

THE POSITIVE CORE OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

Today I want to share what I consider the positive core of Unitarian Universalism. I say positive, because so often we religious liberals describe ourselves in negative terms, stating only what we deny or reject; when, in truth, ours is a positive religion, soaked in affirmations and possibilities.

To locate the positive core of our free faith, I've chosen to focus on three honorable avenues to the holy: rationalism, mysticism, and activism. This threesome, while certainly not an exhaustive list, will suffice for one sermon. Living reasonably, intuitively, and compassionately during our single, precious span of days and nights is our mission as Unitarian Universalists. In essence, we're summoned to be *freethinking mystics with hands!*

First, the freethinking component of our heritage would have us pay homage to reason—a virtue that brings a clarifying, steadying influence in a world that prizes the fiery and flamboyant. You and I proudly say: hip, hip hooray, three cheers for the good old gray!

By reason we mean the disposition to guide one's belief and conduct by the evidence and the will to make measured judgments. Reason implies the readiness to look before leaping, to gaze hard at all sides of an issue, attaching due weight to each side. It means seeing things not through light-or-dark-tinted glasses or distorted or magnifying lenses, but, as far as possible, seeing things as they truly are.

In an era when cults are rampant and irrationality is pervasive, it's crucial that our Fellowship's gospel declare unabashedly that our human minds are gifts of the Creation and to be fully employed. Author Kurt Vonnegut warns an American society increasingly in revolt against reason: "If you want to be unloved and forgotten, be reasonable!"

After all, who really wants to master a gray virtue like reason? Who wants to practice the daily rigors of reflection when you can glide on the wings of the latest mindless fad? The strain of producing ordered thought seems too onerous for the majority of Americans, especially religious folk. Perhaps because of our frontier history, American heroes and heroines are people who live impatiently, even dangerously. We salute the flashy and defiant ones who raise our pulse-rates.

Now, of course, none of our lives is sufficiently robust without occasional zany moments and crazy deeds. So, as one wit remarked: "Every one of us should be a damn fool for at least five minutes every day. Wisdom simply consists in not exceeding that limit."

Friends, think of the violence streaming from the tube in the corner of our den. Think of the paperback trash on display in our drugstores, our airports, even our bookstores. Think of the eerie silence of our inner cities at night, when people are afraid to walk their own streets. Think of what we put up with in American culture masquerading in the name of music, painting, and poetry. Think of how hard it is for us to sustain rational dialogue about race or politics or crime or human rights. All these contemporary challenges will never be solved by the appeal to force, emotionalism, or tradition, however ancient; the only relevant appeal is the appeal to reason, the determined attempt of all sides to act reasonably.

There's a myth circulating in our society that the rational temper imposes a yoke, even a straitjacket, upon the life of feelings. To be sure, reason does and should tell us when we're jealous, angry, or fearful, and that if we give feeling wild reign, we'll pay a price. Yet reasonable control spells prudence not repression. Reason simply urges the purchase of a larger good by a smaller, present sacrifice.

Plato reminded us that life is like a chariot race in which the driver, reason, is in charge of two spirited horses, our appetites and our emotions. It's only if, through an expert use of bits and

reins, the driver can make these two horses run together that we'll ever manage to stay the course and avoid a racetrack pile-up.

So, yes, you and I belong to a heritage that holds tenaciously to the value of reasonableness. I like to put it this way: there are beliefs and experiences (such as love and trust) which I cannot prove and which, therefore, may go *beyond* my reason, yet I never like to take on faith anything which goes *against* my reason.

It was Robert Ingersoll, the quintessential freethinker, who remarked: "If I go to heaven, I want to take my reason with me!" And it was our Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson who mused: "If two people are thinking alike, then one of them is probably not thinking." We ardently believe in the worth, not the infallibility, of human reason. Ours is not a religion of reason, where reason is the noun, the substance; rather ours is a reasonable religion, where freethinking prevails as an adjective or modifier.

Again I say, three cheers for the gray—an imperfect, flawed instrument that serves us well as a sorter, an analyzer, a formulator. Reason's an instrumental value that assists our relentless spiritual quest for beauty, love, and goodness—the terminal virtues of our faith. Simply put, reason is our servant not our savior. It serves to help us get what we want, but it cannot tell us what to want. It signifies what's real but not what's desirable. We affirm that by reason alone, we can never hope to achieve communion with self, neighbor, nature, or God, but neither can we ever hope to achieve enduring, meaningful communion without reason.

Yes, we are freethinking mystics...so we move on to the second nutrient of our gospel. "The highest knowledge," wrote Albert Schweitzer, "is to know we're ultimately surrounded by mystery." Alas, we use our reason to the fullest to explore but not capture the surrounding mystery.

In Unitarian Universalist wedding ceremonies and services of union, we'll often use a passage such as this:

Your partnership is a social reality, a moral statement, a spiritual bond, a personal covenant, and a public witness. Intimacy is also a mystery—a communion full of struggles and joys often more profound than either our expectation or grasp. May you enter this mystery with reverence and be nourished by its singular demands and gifts.

Mysticism furnishes an underrated pursuit in our liberal religious pantheon of values. It's often difficult for freethinkers to confess that we dwell in a universe utterly beyond our creation, our control, even our comprehension. Blessedly, there exist sufficient numbers of scientists in our very ranks who posit that “the cosmos is not only stranger than we imagined, it's stranger than *can* be imagined. The universe is wondrously, terrifyingly inexplicable. And I like it that way.”

The mystical portion of our liberal heritage reminds us that we're sustained by processes and powers we can neither fathom nor do without. We're drenched in holiness.

My hunch is that most of us in the sanctuary today have had radiant, rapturous, transrational (note I didn't say *irrational*) moments of union with self, neighbor, nature, or Spirit that we might designate as mystical epiphanies. These holy encounters can't be adequately verbalized. They impel us to song or silence, often tears. They drive us to leaping or to our knees. They're what I call transformative moments of the numinous.

If you and I, as Unitarian Universalists, were to sit down and relate our most revered values, our lists would be overflowing with transrational concepts like wonder, reverence, majesty, kinship, awe, gratitude and the like—virtues grounded not in reason so much as bathed in what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*.

So, our liberal religious gospel ultimately affirms that life is not a batch of problems to be solved so much as fathomless mysteries to be experienced. The mysteries of birth and death, being and sexuality, human evil and inscrutable goodness, can never be mastered, then packaged

securely in doctrinal boxes. As a reasonable mystic, you see, we're evangelists of a message that resists scrubbing the cosmos clean of its abiding imponderables. We refuse to reduce life to logic and the literal.

Rather as freethinking mystics we're dedicated to a reasonable faith that pushes our minds as far as they can go, then bows before the mysteries. The Greek root *mys* in the word mystery means shutting the eyes or mouth, because the essence of mystery is private. In engaging mystery we're driven to silence, muteness, dumbness—forced to shut-up, at least for a moment, no easy or comfortable feat for the loquacious seekers we're known to be.

The mysteries of creation, love, death and nature are uncanny and elicit sentiments best rendered by the English word awe, and its derivatives *awesome* and *awful*. You see, mysteries both attract and repel us. For example, we're fearful of intimacy, nonetheless powerfully drawn to it. Why? Because love is never a problem to be solved but always an unshakable mystery to be experienced. What makes sexual communion daunting yet exhilarating is not because of any techniques involved but because of the intractable mystery of two beings venturing valiantly their very bodies and souls.

The fundamental religious quest, as I grasp it, is to engage life, meet death, surrender to love, dance with the deities. Blessed are those who rather than avoiding or explaining mystery have the courage to encounter it wholeheartedly, from beginning to end. Indeed blessed.

Finally, as freethinking mystics we consummate our religious quest through action. Both the Hebrew and Christian testaments offer their own version of the religious imperative: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul (the mystical enterprise), and with all thy mind (the gift of rationality) and with all thy strength (the power of enactment).

We're alive on earth to be wise, holy servants of the cosmos. Ever informed minds and transformed souls must result in reforming the worlds where we dwell. Preacher Henry Ward

Beecher used to tell his congregation: “Folks, you can have either my head or my heels but not both...” In other words, he would be either a thinker or a doer but couldn’t manage both. Baloney! As Unitarian Universalists, our aspiration is to employ our heads and our heels, our whole beings, in service of the values we cherish. We’re summoned to meditate and march, pray and protest, commune with nature and clean up our streets, raise hell and experience heaven—be freethinking mystics with hands.

So, yes, I like to call us freethinking mystics with hands. We’re freethinkers: unfettered pilgrims in search of governing truths. We’re mystics as well: spiritually attuned to marvels of the universe and awake to omens of the divine. We’re also blessed with hands outstretched in praise, resistance, and caring embrace. In short, we’re simultaneously summoned to live reasonably, intuitively, and compassionately during our one precious span of days and nights.

Hands, for me, are the key to embodying our liberal religious gospel. Our faith usually launches in the *head*, then moves through the *heart*, but always translates through our *hands*. What we do with our very fingertips is where our soul emerges. So, ultimately, at the close of our earthly journey, we’re going to be measured not by the number of our reasonable thoughts or even hallowed encounters with Transcendence but rather by the breadth of our justice-building and depth of our joy-sharing.

Let me put it boldly: our Unitarian Universalist gospel will prove fraudulent unless we extend our hands in hospitality to the last, lost, and least of society; unless we handle congregational conflicts honorably; unless we soothe the brow of the wounded and dying; unless we dirty our hands in messy social causes; unless we join hands in companionship and love; unless we employ hands in turning word or performing surgery; unless we lift our hands in celebration; unless we raise our hands in protest; unless we heal that portion of the earth where we’re planted.

And yes there's a time to empty our hands as well. The time to put our stones down, for hands clutching stones can't freely hug or drum, and hands fisting the past, can't freely sing a future into being.

A closing story about hands, about touch. A member of the larger San Diego community spoke to our congregation years back, telling his remarkable odyssey as a *recovering* (not *recovered*) schizophrenic. His main point was the utter cruciality of human touch: holding and being held.

As a child, you see, Joseph suffered neglect. He was ignored emotionally and physically shuttled back and forth between his parents, lovingly caressed by neither. One cold mid-western night there was a fierce thunderstorm, with lightning and severe wind. You know what it's like, if you've ever lived there.

Joseph was but five years old and terrified by the storm. He screamed out to his parents to come to his room. Joseph was shaking and scared, but his folks, not wanting to be inconvenienced, brushed aside his fear, with these words: "Joseph dear, hold on, don't worry; God will take care of you." Frightened little Joseph wasn't satisfied and cried back: "But, Mom and Dad, I want, I want somebody with skin on 'em!"

And so it goes. Our heads and hearts remain remote until embodied in physical presence. Humans of varying sizes and situations clamor, day and night, for buddies with skin on 'em, to hold us close or push us ahead: to touch our bodies, our hearts, our very souls.

So it goes: the migration from our heads to our hearts to our hands constitutes the ultimate flow of our earth-based liberal religion.

Just remember how life proceeds. We enter existence with our fists clenched as babies, but when we arrive at death's door, our hands are open. And during the intervening time, our

mission is to progressively unclench our fists and open our hands wide in love and concern toward all who cross our path.

Well, that's how this roving evangelist sees the positive core of Unitarian Universalism. It's a perspective upon which I bet and behave my life. May you and I muster sufficient courage to fulfill our shared ministry as *freethinking mystics with hands*. Today, tomorrow, and far, far into seasons beyond counting...holding one another's hands as go.

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