

Holy Curiosity
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First, let me say how pleased I am to be working with you all during this important time in the life of the congregation.

I'm wondering if you've ever had an experience like this one. I've been out somewhere and the topic of church has come up. Or the topic of religion comes up. I say something about church and people turn and look at me. And, sometimes in that moment, I'm sorry I said anything. Because I know, yes, I know what is coming next. "Oh, what church?" I'm a Unitarian Universalist I say. Silence, puzzled looks, furrowed brows... more silence. I can see the people searching their mental files - checking the alphabetic listing between Swedborgian and Welsey... Unification, United... they pause, having failed to pull the Unitarian Universalist file, and ask, "What's that?" A seemingly easy question, right? But you know, if you've ever had this experience, it can be a tricky one to answer. I usually say something like, "Unitarian Universalism comes from the Christian tradition, but is no longer exclusively Christian, and ours is a tradition which encourages each person to wrestle with the big questions and to answer them in ways that make the most sense to them. We have no creed, no agreement on the nature or existence of God or gods and no prescribed understandings about Jesus, required practices or whether or not there is an afterlife". And I usually get more puzzled looks. "How can you be a religion if you don't agree on those things? How can you be a congregation? What holds you together?"

What I'm about to tell you probably won't come as a surprise. Unitarians and Universalists have a long history of being heretics. Heresy in Greek means choice. Historically those who identified as Unitarians and Universalists were making choices. Originally, before the year, 325 CE, when the Nicenean Council established basic Christian doctrines – of the Trinity and of the possibility of eternal damnation- Unitarian and Universalist beliefs were some of the choices available to those who followed the teachings of Jesus. After 325, those who chose to disagree with the established church did so at the risk of persecution.

In the 16th and 17th Centuries, there were brief flowerings of Unitarian thought, Unitarian meaning in earlier times, not Trinitarian. God was one, not three. The book by the Spaniard Michael Servetus, "On the Errors of the Trinity" was widely circulated. Poland had a Unitarian Community. Eventually the Polish Unitarians were suppressed, and Servetus was burned at the stake. The choice to subscribe to Unitarian thought was dangerous.

In England, where religious harassment was not as extreme as it was elsewhere, it was still risky to make choices. Joseph Priestly, scientist and prominent Unitarian thinker, had his laboratory burnt by an angry mob. Unitarians were barred from public office in England until 1828. Many Unitarians used other terms to describe themselves, to

escape the notice of neighbours and officials. Presbyterian, a word denoting a form of church government, was often used.

On this continent Unitarianism evolved from a reaction to mid-1700 evangelicals calling for the return to Puritan orthodoxy, which taught that people were, inescapably, sinful. People who disagreed, instead believing in free human will and the loving benevolence of God, eventually became known as Unitarian. Taking their cue from Enlightenment philosophy, the Unitarians began to apply reason and logic to religious exploration. Intellectual rigor became their preferred path to salvation. Instead of the Calvinist dogma which stressed obedience and faith the Unitarians developed a philosophy which stressed voluntary ethical conduct and individual effort to determine what constituted ethical conduct. They believed that there was a natural and benevolent order to the universe, which could with study, be understood. In 1819, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon called "Unitarian Christianity" and helped to give the Unitarians a strong platform:

Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.... With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually,

But this rational, classical, post-Enlightenment Unitarianism was found by some, to be lacking in heart. Ralph Waldo Emerson, remarked on 'corpse-cold Unitarianism'. Some young, dissatisfied Unitarians, not satisfied with the sobriety, rationalism and critical thinking they had been taught, expressed their longings. Their emerging belief was that finding God (and in these early days, a belief in God was still assumed) required them to navigate a path between orthodox creedalism, emotional frenzies and a sensible, rationale ethic. For them the path they sought, their path to God, was found through a personal inner striving for a spiritual communion with the divine. This branch of inquiry became known as transcendentalism.

Those who chose to believe in Universal Salvation – the Universalists- began to express their views in North America as early as 1781. This popular alternative to Calvinism, and its ideas about predestination and the sinful nature of humans, gained popularity. Universalists said that we'd all, in the end, be admitted to heaven, as no loving father could condemn his own children. Yet these views, considered radical, also drew strong suspicion from those who assumed that fear of hell was the only thing that encouraged moral choices and human goodness.

As early as the 1830's adherents from both traditions were choosing to look beyond the Christian scriptures, and to consider the wisdom of other traditions. Henry David Thoreau was influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. In time, some Unitarians and Universalists chose a religious life that did not include God; the humanists have become an important part of our tradition.

Our history is full of people making choices. Today we continue to make choices. In fact I suspect you are nothing more than a bunch of heretics! It may interest you to know that a 2001 survey by the Unitarian Universalist Association revealed there is significant theological diversity in our congregations. The survey revealed that we categorized ourselves as: atheist, theist, humanist, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, earth & nature centred, mystic, Moslem or Hindu and "other". The results indicate that not one of these categories reflected a 'majority' belief. It seems there is no dominant understanding in our communities.

That's a little romp through history. "An odd choice", you may be thinking, "For this moment." Isn't this a time to be asking 'where to?' instead of 'where from?' But I think our history is particularly relevant in this moment. We are on a threshold, asking what it means to be the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto. It has been a hard five years, and so much has changed. Who are you? What is different here? Who is newer, who has gone? What do we understand about our personal faith journeys and what does it mean to be in community today... The question, "How can you be a religion if you don't agree on God, or prayer, or any of the other religious ideas? How can you be a congregation or a spiritual centre? What holds you together?" is still one we need to answer.

I know I'm happy to have my religious tradition tied to those creative and courageous souls of earlier times, but the variety of understanding and expression they represent don't make finding an answer easier. I know I appreciate the richness that our current diversity brings to the life in a congregation, but it does make it tough to respond to inquiries from curious people. And, at times I confess I've floundered when asked to respond to the person who challenges me to articulate how our 'choose your own adventure' faith supports and sustains me and others. I've sometimes struggled when I'm accused of belonging to a tradition that has 'no there, there'.

One of the things I've found myself asking is, 'what does lie at the heart of Unitarian Universalism?' and 'what is our work in our communities?'. I hear people talk about these questions in terms of finding a sanctuary, and personal freedom, and comfort and 'like minded people'. And trust me, you won't get an argument from me on that front. I know how 'at home' I felt when I first sat in one of our congregations. I know it has been liberating to think about the world in theological terms that made sense to me. But I think we sell ourselves short if we stop there. I've come to understand that if we stop there, that we are in effect, taking the easy way out. If we stop there, we fail to truly engage our history and our diversity and we substitute one kind of creed for another. Rather than really go deep with one another we sometimes, perhaps out of a fear of conflict, stop short of the juicy stuff, the honest engagement and the potentially life-changing encounters. At other times, I've seen how our how we can possibly function as communities of our tradition of questioning translates into contrarianism – how do we build communities of support and encouragement when that happens.

When our insistence on 'my freedom of belief' turns into an unengaged rejection of the beliefs of another we are, in my opinion, dangerously close to becoming the

fundamentalists we often criticise. We are, I've come to believe, a complex, and sometimes complicated group of people. I hate to break this to all of you, but we are not a people of easy answers! What is a congregation, standing on a threshold to do?

The answer I'm working out, in my reflection, is that our work, as people in a tradition of freedom of religious expression and of voluntary association is to determine how we can stay connected and engaged, without surrendering our intellectual and spiritual capacity to know our own truths. There is a tension in that, and we must, if we are to live as the vital liberal religious communities we dream of being, learn to live with and *celebrate* that tension.

I've come to believe that at the core of our tradition is an empty space. Not a desolate void, but a space that is rich with possibilities. At the centre of our communities and lives is a space, a hole, a place where, I believe, the magic happens. I think we are at our best, and in my work I've been privileged to see us at our best, when we regard that space with the attention it deserves. Without one single unifying belief about God, or an afterlife, or Mohammed, or Jesus... without one single unifying belief about how we each become more whole, we are left with a space in the middle of our community. I think sometimes there is a tendency to want to rush in and to fill that space, to name it. I've seen attempts to fill the space and to name it, in a variety of ways. In some cases people have named and filled the hole with the names of famous Unitarians and Universalists, perhaps hoping we can define ourselves on their coat tails. I've seen social policy positions become a new kind of orthodoxy, shaming those who hold alternative views or who aren't so sure they agree. I've seen contentiousness become a fall-back position, perhaps because it's far easier to tell people what we aren't rather than what we are. As heretics, we've sometimes fallen into the habit of challenging just about everything, instead of remaining curious.

There is a hole at the centre! And that is surely, where transformation can occur. It might be easier if we all agreed on God or not-God. But really, isn't it the proposition of diverse understandings that provides our greatest strengths and potential? It seems to me, that our work is that of being in sacred relationship with one another, of challenging, engaging and supporting one another – of staying connected, even when we disagree. Sacred for me has to do with understanding something as special, and worthy of being held, respected and protected. Isn't that in fact how we believe all relationships should be? Sacred relationships require the hard work of listening, of seeking to understand, of putting, at least some of the time, the other person's needs ahead of our own. And in the context of this religious community, it requires us to accept that we don't all agree. It insists that we engage in honest and open dialogue. No doubt there are a LOT of ideas and imagining about what congregational life is going to be like. Some are looking forward to picking up where we left off, over five years ago, really, at the start of the Covid pandemic. Others weren't here, and so that point of reference makes no sense. So, easy, right? No problem. Finding a path through this complicated terrain we've chosen is NOT a piece of cake. This is hard work, but I've found that one of my mantras has become 'hard is not bad'. Sometimes hard is good, and sometimes hard is exactly what we need. So how do we learn to live

with the tension? How do we know how to navigate? And how shall we equip ourselves? Holy curiosity.

When we come to this community with an understanding of the richness of our tradition and our diversity, with holy curiosity, we come with respect for the relationships. We come expecting our needs to be met some of the time, but not all the time. We come open to differences, we come with respect for the potential at the centre of all of this, and with a patience and resolve to live with the tension it presents. Holy curiosity means we work to honestly engage and to understand, we share our ideas, and we listen to others. When I've been successful at making holy curiosity my practice and my path, I've found myself in relationship with unlikely allies, I've found myself engaged in surprising ways and I've found myself changed. I've learned things about myself, I've learned to appreciate the perspective of others, and I've become, I believe, a more fit companion for those I encounter in my travels. When I let my guard down, when I stop worrying about my ideas, my position and my beliefs, I've become more open to the work of the world, better able to be of use and service. I mess this up. I mess this up often. I'm human. And so, I strive to show compassion to myself. I'm just another person, imperfect and human, trying to get by, to do good, to live well. But I've seen what it can be, how it can work... Holy Curiosity. What would it mean for you? What would it mean for your relationships or for our community? Holy curiosity. As we move into the unknown of the next phase of this congregation's life, we'll continue to bring holy curiosity.

Holy curiosity helps us live with the tension; it helps us honour and protect the space at the centre of who we are. The stakes are high. Our potential to live up to our potential as individuals and as a community rests on our ability to bring holy curiosity to our work together. Isn't it what the world needs? Isn't it what we need? And isn't that what we've got to offer? Isn't that what we do here? Isn't that a wonder? I am pleased to be on this adventure with all of you. Thank you for inviting me along for the journey.