

Let Love Be My Legacy

Arlington Street Church

August 31, 2008

I am religious refugee. Well, more accurately, I *was* a religious refugee. I am now a proud, happy and loyal citizen of Unitarian Universalism. But that was not always the case and my journey from refugee to this refuge – like the great exodus story of Judeo-Christian scripture – was through a dry, barren and hostile desert.

I wandered aimlessly, anxiously and often angrily. I encountered and became enchanted with false idols. I searched for and demanded manna from heaven even while my soul and spirit told me that *my* nourishment and sustenance could only come from within. I sought answers to questions that I was not yet even able to ask.

You see the religion of the first half of my life was Roman Catholicism. I was a very devout Catholic from an even more devout family. My Catholicism was as much a part of my identity as my very own name. And it informed every aspect of my life – what I felt, what I feared, how I hoped and how I prayed. The Church had an ostensible answer for every conceivable question. It provided a complete worldview and rulebook for living a faithful and faith-filled life.

When I became a refugee from that religion, all those answers, rules and perspectives were gone. I was on my own and it felt like I was in a dry, barren and hostile desert; and without a compass or roadmap or even a sense of my own true north. I knew that there must be a destination to all of my wanderings but I did not know where it lay or how to point myself in its direction.

Then I stumbled upon Unitarian Universalism, I knew that I had found a genuine community of love and acceptance and maybe even one of hope and healing. And as wonderful as that was, it did not seem to me that it was a religion – at least not in all of the tangible ways that Catholicism was. There were no sacred objects, universal rituals or recitations of long-memorized prayers whose words seemed to emanate from deep within my very own cells and DNA.

I thought that perhaps Unitarian Universalism might be an oasis in my desert but certainly it could not be the *actual* destination of my spiritual longing and wanderings.

And this is where our summer worship theme of “Take Up The Song” comes in. I took up the songs of Unitarian Universalism and it was a transformational experience for me. Our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, became a gateway through which I began to experience and then to learn and realize that Unitarian Universalism is more than just a faith community – it is a robust and compelling religion.

Even without a creed or a singular, exclusive belief about the divine, or agreement as to whether there even is such a thing. Even without the communally recited and long-memorized prayers, the authority of hierarchy and a universally practiced common liturgy, Unitarian Universalism is a religion that informs how we live, not just how we believe. Our religion of “deeds not creeds” really is a religion.

Like every good religion, it puts demands on us – how we view others, our world and ourselves. It puts demands on us about how we view truth and knowledge, authority and wisdom. It puts demands on how we treat others and on how we allow others to be treated. Unitarian Universalism demands of us all that we live our

lives so that we can honestly say, “Then, when life is done for me, let love be my legacy.”

“Then when life is done for me, let love be my legacy.” That is the final stanza of our closing hymn today, *Blessed Spirit of My Life*. Shelley Jackson Denham, who wrote the words and music to it, composed it as a prayer; and it *is* a prayer. It is a prayer about the ways to meet some of those demands that our religion puts on us. It is an invocation to our shared values and shared commitment to seek redemption in - and for - this life, not the next.

It is a Unitarian Universalist prayer because it is addressed to the blessed spirit of *my* life. That spirit is whatever or whoever each of us believes it is. Or it may simply be a prayer to ourselves, to our own true natures or to our highest aspirations.

It asks, “help me live with dignity” reminding us that our First Principle – the inherent worth dignity of every person - applies as much to how we live our own lives as it does to how we view others. That principle applies as much to how we treat ourselves as to how treat others.

“Fill me with a vision, clear my mind of fear and confusion.” We ask for a vision – not of some ethereal afterlife – but for vision into our own true natures and essences; vision that “clears my mind of fear and confusion.” It is breathtaking to think about what our world would be like if no one acted out of fear or confusion. It is often even more so to think about what our own lives would be like if we were able to do the same.

“Let peace find a home in me.” We, alone, cannot create peace – it is in relationship that we create and experience genuine peace. It is in relationship that we share and strengthen that peace. If peace is at home in each of us, then we need merely be hospitable in order to magnify and share, spread and strengthen that peace.

The second verse begins “Spirit of great mystery, hear the still, small voice in me.” We affirm that what we *believe* individually is what speaks to, from and within our own consciences and spirits. To hear that still, small voice within, we must find the silence within which to hear it above all of the clatter and clamor of our everyday lives.

It was this next portion of *Blessed Spirit* that was most compelling for me; “Help me live my wordless creed as I comfort those in need.” We do not require a shared creed – a specific set of sacred beliefs – in order to know how and why to live a faithful and faith-filled life. The only way to truly provide comfort to those in need – versus giving them charity or a hand-down – is to be a genuine ally in the struggles of those in need. It is to bear witness to their struggles and to join with them, at their sides.

Finally, this Unitarian Universalist prayer asks, “Fill me with compassion, be the source of my intuition.” Again affirming that it is our own direct experience of what is sacred that guides our beliefs while it is our collective commitment to compassion that guides our behaviors. In the words of the Unitarian martyr Francis David, we need not believe alike in order to love alike.

What is more, our faith springs from within and our beliefs are unmediated, whether through another person or an institution. It is intuition, not institution, that defines and delimits our beliefs.

And it is a legacy of love that we are called to by this faith. Dignity and peace, comfort and compassion, eliminating fear and confusion; this is the work of creating a legacy of love. It is a religious call always to live with an awareness of all that is around us – others, ourselves, our communities, our world.

And for me, this prayer is as real, powerful and moving as any that I learned as a child or adolescent. And for me, this prayer to the blessed spirit of *my* life is all the more real and tangible because I cannot blame someone or something else when my prayer is not realized.

As for the old rulebook of the first half of my life; well that has been supplanted by the values and aspirations that I have committed myself to, the ones that I pray myself to always remember, strive for and expand. Creating a legacy of love informs my way of living in ways that historic prohibitions and practices cannot.

I invite each of you to listen for your own song and to “take up the song,” the one that animates your existence; to hear your still small voice within and to greet it with dignity and love. Let it be your vision and your intuition. So that you may heartily say “when life is done for me, let love be my legacy.”

May it be so.