

Sources of Religious Insight  
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UCV

Aside from our history, I have long believed that what's most distinctive about Unitarianism is the breathtaking diversity of the sources of our religious faith which we embrace; sources that inform and animate what we call "our living tradition." I know nothing like it in other religions. They are a principal reason why I find our religion worthwhile and worthy of my loyalty.

The capacious Unitarian vision of a viable religion drawing from a diversity of religious sources and disciplines started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Michael Servetus used the insights and scholarship of Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions to affirm and envision his heretical theology. It continued down through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when people like Emerson, Thoreau, James Freeman Clarke and others brought the wisdom of non-Western religions into the household of our faith. As well, Maria Mitchell, the first female professional astronomer in the world, whose words we meditated on earlier in this service, brought her keen insights about the workings of the cosmos as a source that could deepen and inform the most profound religious and spiritual vision. She and they were united in the belief that the creative interchange, the dialogue that ensued from the mingling of ideas, sciences and spiritualities would be a good and healthy thing. And so it may continue to this day if we rightly value and put to use these sources and their creative and sustaining potential.

Let's bring this home. There are two labyrinths on this property. An encounter with them may go something like this: We're walking along Fremlin Street or taking a short cut through the courtyard out there. Occupied with random everyday thoughts, our attention is diverted by a strange, mazy pattern laid out on the lawn or on the pavers in the courtyard.

There's an opening into the design, an entrance, and we see that a path ensues. With its twisting turns, a glance tells us that a person can't walk through it quickly. What to do? Flee and continue on our way; or stop, slow our pace, step inside and follow the path?

There's something about that entrance—like an invitation to cross a threshold from the ordinary into a different kind of space and time. We sense this as soon as we've taken a few steps into the labyrinth. We become aware of our body moving with non-linear deliberateness. As we tread, step-by-step, the flotsam, flux and cares of random musings and feelings may give way to a concentrated, affective thoughtfulness. And it may come to pass, it's not guaranteed, that as we wind our way toward the heart of the maze, the maze enters our heart.

For thousands of years, we've been laying out labyrinths as symbolic roads of pilgrimage toward...*what?* There are various answers to that question. But the way I see it, the intent of walking the winding path is to take us out of the everydayness of our lives in order to deliver us to a realm of insight—a place of understanding hidden truths about ourselves and the times and places in which we live. Such is the latent power of a labyrinth.

This came home to me powerfully last week when I was trying to get back to Vancouver from New York City. All flights had been cancelled out of LaGuardia airport to Toronto and connections across Canada. I sat on a grounded plane for hours and stood in line for hours more with patient passengers, fellow in suffering, as each and all sought some alternative flights, some path back to our homes. Later, in dark and freezing rain, I lugged belongings through sodden city streets hoping to find a warm room and bed for the night. And then, long before dawn, another leg of the journey to JFK Airport, and from there to *Los Angeles*, and from there, *finally*, back to Vancouver. Hundreds of others from those cancelled flights were similarly striving to return to homes across this country; so my story's not unique.

But what I saw those two trying days was this: there are everyday labyrinths whose mazy ways we walk, though perhaps against our will. We don't have to hie to a Cathedral, or some exotic, distant sacred site, nor even tread the labyrinths of the Vancouver Unitarians. It could be cancelled flights, the loss of a job or embarking on a new one; it could be the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, the beginning of school, or a move to a new city and home, or any number of times in our ordinary, extraordinary lives that compel us to stop in our tracks, notice the end of a road, and see and feel an invitation to enter and walk a different path. Each of these occasions could be the moment and place which invites us with unusual power to ask questions about the meaning of our lives, of who we are, where we're going and how we intend to live in this world.

This isn't an accidental, rare phenomenon. It's given rise to countless acts of personal transformation, to moral codes of conduct and keen insights into the nature of things that lie at the root beginnings of religions and that sustain whatever integrity they may have. *Who are we? How do we intend to live? What's the meaning and purpose of life?* And we know, or can well guess, that we're not going to get satisfying answers to those questions from the endless wasteland of entertainment, the fragmented world of frenzied consumerism, the wizards of the finance, or the bully pulpits of preening, narcissistic autocrats and their craven enablers. That way lies the mad, broad, smooth road of intellectual and spiritual emptiness and moral sterility.

And so, instead, we look within and beyond for some meaningful entry point that may usher us onto the path, that mysterious and intimate journey, to a place at the heart of the maze; that place where we may stand directly in the presence of what we call the "transcending mystery and wonder" that affirms our existence and renews our souls by unveiling hidden truths about ourselves and our world. I will never forget those moments where, by force of circumstance in my life, I *had to have* certain, crucial answers, some light beyond my frail means to dispel times

of dire darkness, some power beyond my strength that would tear down walls thwarting my way forward to an authentic, meaningful life where I might rediscover purpose and hope. Those moments are of inestimable worth to me.

Beyond price, as well, to know we don't walk life's labyrinths alone. We know this because it's an experience that's shared—shared when we gather as a community, shared in the words and public acts of prophetic women and men; shared in sacred texts, shared in ritual gesture, arts and tradition handed down from generation to generation through the ages.

However, more than mere accounts of personal insight that may affirm the presence of that by which we are known and seen from beyond the horizons of the routine and everyday world, what these shared words, deeds, rituals and arts tell us—and I'm speaking here of us, as Unitarians—what they tell us is that there are values that bring us together and that uphold a meaningful life: standards of justice, equity, and the transforming power of compassion; the counsels of reason, and the empirical, self-critical methods of science; the affirmation of Nature's fecundity, its infinite variety and mysterious interconnections.

I know we know this, that's why we're here, but it's worth repeating. We share certain values informed by a host of sources that we name in turn, and which makes our religion worthy of our loyalty. For sources of insight, we turn to prophetic women and men—*Wait a minute*, I've just got to say this: prophetic folks aren't people just from ancient days, nor elevated by heroism so uncommon that we shrink and feel as nothing by comparison—I'm talking about people in this room; I'm talking about Unitarian Universalists elsewhere and others beyond our denomination, *obviously*, who in ways public and unseen, newsworthy and hidden, embody values of justice and compassion we esteem and hold most dear.

As well as prophets ancient and contemporary, we turn to the roots of our five hundred-year old tradition arising from Jewish and Christian sources that call us to stand on the side of love. We turn to a humanism that privileges deliberative reason and dialogical engagement. And we turn to the counsels of those traditionally attuned to the earth as something as alive and vivid as kin (all our relations), to whose rhythms and wisdom we need to harmoniously align.

These values borne and attested through time are important to us for two reasons: we believe they speak of and to our truest selves, and we believe that a world where these values are alive and at work is truly a world worth living in, a world worth protecting, saving and handing on to other generations that will succeed us. When embodied by us, these values become rich sources of insight to help us achieve lives well-and-truly lived.

But as we heard a couple of weeks ago from ministers across Canada, living values esteemed by this, our unusual, pluralistic faith, may not be easy. Because of them and who we are, we confront structures of evil that batter the vulnerable and bring misery into the world. We confront idolatries of politics, religion, science and finance, which reduce us to mere clay in some malign potter's hand, mere flesh and synapses, mere raw material to exploit, mere units of consumption and bits of information to hoover up.

With all this to take on, how do *we* keep on, what keeps us going?

I thought about this while crammed into the incredibly shrinking seating space allotted by airlines to economy class customers. Speaking of whom, when asked what was driving them to get back home, whether home was Medicine Hat, Winnipeg or Vancouver, they told me “family” and “work,” and they said those words with remarkable passion. Passion for something worth the pain we shared those difficult days last week.

This brought to mind something that was a key teaching of the American philosopher Josiah Royce. Royce was born and grew up in the chaos and anarchy of mining camps in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century California—a place where it was dog eat dog, just a collection of individuals in avid search for their own personal gain. It was there, where the young Josiah Royce concluded, by close observation and experience, that people make themselves miserable when pursuing nothing more than fleeting, insatiable desires. For him, a good human life meant *loyalty*, “the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause.”

We West Jet economy class passengers, stranded in a foreign country on a freakishly stormy Tuesday, were devoted to something keenly alive for us. And in loyalty to beloved persons, to colleagues and work, we focused all our attention and exercised remarkable forbearance, patience and determination to get back home. This wouldn't have surprised Royce, who died just over a hundred years ago.

“The loyal person serves,” he wrote. Our cause, that to which we are loyal, grips, guides, and helps us discern what to do. It gives unity and consistency to life. We may call it home, country, or service, my art, my religion, humankind, the cause of science, social justice, or Mother Earth. It may be the one person, or the children we love. I think it's always about more than one's self alone.

There are good causes and bad, to be sure. The bad ones prey upon, have contempt for, and destroy the loyalty of others. They don't allow for multiple voices to be heard, or stories to be told. They insist on theirs to the exclusion of all others and would compel us to submit to their one reductive truth, tribe, or creed. We know—some, here, by personal experience, how destructive bad causes can be. They wreck lives, homes and nations. They despoil the earth. They are legion. “No loyalty,” wrote Royce, “that lives by destroying the loyalty of your

neighbor is just... And that is why charity and justice are the fruits of a loyal spirit... Whatever your special cause may be—your love, your home, or your calling—your true cause is the spiritual unity of all the world... This cause you further, so far as in you lies, by your every deed.”

A significant moral commitment to a good cause—that which is devoted to the flourishing of others, to the plurality of life—to the infinite variety of creatures and habitats, to stories and ways of being, to the mysterious yet orderly interdependence of all things—loyalty to *that!*—there could hardly be anything more beautiful. And though arduous, it was a thing of beauty watching a bunch of Canadians trying to get back home to “family and work.”

Here Josiah Royce, as intimated above, took one more step. Though we all have our different destinations, our communities and causes, underneath and through them all, he believed there was an absolute unity to life, a loyalty to loyalty, an ultimate horizon at the end of things, shining back on us. “We all seek a city out of sight,” he wrote. Another way of saying it was in a phrase Martin Luther King Jr. borrowed from Royce. King called it the “beloved community.” It was a central religious insight and vision to his theology and his passion. It kept him going toward the hilltop, and we’re on the way still.

In a time of pessimism, anxiety and divisiveness, this vision of unity in a beloved community, of binding and connecting through loyalty to a worthy cause, is something of which we are sorely in need. It’s what brought me into this faith, keeps me here and keeps me going.

Coming to the end of these words, let’s return to beginnings, to labyrinths and one more word about religious insight. The most famous of all in the ancient world was the labyrinth built by Minos, King of Crete. He commissioned it in order to hide away deep in its core his monstrous son, the half-bull, half-man named Minotaur. It may be that Minos felt compelled to

hide his monstrous progeny due to an excess of personal shame. I think, far more, it was also to bury his grief. And as it turns out, or so the mythic tale goes, in burying his grief away deep in the heart of the maze, Minos ended up losing his son, his daughter Ariadne and his realm.

By contrast, there's another story. It took place one night in April 1968 in the city of Indianapolis. Deep in the heart of the city's African-American neighbourhood, a crowd had gathered outdoors to hear a campaign speech by Robert Kennedy who was running for the US Presidency. Kennedy had just received word that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and killed in Memphis. Setting aside his prepared remarks, Kennedy informed the shocked gathering of this dreadful news. And then, and I will never forget, he quoted from memory a passage written by the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus that goes like this:

*He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain, that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart; and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."*

Rather than bury the grief, Kennedy and the assembled crowd named it, carried it forward and suffered it together. And as a result, almost alone of all US cities, Indianapolis did not burn that night, nor in the nights that followed. Grief shared, and not buried away, can serve to connect, to bind, to comfort. Grief borne and shared can unveil the quiet, firm vision of the beloved community which lies at the heart of our religion.

May we be loyal to it, to one another and grateful for the living tradition we share that draws from many sources which enrich and ennoble our faith.