Religious Naturalism
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

Have you ever heard of Unitarian Universalist Commission of Appraisal?

According to the By-Laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a Commission of Appraisal is charged to "review any function or activity [of our movement] which in its judgement will benefit from an independent review and [it will] report its conclusion to a regular General Assembly" of Unitarian Universalists. Since 1961, Commissions of Appraisal—comprised of minsters, lay people and others—have produced reports every five years or so on topics ranging from congregational governance to the complex relation of ministry to authority to our on-going struggle with the vexed issue of class within our religious movement and beyond.

Nearly twenty years ago, a Commission of Appraisal, which included two representatives from Canada, took on the task of trying to map out the theological diversity afoot in our congregations throughout North America with the intent, if possible, to find some "common ground to build a strong, effective religious voice." After four years of work, cooperation of UU congregations and hundreds of people who participated in meetings, focus groups and surveys, the nine members of Commission released a report in 2005 called "Engaging our Theological Diversity." Let's think about that title for a minute.

Engaging with something…we're good at that, no? Each Sunday, holding up an order of service for all to see, a member of our Board of Trustees says: "there's a lot that goes on around here"—not to mention all that we're engaged with otherwise in our lives. And *diversity?*, isn't that just about on everyone's minds and lips? And if you want an example of diversity, then

thumb through our grey hymnal someday. Within these covers, we find songs, readings and poetry from a vast array of sources from religions, the arts, letters and sciences which feed what we call the "living tradition which we share." This plurality of voices, at home in one religion, is unlike almost anything I've ever seen or known. And let me also say this: look around at the people in this room. To be sure, there may be traits and values we share, however; *and I mean this sincerely,* each of us is a unique, unrepeatable human being. And though we may be gathered here under the label "Unitarian," we are also an assembly of exceptional originalities—each of us carrying around an unprecedented subjective world within the envelope of our skins. And I hope we'll never forget that.

So we've got *Engaging,* and we may have *Diversity.* But "Engaging our *Theological* Diversity? *Theology*? What the heck's that, really?

My *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* says that theology is "the study of the nature, attributes and governance God," [or gods]; and "a particular system or theory of religion" that includes an "analysis of a religious faith," along with "its principles." Do we do that? Systematize and analyze divine governance, religious faith and principles? Not too often, I reckon. Which is OK, if defined narrowly in that way. In my mind's eye, I can see lined up ranks of theological tomes, mostly gathering dust, penned by godly folk, arrayed out on shelves in university and seminary libraries.

Which is not to say that we don't have a theology [or several] going on in our heads and working its way through our lives. Let me put it like this: I think that theology is a kind of map we carry around within us. It's a way to depict what we think and feel is really true about the world and cosmos in which we live. It's a picture of reality, a worldview; and like a map, a theology helps to give us our basic bearings and orientation as we navigate the terrain of our

lives. Theologies try to answer basic questions like: Where am I, where are we, in the scheme of things? What are we doing here? Is there some purpose and meaning to our lives that goes beyond the daily grind and the getting and consuming of things? How do I deal with loss and pain? In fact, how am supposed to live my life? Are there any basic rules that inform and direct our behaviour, or is it just a dog-eat-dog, every-person-for themselves kind of world?

Most human cultures I'm aware of have created theologies to try and answer those basic questions. They do it in myths, stories, song, ritual gestures and rigorous thought. And we've also come up with beautifully ingenious ways to depict our theologies visually. Take a look at the samples in the insert of our order of service. They include ways various Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, Nordic, South African, astrophysical and Navajo religious and scientific cultures have tried to express in pictures the way things *really* are and how we and our lives are situated in the grand scheme of things. With one exception, each depicts us and our world nested within or below supernatural realms and beings that transcend Nature. That is, domains from beyond the natural world from which powers supernatural exert their influence, both intimate and epic, down here below.

Coming as they did from western religious cultures, most of our Unitarian ancestors from the 16th up to the 19th century believed in a picture of supernatural, transcendent orders, beings and realities and shaped their lives accordingly. Though in their own unorthodox ways, Unitarians were unembarrassed talking about God, creation, revelation, providence, the Bible, Jesus and embodied life after death. They weren't Martians after all; they were people of their time and place.

They were also sensitively attuned—and this is crucial—beginning in the early 1800s, Unitarians started to become keenly aware of both the wisdom and teachings from non-western

religious cultures and the breathtaking findings of modern sciences. References to Asian and earth centered wisdom traditions began to feature in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, James Freeman Clarke and others. The findings of Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, Caroline and William Hershel, Maria Mitchell and other scientists changed utterly our conceptions of the age of the earth, the laws of evolution by natural selection, the origins of our species and the unimaginable timescales and vastness of the cosmos.

Altogether, their revolutionary work and discoveries in world cultures and sciences added riches to our Unitarian theological and moral repertoire. It also completely reconfigured the map of Nature, the cosmos and our place within it. Hereafter, no matter how emotionally pleasing pre-modern notions about humanity's singular pre-eminence may have been, and no matter how aesthetically comforting pictures of supernatural beings and domains beyond nature may have been, at least for most Unitarians, it all became incredible, and beyond belief.

And here, we return to that 2005 Commission of Appraisal *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* which started out these remarks and something called *religious naturalism*. The authors of the report state that while "our research supports the perception that most Unitarian Universalists draw from divers Sources in very conceivable combination, with over twenty different theological descriptors mentioned"—ranging from pagan to humanist to rational mystic —the "largest piece of common ground for both ministers and laity" is this: "The natural world is a web of interdependent connections of which we are inescapably a part." And that "this understanding is highly important to [our] faith." (*Engaging our Theological Diversity, pp. 72, 73 EOTD)* It's summed up in our Seventh Principle, which states: "we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

So far, so what? We may ask. First, though not unique to us, this **is** a theology, a map of our place in the universe; and it stands in contrast to the most common interpretations coming out of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Second, let me quote the UU Professor David Bumbaugh:

The heart of a faith for the twenty-first century…is suggested by the seventh Principle. Hidden in this apparently uncomplicated, uncontroversial, innocuous statement is a radical theological position. [It] calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday existence. It challenges us to understand the world as reflexive and relational rather than hierarchical. It bespeaks a world in which neither god nor humanity is at the center; [rather] the center is an ever fecund matrix out of which being emerges." It calls us to trust the creative, evolving, renewing and redeeming process which calls us into being, which sustains us in being, and which transforms our being. It offers a vision of a world in which the… sacred is incarnated in every moment [and] in every aspect of being. (*EOTD, p.90)*

I think this is a fabulous *theological* statement—one we could tape to our refrigerator doors, but how do you go from an "uncomplicated, uncontroversial, innocuous statement" to a "radical theological position?" I think we find it in religious naturalism.

So let's start with naturalism. Naturalism says that Nature is all there is: there is no outer boundary to it, no supernatural creator or power *outside* of Nature, and no time when Nature was not, nor will there be a time when Nature will no longer be—it's eternal in the sense that it's continually self-renewing. (Robert S. Corrington) And that's quite enough, thank you, says the naturalist, for scientific inquiry has provided us with a mind-bending new core narrative: the epic of evolution, the epic of creation, the universe story—if you will—where humans and human cultures are understood to be emergent from and, therefore, part of nature, or what Rachel Carson called "the whole stream of life." Carson also believed that there is in us a "deeply seated response to the natural world…an affinity of the human spirit for the earth and its

beauties." A naturalist would adopt this core narrative and view of our affinity with nature while fully recognizing that this understanding will certainly deepen and that it may shift with further scientific inquiry. (Ursula Goodenough)

Now we introduce the wild card of religion, so that we get *religious* naturalism. Being religious traditionally entails four things: first, a *mythos*, an epic story recorded in texts or oral accounts about the cosmos, the gods and the meaning/purpose of life as interpreted by prophets, shaman, and elders and clergy. Second, we have *spiritual* responses to the myths via inward experience, and the products of creative women and men with their legacy of arts, crafts, architecture and rituals. The third feature of religion are *moral and ethical* rules and lifeways—that is, the commitment over time to what's believed to be good. And finally, there's *community* —the social context where the religious share mythic stories, where one's moved by experience, arts and ritual, and where ethical and moral commitments are embodied socially.

Religious naturalism says that Nature is all that we know there to be; its epic story is the awesome narrative of evolution of the cosmos and life on earth; its source is a mystery; and its dynamics and laws "generate emerging life and phenomenon of increasing complexity." A rigorously materialist naturalism would say, that's it, full stop. Think Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. Religious naturalism, on the other hand, says there is in the world "Something Else." Rachel Carson calls it the "*exceeding* beauty of Nature," a contemplation of which brings "calmness and courage." Robert Corrington calls that Something More "sacred folds"—be they unusual features of the landscape, works of art and music, moments of crisis or extraordinary persons. These, Corrington contends, are central to human religious experience and when encountered, they can shake the self to its core, conveying something of the power of nature and opening up creative pathways within and without into the world and our on-going story.

The biologist Ursula Goodenough points to value and purpose in the surplus Something Else of religious naturalism. She sees it in "every biological trait, every adaptation, every hummingbird dipping into a flower with its exquisitely shaped beak." "For me," she writes, "the flourishing and continuation of life has deep intrinsic Value and Purpose."

So religious naturalism has both an epic mythos or story and a recognition of our spiritual responses to it and to where Nature, seen in both its full cosmic sweep and intimate detail, gives rise to inward awe, reverence and humility and the production of arts and ritual. Try to recall those heightened moments of intense feeling when we encounter what Rachel Carson called the "splendor of life…when the mind is absorbed by beauty…in the migration of birds; the ebb and flow of the tides; in the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing," Carson writes, "in these repeated refrains of nature." (She also thinks these are "the only hours when we really live.") Think of the chalice we light on a Sunday morning, and consider the architecture of this Sanctuary. We cross the threshold into this space and feel we have stepped out of the everyday world into sacred space adorned, not with the kind of iconography and design that we'd normally encounter in a church, but with nature close at hand, and a design that reinforces our democratic, common authority and purpose in this religious faith.

And finally, there is a call to the moral, the ethical in religious naturalism. And here, we consider that morality describes that which allows us to flourish in community. Nature's mandate is that organisms not only survive, but that they flourish. "A good willow tree," says Ursula Goodenough, "maximizes the potential for willowness in all its manifestations: bark quality, disease resistance, pollen production, and so on." Social animals, like ourselves, remain self-interested to be sure, but we also cooperate. "A good wolf is a flourishing animal and a member of a flourishing pack…a good bird joins others in chasing off the circling hawk." A

good human…? Isn't it someone who cultivates moral capacities that promote them to flourish, and for us to flourish in community—which, we affirm, extends out into the web of our interdependent connections with Nature? For this to occur, we attend to the moral education of our children and adults to virtues of reciprocity, compassion, courage, reverence, reconciliation and justice. Surely, religion means more than a state of mind or a mystical mood or ritual behaviour. It's also a commitment over a lifetime to achieve what we believe is the good.

It's been said that the test of any theology is whether it is good for children. (Robert McAfee Brown). That's not a bad rule of thumb. And here I'm thinking of the children of this congregation; thinking of my own grandchildren for that matter. What would it be like for them to live with a good, appreciative grasp of the universe story as revealed by the best of our sciences? What would it be like for them to appreciatively experience that which can be called sacred or divine, that Something More, Something Else coursing within the world of nature and of arts which celebrate it? What would it be like for them to be a lively part of a flourishing community that responds confidently, non-arrogantly to wicked problems in challenging times with cooperative, community building virtues, with kindness, and the simplicity of peace, fairness and reverence?

We could call it *religious naturalism*. We could also call it the heart of a faith for the twenty-first century: a vision, a place to live and flourish together with resolve and reverence in the midst of the challenges and splendors of this miraculous, relational, ever-evolving world whose Source is a Mystery and Wonder—which "moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to that which creates and upholds life."

(see Ursula Goodenough, "Religious Naturalism and Naturalizing Morality," http://openshcolarship.wustl.edu/bio_facpubs99; Rachel Carson,, "The real world around us," *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson,* 1998*,* pp.159-63*;* Robert S. Corrington, "Deep Pantheism," *JSRNC* 1.4 (2007), 503-7)