

Re-enchanting the World, Part 1

Clay Nelson © 7 September 2014

The day has finally arrived: A new chapter for me in my long ministry, a new chapter in the long history of Auckland Unitarians. It is always exciting to crack open a new book to read what will unfold. What is the theme? What characters will we warm to and who will repel us? How will it touch us? Will we see the world differently after reading it? So let's open the book. Bugger! It's blank. It appears we have to write it ourselves. That will be the challenge because we bring our different hopes, anticipations, expectations, experiences, worldviews, philosophies, fears and individual spiritual needs to the project. And of course since we are Unitarians everyone will have their say. And so, for every sentence written there will be at least one footnote giving an alternative understanding or referring us to a policy statement.

In the midst of all this difference I have been seeking to find a way to get us to agree to the overall framework of the book. I want to go further than our seven principles and covenant as we look at what binds us and calls us to the next horizon.

Over the next few Sundays I would like to explore why we are here, how are we called to be, how might the world or at least our little corner of it, be a little better because we gather here each Sunday. For lack of a better phrase, I want to propose a Unitarian philosophy that might guide us as we fill in the blank pages.

One reason I think this is important is your clearest expectation in calling me to be your minister is the hope the congregation will grow. While growth will give us a louder megaphone to project our Unitarian values into the marketplace of ideas, it is not a vision. It certainly isn't a good marketing ploy. Imagine the greeter welcoming a visitor saying "Hello, we are pleased you have come to worship with us today because our mission is to grow and, if we do, our finances will improve. So which committee would you like to serve on?" I think you can see how that might be counter-productive.

No church ever grew by focusing on growth. Growth is a reasonable outcome to expect if we are living out our mission by which I mean being true to who we are. However, if our mission is to serve or satisfy those who are already members, we won't grow. We will stand a chance of growing only if we understand that churches are the rare human institutions that exist to serve their non-members. If we forget that we risk becoming a club.

I think Unitarians are always at risk of becoming a club, because those of us here think it is a pretty cool group to belong to and wonder why everyone isn't one. But if everyone was a UU, we might react like Groucho Marx, who famously said he would never join a group that would have him as a member.

I just read a book entitled *101 Reasons I'm a Unitarian Universalist*. I resonated with many of the reasons.

- UUs have no problem incorporating the insights of science in their religious understandings.
- UUs have never had a creed which defines who is inside and who is outside.

- UUs get to celebrate a lot more holidays than anyone else: Ramadan, Chanukah, Christmas, Samhein, Beltane, Passover, Duvali, equinox, Midsummer, Easter, Labour Day, Bastille Day, the Queen's Birthday, and many more.
- UUs don't just welcome or tolerate different genders, sexual orientations, spiritualities, races, ethnic groups, and socio-economic classes, we appreciate them and their contribution.
- UUs believe strongly in democracy. Few people know that Abraham Lincoln was quoting Transcendentalist Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker when he described the government at Gettysburg as "...of the people, by the people, for the people."
- UUs have long been committed to social justice and peace-making and a belief we can make this a better, fairer world for all.

The book lists 95 more, but for me the most endearing reason I'm a Unitarian is our irreverent sense of humour about our selves. It can be theological: How many Unitarians are needed to change a light bulb? One. Certainly not three. How many Universalists? All of them. Every single one. It can be sociological: At the time of the merger of the two in 1961, the Universalists were afraid the Unitarians would swallow them up. The Unitarians were afraid they would get a stomach ache. And often it is just laughing at our idiosyncrasies. When a UU died he discovered there was an afterlife after all. He was informed at heaven's gates that because of his doubts and scepticism he would be sent to hell. In his case, that would be a place where no one would ever disagree with him. It is our ability to laugh at ourselves that keeps us real and grounded.

But as I read all of those 101 reasons, I realised that they didn't really give us a coherent philosophy, they were just why we are proud to be UUs and like to hang out with each other. Why do we need a coherent philosophy is a fair question. I believe it gives us direction in our search for meaning and purpose as we build community. On a personal level, it will guide me in future sermon preparation.

Such a philosophy has to begin with understanding our present context in 21st century, multi-cultural Aotearoa New Zealand. Since the 17th century, the western world has become increasingly secular, a world where religion and spirituality have a much smaller role to play. Certainly that is true here where over 50% of the population has no religious preference. Matthew Arnold long ago described the situation in his poem *Dover Beach*:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar...

By late in the 19th century German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche could make his proclamation that God is dead. Jewish theologian Martin Buber in thinking about the implications of the Holocaust spoke of the "eclipse of God," about God withdrawing his face from us. Sociologist Max Weber has described our era best, "modern economies, with their highly rational rules for how society should be structured, have 'disenchanted' the world." They have removed a sense of the sacred, the Holy, the Mysterious.

Except for Marx and Freud this hasn't been a self-conscious effort to eradicate religion. It is more the case of impersonal forces unleashed by modernisation. Dr Richard Grigg, a professor of philosophy and religious studies AND a Unitarian Universalist has pointed out that Unitarians and Universalists have unwittingly been caught up in the process. While earlier versions of both were pious Christians, they later both sought to be free of the constraints of dogmatism and obligatory creeds. As a result their churches became a home for religious sceptics. He argues that it is an important part of the UU heritage that is kept alive by the contributions of UU Humanists. However if scepticism is allowed to stand in stark isolation from all of our other human sensibilities, it might indeed become one of the culprits in the disenchantment of the world.

I am arguing that while some of us may think it is well and good that the world is disenchanted, I would argue that it leaves us as mere cogs in a capitalistic machine, where we are only here to make a few rich while we seek to scrape by. Meaning and purpose get lost in the daily struggle to survive, leaving us aimless.

A truly secular woman or man is far from anti-religious, she simply never thinks about religion or spirituality at all. It never enters her mind. What does someone do with her life if she never, ever brings to mind questions of Mystery, spirituality, and transcendence? Compare her to a reluctant agnostic, or even the reluctant atheist, who cares enough about God to contemplate God's death, even if God's absence is deflected by humour, as in Woody Allen's observation that "God is not dead, he's just an underachiever."

What is she to do with her life if she never ever, ever brings to mind questions of Mystery, spirituality, and transcendence? As a resident of the 21st century West, the path of least resistance is to allow her wants and values to be formed by the dictates of multinational capitalism. I am what I desire to own; I am what I wear and what I drive; I am the body that I display through camouflage of the latest moisturisers and makeup. She has been reduced to being a commodity. This is no less true of him.

Historically, much of the western world lived in Christendom for about 600 years, a kingdom of the church. It controlled every aspect of life. It determined all the rules. It defined reality even when science said differently. Even kings had to submit just as the serfs. While the Reformation broke it up, Protestant churches were no less controlling. While greatly weakened today, there are residues of it with us still. Instead of Christendom we now live in a secular version of that. Instead of popes and their minions we have multinationals replacing "the old time religion," but it is no less hollow. It leaves us empty and lost.

Christian religion has succumbed to this reality while at the same time railing against secularism. But what they mean by secularism is that fewer and fewer people believe and support their particular version of spirituality. They are annoyed because they have lost control over the majority and that majority is growing. They are worried about lost income and shrinking congregations, not the spiritual wellbeing of their members and non-members.

While fewer people are part of a church or particular faith community many seek to be re-enchanted by searching for a meaningful spiritual path or practice. This is where I believe Unitarian Universalism is uniquely able to serve the world. Our ability to bring together a plethora of different spiritualities within a single community makes us a powerful site for

the re-enchantment of the world, for the rebirth of the sacred. Unitarian Universalism is about finding identity in difference: the spiritual quest must, given our emphasis on the integrity of the individual, always be one's own undertaking, but one makes the spiritual journey in community, alongside a host of others on their own unique quests. We are on a solitary journey together, and it is through this mix of pluralism and unity I hope to show next week that the sacred is born.

The challenge we have in being such a diverse community is finding a common denominator when there is no unity of content. Without such a common denominator, bringing together a host of different spiritual paths within a single community probably leads to unbearable chaos and not to a rebirth of the sacred.

Next week I would like to define a model of spirituality that might help us find that common denominator. Spirituality is a word we throw around a lot without being specific, so it has become almost meaningless. I would like to give some substance to it by zeroing in on Unitarian Universalist spiritual pluralism. I want to look at five spiritual paths: humanism, nature, the arts, social justice, and the source of existence. Most of us here probably can identify with at least one of these. Each confronts us with a glimpse of the mysterious depth of reality. In other words, a mystery that has to do with the fundamental questions about who we are, what our lives mean, and how we ought to live.