you've heard anyone talk about liberal religion existing. The great German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher was named the Father of Liberal Theology just two hundred years ago. But liberal religion goes back much farther than that, and isn't confined to Western religions. It has been part of every major religion in the world.

When you encounter a few of the insights from this broad, deep and rich tradition, I think you'll find them challenging, and perhaps a little scary. The perspectives of liberal religion have been the very best Good News to come out of our religious imaginations for the past 25 centuries.

Then for the heretical part, I want to look at this very new religion called Unitarian Universalism against this background, and wonder whether it's a good thing or a bad thing.

I begin with a confession: I am not and have never been a Unitarian Universalist. That sounds like a line from the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s: "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Unitarian Universalist Party?" But I'm not and I haven't been. In a way I'm a kind of alien here, an interloper from outside of UUism. Though I may have a different religion, I also have two areas of overlap with UUs; enough, I hope, that I might still be both interesting and useful.

First, I've been a parish minister since 1986, and all the churches I've served have been dues-paying members of the UUA. So while I've never found "Unitarian Universalism" attractive, some of my best friends call themselves UUs.

Secondly, I am a religious liberal. That's how I define my religion. It's the smallest pigeonhole in which I'm comfortable. I hope that I might make it the smallest pigeonhole in which some of you will want to be comfortable, too.

One of my favorite religious discussions happened some years back with some Presbyterians. Other religious groups, as you may know, say all the same things about their uniqueness that UUs do. You'll hear them say that steering a bunch of them is like herding cats; you'll hear them say things like "What would you expect of a bunch of Lutherans?" or "Ask three Baptists, get four opinions," and the rest.

About a dozen years ago, I belonged to an ecumenical ministers' group. Thirty or forty of us met together every Thursday for lunch, and our churches took turns hosting the lunches. So we got to meet a nice variety of people from other religions—mostly the women who prepared and served the lunches. We were visiting a small rural Presbyterian church one Thursday, and before lunch I overheard some women talking. They were trashing Catholics or Baptists, and one of them said "Well, thank God we're Presbyterians!" After a little silence, a second woman said "We're not supposed to be Presbyterians. We're supposed to be Christians." After more silence, another said "Even that sounds arrogant. We're supposed to love one another, that's all."

There is a whole graduate-level education in that little interchange, in the difference between a religious life and a religious club. It's the difference between what Hindus might call the transient and the permanent, or Buddhists could call the difference between being asleep and being awake. Clubs and denominational identities are about who we are, what we believe, what separates us from others. But these identities are not about timeless insights into the human condition. And that smugness of the first Presbyterian woman represents an attitude that every religion has seen as the enemy of religion.

In Christianity, it's the figure of the Pharisee from Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Remember that one? They both went in to pray. The Pharisee thanked God for making him superior to other people, especially that tax collector. "Thank God we're Presbyterians!" The tax collector just stood aside, asking for mercy for a sinner such as him. And Jesus' observation was that the arrogance of the first man was not acceptable to God.

Real religion is never about trying to make us feel superior. It's always about trying to make us very small parts in an imaginative reality that transcends all the insights and ideals of every club, every denomination, every creed or set of "principles." It's a little scary that way, and brings to mind St. Paul's statement that we work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

But this notion that religion is like wisdom communicated in symbolic and metaphorical code, which must be brought inside and allowed to challenge and transform

us—that's a very old notion—it is the soul of liberal religion. In the period from about 800 to 200 BC, some fundamental changes took place all over the world. Some scholars call this the Axial Age, an age when human consciousness shifted on its axis, to a new way of understanding who we are and what we are to do.

You could say that this was the time when, for the really advanced thinkers and visionaries, God changed from a Being outside of us to be placated, to a concept inside of us which must be embodied, incarnated. The prophets brought this to ancient Judaism with their talk of religion as a transformed heart rather than the stench of burnt offerings to bribe an external God. In Hinduism, the Upanishads brought the notions of God inside, and redefined religion as transforming our own understanding to be in harmony with what they saw as eternal and divine perspectives.

The Buddha took the same road, but without using God-language as his idiom of expression. He almost used ordinary language, in saying that the personal goal should simply be to wake up, which he defined as growing beyond the need for our illusions, including our comforting illusions. That's part of that was meant by that odd saying "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" The authority for life was to be within us, and we were to wake up by understanding the real nature of life, its sufferings, and the cure of those sufferings.

It wasn't about what we believed; it was about the way things really are, whether we like it or not. Thich Nhat Hahn has called this "salvation through understanding," where "understanding" is taken in a deep and broad sense, not just intellectualism. What all these great religious thinkers were saying was that religion is about who we are, how we understand ourselves, and how we should live. Whether it was done in God-language or not, it was a kind of classical humanism, concerned with the quality of our lives here and now, trying to put them into a kind of harmony with insights that were believed to be eternal, rooted in the very nature of life understood deeply. It was an attempt to help us establish absolute relationships with absolute things, and merely relative relationships with merely relative things, and each religion tried to teach its people the difference.

This was the birth of the liberal style of being religious. What I see as liberal religion is the opposite of literal religion; it understands religious teachings as symbolic and metaphorical ways, imaginative ways, of speaking to the human condition, our human condition. The authority for this, the authority for all honest religions, is ontological—a truth that is not determined by what we do or don't believe, not determined by any church, creed or tradition. Saying something is an ontological truth is saying this is really the way life is, whether we like it or not. The focus isn't on how special we are, but whether we are living out of values that transcend the identity of our social, political or religious groups. I can't think of a single first-rate religious figure of whom this is not true.

This is the essence of honest religion. I call it liberal religion. Maybe you would rather call it metaphorical, psychological, pragmatic, existential, or think of it as a wisdom tradition. It isn't about what we believe or what a group says on our behalf as a condition of membership—whether creeds or principles. It's about what we think we can argue is really

true about the human condition, and the commands those truths make on us.[1]

An Eastern Christian theologian named Origen spelled this out in the early 3rd century. He said there are three levels on which we can understand religious teachings. The lowest level was the literal, where he said the simplest believers actually thought God existed as a being. This, he thought, was ignorant nonsense. The second level was the symbolic and metaphorical level, which most of us still identify with liberal religion today. That's where we understand that the important meanings of religious scriptures are about deeper and more authentic ways of being.

Origen's third level is still uncomfortably challenging. That's where we finally see that religion isn't really about understanding. It's about transformation. It is about becoming divine, even becoming God. It's a way of living and being, not an intellectual exercise. The simple gift of liberal religion is salvation by character; it is personal authenticity, the kind of authenticity that rejuvenates the world.

You can't get that secondhand. You can't get it by joining a club, a denomination or a church, or putting fish named "Jesus" or "Darwin" on your car trunk. You only get it by doing the self-examination and the personal work. The gifts of all the world's liberal religions are free, but they aren't cheap. They can cost us our artificially small identities, and the comfort that comes with them.

Schleiermacher, that German theologian I mentioned earlier, brought religion down to earth with great clarity and force. Religion, he said—and he meant every sincere religion—comes from the human tendency that wants to take life seriously, to grow to our full humanity. And when we find someone who lives in relation with the highest ideals, he said, we absolutely admire and respect them. We can't help it. This is one of our highest aspirations: not because we're toadying up to a god, but because religion is the imaginative human enterprise of trying to become most fully alive and authentic. You can't fake that, and you can't do it as a group.

This is good religion! It takes us seriously enough to give us the biggest and deepest challenge of our lives. Anything less should simply not be counted as religion. And, as every religion I know teaches, there is a penalty for not taking our lives this seriously. Hindus and Buddhists have you coming back until you get it right. Taoism and many nature religions talk about being out of touch with the essential balance of life, saying you pay the penalty of a diminished and fragmented life. It is a dissipation of the life force.

My favorite Western religious thinker is the 19th century Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard. He didn't think we could fool ourselves. He thought there was a price to pay for identifying only with clubs, churches, denominations, and secondhand faiths—Lutheranism, in his case. It was a kind of existential Judgment Day that he called "the Midnight Hour." Here is how Kierkegaard put it:

> Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when every one has to throw off his mask? Do you believe that life will always let itself be mocked? Do you think

you can slip away a little before midnight in order to avoid this? Or are you not terrified by it? I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself [at all].[2]

When a secondhand identity short-circuits the religious process by giving people strokes simply for being Presbyterian, Christian, Unitarian Universalist or Republican, then it has become a betrayal of the religious calling. And it diminishes our spirit by focusing on proximate rather than ultimate concerns, on the transient rather than the permanent, by identifying us as members of a club, rather than serious people working out their paths toward wholeness and connection in fear and trembling.

Many of you are probably more realistic than I am. Those of you who are may be thinking "Wait a minute! This isn't how religions operate in the real world at all! Mostly, they're herds of people unthinkingly repeating nonsense fed to them by churches and priests who neither know nor care about this deep existential stuff!"

And you're right. The searing insights of history's best religious thinkers scare people. Perhaps that's why all religions have created simplistic, secondhand faiths for their masses. It's the religion of that first Presbyterian woman. "Presbyterianism" is the religion for their masses, just as "UUism" is the religion for ours. And mass religions have a different faith than honest religions do.

The faith of religions for the masses is the faith that there is safety in numbers and security in belonging to a group of like-minded people. The faith of honest religion is fundamentally different; it is the faith that life really does have some abiding truths that can guide, strengthen and comfort us if only we will listen, hear, and obey them, even when they put us at odds with our group—which they usually will.

Club membership, membership in a political party, religion for the masses—these things can feel really good if what we seek is acceptance without work, given for being in a group of people just like us in a kind of mutual admiration society. It's the feeling a Democrat gets at a Democratic convention, but—curiously!—doesn't get at a Republican convention. It's the feeling a Baptist gets at a Baptist convention, but—again, curiously—not at a Catholic convention.

Why is this group identity, this club membership, such a bad thing? For one thing, clubs are usually more concerned with adoring their own club members than in searching for truth that transcends their club. For example, I heard that, again this year at General Assembly, there were still people presenting papers on Channing, Parker and Emerson, as though an adequate religion for the 21st century could be found in them. It can't. The truth is, those three were not first-rate religious thinkers. If none of them had lived, liberal religion would not have missed a single important idea. Everything of enduring worth that they said had been said earlier and better by more powerful religious figures.

The only reason those three men are revered today is because they tried to serve the deep and timeless ideals of a transcendent sense of identity that took them well beyond the

comfort zone and religious vision of most of their contemporaries. Their primary identity was not as Unitarians, but as people of vision and courage looking for ontological truths about life. That's what we should be doing today: looking for first-rate sources of insight into the human condition, rather than bowing to the memory of the dead who let us shine by their reflected light because they once had some kind of connection with 19th Century Unitarianism. To me, these look like the desperate moves of people with low self-image, trying to gain a secondhand identity by saying "Yes, but once there were these few people in my club who really did something."

So now there is this new religion of Unitarian Universalism, defined by seven principles that even the president of the UUA has described as boring. Maybe you wonder "So what? We all know they are silly things, nobody can remember any but the first and last one anyway, but so what? Why make such a fuss?"

One answer is that bad religion drives out good; these banalities divert spiritual energy away from real religious questions, and the kind of hard personal work real religious questions have always involved.

Not everyone agrees with me here. I was discussing this with a very sharp Methodist minister a few months ago, and he wouldn't buy it. He gave me a very fatherly, patronizing talk about how the masses of Methodists need the group faith of Methodism, how most people don't want to think about these things, and just need to be comforted.

I've heard the same argument from colleagues in the UUA: that most people don't want to think about these things, and the seven principles give them something simple to make them feel special just by belonging to the church. A longtime friend of mine who now heads the ministry program at the University of Chicago Divinity School says she thinks people identify with religious denominations so they won't have to think, and won't be expected to. Maybe. I am unredeemably idealistic, and I don't want to admit that these realists may be right, though history seems to be on their side.

But there are some very real, down-to-earth effects of a religion with a vaporous center, which we need to discuss openly. I think the shallowness of a faith related to principles that even bore the president of the UUA is worth talking about.

And I think it's directly related to the fact that the adult membership of the UUA has declined by more than 44% since 1970 relative to the population of the U.S. Even in real numbers, we had over 12,000 fewer members in 2000 than in 1970. But during those thirty years, the population of the U.S increased by over 37%, while UU adult members decreased by 7%. If adult membership had simply kept up with the U.S. population increases, there would now be 230,000 adult UUs rather than the 155,449 reported in 2000.[3]

This brings me to an awkward place. I want to get worked up, and tell you what I think we should do. But I can't have it both ways; I can't refuse to identify myself as a UU and then tell you what I think "we" should do, because I've chosen not to be in that "we." Perhaps the only thing I have a right to say is that I think as a religious scholar that these are

really fundamental problems, and I wish you well. But that's neither emotionally nor rhetorically satisfying, and feels like I'm wimping out, that I should just say what I believe and trust you to know what to keep and what to ignore.

So if I *were* a Unitarian Universalist, here is what I would tell you: fifteen years ago, I wrote to one of the men responsible for establishing the seven principles as the de facto creed of the new religion called Unitarian Universalism. I argued that besides their banality, it dumbed faith down to the level of a political party or social club, and was a deep betrayal of the very soul of liberal religion. He wrote back, saying "The principles don't do much for me either, but people need a simple place to start."

I respectfully—but violently—disagree. You cannot imagine Jesus, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Muhammad, Origen, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard or any other exemplary religious teacher ever saying such a thing. Most of Jesus' disciples never understood him. He didn't do them the insult of dumbing down his message. He said it was there for those "with eyes to see and ears to hear," and left the challenge with them. The Buddha spent 45 years teaching and explaining because he knew that people need a profound and deeply true place to start, or they are likely to remain spiritually simple.

The only reason that history's greatest religious thinkers achieved anything of significance was because they tried to serve—not principles or creeds, but the ancient and honorable tradition of an honest religion that takes life very seriously. The same will be true of us living today. We are blessed by the quality of our aspirations.

I believe we will be judged by whether we had the vision and the courage to say "No more shallowness. No more vacuous principles sitting on the altar where deep and sometimes scary religious insights belong! We come for that, and will not settle for less!" For the love of God, let us stop the obsessive adoration of a handful of dead people from the 19th century! Consider the irony of this: looking back 150 years to venerate people whose significance lay in the fact that they looked forward rather than backward. Yes, they did good things, but venerating them is a category error that demeans both them and us.

The Buddhists talk of all great teachers as "fingers pointing to the moon." The object, say the Buddhists, is to see the moon, not to worship the finger. (The Buddhists obviously don't think people need a simple place to start.) Turning Channing, Emerson, Parker and the rest of the tiny group of 19th Century Unitarians into the heroes of our subculture is worshiping the finger and ignoring the moon.

That "moon" is the view of life lived more whole, more connected, more aware and responsibly, and the rest of the callings that have inspired the religiously gifted people. The "fingers" are the people who were great only because they let their lives be directed by that deeper awareness, broader sense of connection and higher calling. To turn them into objects of adoration in our little club, while ignoring the many other religious figures who were far better, demeans us and dishonors their memory, doesn't it?

And let us stop talking and acting like a political cell of the Democratic party. Fighting for

laws that enshrine only one set of values may be part of what democracy is about, but that intentionally fragmented and partial view of life is not what any religious vision has ever been about.

Above all, let us once more seek and serve that molten core, that deep, life-giving, terrifying spirit of healthy vision and uncompromising courage which has given such vibrant life to 25 centuries of religious liberals and might yet again give life to us. Let us seek that ancient and honorable spirit, that spirit: nothing simpler, nothing less. Starting here. Starting now—Amen!

Notes:

1. If you're really interested in this, I have an eight-hour adult education course called 2500 Years of Liberal Religion, recorded on tape cassettes, and available through my church for $35 including shipping. (Send check for $35 payable to FUUCA, 4700 Grover Ave. Austin, TX 78756, write "2500 years tapes" in the memo line. You can also buy the 8-hour workshop on the Jesus Seminar for the same price; just put "Jesus tapes" in the memo line.) You can also read or download sermons and other materials from the church website: www.AustinUU.org.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, edited by Robert Bretall, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1946, 99

3. Unitarian Universalist Association, *Unitarian Universalist Association Directory,* Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979-2000

"UUism" and its growth or decline, compared with the growth in the US population:
In 1970, UUs (167,583) were 0.0817% of the US population (205,052,000).
In 1980, UUs (139,052) were 0.0614% of the US population (226,545,805).
In 1990, UUs (145,250) were 0.0584% of the US population (248,709,873).
In 2000, UUs (155,449) were 0.0552% of the US population (281,421,906).

The 2000 figures show UUs have lost over 32% since 1970 (0.0552% is 67.6% of 0.0817%). They've lost 10% since 1980, 5% since 1990.

Here are some more ways to play with those figures: Since 1970, the US population has increased by 37.2%, while UU adult members have declined by over 7.2%. If UUs had kept up with US population growth, there would be about 229,998 adult members today instead of the 155,000+ we have. So we are about 44.5% behind where we would need to be, to have kept pace with US population growth. And we're about 45% behind where we'd need to be actually to say we had GROWN in the past thirty years.

U.S. population figures from various internet sources.