

**Sermon      Nov. 16, 2008      Rev. Martha Hodges**  
**Engaging Our Third Source: Wanderers & Worshipers**

Have you ever wondered about the words to that song we sing so often: “Come, come, whoever you are; wonderer, worshiper, loving of leaving... Ours is no caravan of despair; come, yet again, come?” The words are from a poem by Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic and poet. So far, so good. We Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on our eclecticism and our openness to diverse spiritual beliefs. The 3<sup>rd</sup> source that our denominational bylaws list as supporting our tradition is, after all, “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” We may even be particularly pleased to be able to number among our best-loved songs the words of a Sufi, a Muslim. In these times of widespread intolerance and suspicion of Islam, this easy affirmation of at least one branch of the Islamic faith costs us nothing and makes us feel pretty good about ourselves.

The sentiments of this song certainly sound very UU: Come, come whoever you are. All are welcome. Worshiper... yes, we worship here, or most of us would say that we do. Wanderer... yes, we welcome those in search, the seekers. Lover of leaving... Okay, now what does that mean? In 13<sup>th</sup> century Afghanistan, this might have made some reference to the nomadic life. But to the modern Western ear, it also suggests someone who is rootless, fickle, maybe shallow and commitment-phobic. A dabbler. A dilettante. Someone undependable. Not exactly the values that we consciously encourage as UUs. I wonder, though, if that label, “lover of leaving” might not be a little more a propos than we would perhaps wish.

Many of us have “left” some other faith tradition for Unitarian Universalism. And for some of us, joining a UU congregation by simply “signing the book” lacks a certain amount of seriousness. Certainly, our requirements for membership are minimal compared to more orthodox faiths. “Conversion” to Unitarian Universalism doesn’t suggest the kind of life-altering commitment that becoming a born-again Christian entails. We don’t require anyone to become circumcised. Compare us to the Muslims, for example, with the requirement to pray five times a day, to visit Mecca, to fast, to give alms to the poor. And can we even call the decision to join a UU church a “conversion?” It certainly isn’t the language we use. Is ours a lightweight among faiths? A religion for the commitment-phobic, the lovers of leaving?

Some regard us that way. Garrison Keillor, for example, and others who might even question whether we qualify as a religion, with our distaste for creeds and our collective doubts about the nature of God. I’m all for not taking ourselves too seriously. It’s important to be able to take a joke. But, truly, I cringe when UUs are made the butt of jokes, at least when the joker is not him or herself a UU. I recall a remark that my New Testament professor made in a class that we UU students were required to take at the University of Chicago. I admired this professor a good deal. She was a Christian and a scholar. She was funny and erudite and managed to balance on the thin edge between reverence and irreverence. So when she made a crack about UU churches featuring a

revolving altar, my feelings were a little hurt. Especially since the chapel at Cornell University, where I'd often attended services, did, in fact, have a revolving altar. Depending on who was using it that day, the altar was easily converted from a Christian one to a Jewish one, or a sort of non-committal one. "What's wrong with that?" I thought.

Ours is what is called a syncretistic religion. (And yes, ours is a religion.) A syncretistic religion takes a little of this and a little of that and cobbles it all together into a new form. Sort of like adding on additional wings to a house as the need arises. It is expansive. Hinduism is another syncretistic religion. Like the Hindus, we UUs don't claim one single path to the top of the mountain, to God. We're unlikely to get too exercised about religious ideas that differ from our own. And if it seems like a good idea, we're happy to welcome it into our communal beliefs. This is the source of some scorn from other, dogmatic religions that make exclusive claims on the truth, and a source of pride to us.

Now, it can be argued that all religions are patched together from a variety of sources. Consider how Christianity co-opted various pagan beliefs, for example, replacing goddess-worship with the cult of the Virgin, and the earth-based worship of the dying and resurrected fertility god with the dying and resurrected Christ. All religions change in response to cultural and historical pressures. But, putting that aside, Unitarian Universalism, along with Baha'i and Hinduism, is characterized by its willingness to welcome new ideas without the kind of surreptitious and agonizing struggle that others face when they are challenged in this way. Does this make us a lightweight religion? A religion of dabblers, committed to nothing because we offer nothing to commit to?

Well, we do run that risk. And this brings us to the question that plagues UU seminarians and ministers: the ogre that lurks in the shadows of our sunny and tolerant and optimistically welcoming faith: the ogre of "cultural misappropriation."

If you studied the proposed changes to the UUA Statement of Principles and Sources, you may have noticed this one. Added to the statement about our sources is this proviso: "Grateful for the traditions that have strengthened our own, we strive to avoid misappropriation of cultural and religious practices and to seek ways of appreciation that are respectful and welcomed."

What does this misappropriation mean? It depends on who you ask. I'm personally not too concerned if we get all the nuances of every text or ritual that we borrow from another religion. If we required ourselves to understand fully and completely the implications of everything we borrow, we would be paralyzed and silenced by our fear of political incorrectness. In fact, for the many of us that come out of no religious tradition at all, everything we use is "borrowed." And for the many who are leaving some other religious tradition, being cut off from the familiar words and music and stories would leave us bereft indeed.

Now, I can see and agree with certain cautions against this cultural and religious misappropriation. Perhaps the most “misappropriated” culture, or cultures, among Anglo-Americans are the Native American traditions. The appeal of the Indian worldviews that we garner from popular culture is strong. Here is a people – and we do tend to lump the native peoples into one “people” – that honored the earth, that lived close to nature, that observed a strong code of honor, that practiced restraint and self-discipline... or so the story goes. The myth of the “noble savage” is alive and well, two centuries after it was invented. So does this mean that, because we are ignorant of the history and culture of these peoples, we should delete from our hymnal the sayings attributed to their leaders... sayings that are inspiring and poetic? I don’t think so.

If it’s useful, use it. I admittedly have a personal stake in this matter. I was raised Unitarian. I have no tradition except what has been borrowed. And as product of the melting pot with no discernible ethnic identity, what else can I do but borrow from others?

But let us be aware of our limitations when we do borrow -- be aware that we cannot understand the meaning of the words to the culture in which they were first heard. We don’t know the cultural or historical context, the political implications, the personal meaning these words had to the speaker or his listeners. And this awareness should keep us humble and prevent us from making foolish generalizations or claiming a false sort of ownership of traditions that have their own rich histories and significance. If we put a UU twist on a borrowed text or ritual or tradition, so much the better. Let us create something new from the raw materials of borrowed tradition. This protects us from the arrogance of claiming someone else’s tradition as our own.

The danger of “appropriating” – or to take a more lenient view of the question – of “borrowing” bits and pieces of the world’s religions is not only that we will offend those for whom the tradition in question is authentic. It’s not only that we may lull ourselves into believing that we understand traditions that we do not. The greatest danger of all is that we will create a mishmash of religions that has no real substance – a mixed-up mess of superficial impressions. The danger is that we will become the religion of dilettantes and dabblers.

The other edge of this particular two-edged sword is that we will reduce the richness of diversity to a homogenized glop consisting of the least common denominators of the world’s religions and thereby forfeit the opportunity to add to our collective wisdom and understanding.

It’s popular nowadays to emphasize the commonalities of all religions. And, indeed, there are some things that religions hold in common. They all – or at least most – seem to have some version of the Golden Rule. They all try to teach us to live in harmony with others and treat others fairly. They all address our human longing for something “more” – some connection to something that transcends our limited experience of life. In the words of Jacob Trapp, in the reading we heard earlier, worship

(or religion) is the “mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond... The window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.”

But the ways in which they address this longing – the differences in core beliefs and practices are not insignificant details and they are overlooked at our peril. If we ignore these important differences among the world religions’ understandings of the nature of humankind, or the source of suffering, or the role of God in our daily lives, beliefs about free will and destiny – if we sweep all these under the rug in an attempt to establish a comforting generality – we impoverish ourselves and reduce our likelihood of understanding others. Our beliefs about these questions influence not just what we do in our houses of worship, but how we go about our daily lives. That’s why this kind of homogenization is dangerous in a world in which multiple cultures live together in such close proximity. And it’s disrespectful. I find this tendency much more demeaning and dangerous than that of cultural misappropriation.

Students of religion talk about three kinds of religion – or more accurately, three approaches to religious belief. The exclusivist insists that his religion is the only true religion. There is only one correct name for God, the exclusivist claims, and those who use other names are in need of correction. God is on his side and his alone.

The inclusivist believes that other beliefs are valid as far as they go, but incomplete. Other religions are tolerated but the assumption is that they are poor substitutes for one’s own. I suspect most of us UU’s, and most Americans who feel religious tolerance is an important virtue, fall into this category. We welcome many beliefs within our tent, but we understand them and interpret them on our own terms.

The true pluralist is something quite different. She does not accord her own beliefs any kind of priority or superiority to others. She doesn’t try to reduce other religions to some form that she can find compatible with her own. She acknowledges the richness of diversity and does not try to minimize it. Now, that’s a tall order. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever met anyone who didn’t prefer her own understanding to others – who didn’t secretly believe that she was “right.” I’m not sure it’s humanly possible to be a true pluralist – to sincerely accept that one’s own view is just one among many, no better and no worse. We seem to be wired to make judgements about such things, with our own view of reality naturally taking highest place. It would be hard to live without that kind of mental, emotional and spiritual confidence.

Fortunately, pluralism is not the goal we UU’s are necessarily expected to espouse. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> source suggests that we are selective and evaluative in what we draw from the world’s religions, and that’s just fine. To have a religion of our own that had any kind of center or substance, we could hardly do otherwise.

And, contrary to the assumptions of those who make fun of us for being syncretists, we do have a center, a core. We are a religion that espouses, not a dogma, or principles of belief, but principles of behavior. And those principles are pretty revolutionary, underneath their mild wording. Primary among those are that every person

has inherent worth and dignity; that it is incumbent upon each person to freely and responsibly seek his own truth and meaning; and that we are connected to and, therefore, responsible to, all of life, to one another.

The logical implication of those principles is that we honor and respectfully examine other religions and, if we find among them a signpost or beacon on our path to truth and meaning, then we are duty-bound not to ignore it, regardless of where it comes from. And we are duty-bound to do so with humility and integrity, with respect for our own reason, experience and conscience, and respect for the reason, experience and conscience of those we don't understand.

Ours is not an easy religion. Especially when we fully acknowledge our debts to other thinkers and our limitations in completely grasping the beliefs growing out of the lived experiences of another. This is the challenge and the gift of our beautiful patchwork faith.