

Re-enchanting the World, Part 2

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Today I continue last week's search for an underlying philosophy to unite our many different spiritual paths into a community that might re-enchant the world. I am beholden to Richard Grigg's book of the same title as this sermon for many of the insights and illustrations that follow.

Our search begins with emptiness. On one episode of *The Simpson's*, America's quintessentially dysfunctional family, they attend a church picnic. Reverend Lovejoy is working at the ice cream stand. Lisa Simpson, by far the most gifted and sane member of the family, approaches the stand, only to notice that the different flavours of ice cream are not identified as chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, but have been given the names of different denominations. In her usual thoughtful manner she pauses, and then says, "I'll try the Unitarian." Lovejoy hands her a bowl. She looks at it and says, "But there is nothing in here." Lovejoy's responds, "That's the point."

Taoist masters make much of the metaphor of an empty bowl. When we look at a bowl they point out that we look at its exterior. What is its material, its shape; its decorations? But the Taoist sage teaches that the true importance of the bowl is the empty space inside it. Without the emptiness the bowl would be useless. It would have no purpose. The Taoist goes on to say we are to be like the bowl, emptying ourselves of ego to allow the Tao, the infinite power that infuses the universe to fill us. If we flow with Tao, the sage teaches, we will be led to right action. Our emptiness becomes productive.

If we look at our sanctuary, the central focus in this space is the chalice. Part of its symbolic power is that it is empty. It is empty in the sense that it does not come pre-filled with congealed ideologies and elaborate doctrinal prohibitions. Paradoxically, this emptiness is a precondition for fullness. Anyone who wishes to participate in a Unitarian Universalist community can bring with herself or himself any number of different spiritual foci. In a bit I will look at five of them, namely, humanism, nature, the arts, social justice and the idea of a creative source of the universe. Every one of these, and many more besides, can be poured into the chalice. Each helps to keep the flame alive.

The issue becomes how is it possible for us to undertake our solitary journey together? How can so many diverse spiritual disciplines happily coincide within one chalice? How do a Christian theist and Humanist atheist, for example, find a common identity in their difference and provide each other support?

Richard Grigg argues that we can find unity in a common understanding of spirituality. Spirituality is "a quest to become something more than we already are, to participate in a reality larger than ourselves." Frederick Streng defines religion as "a means to ultimate transformation." If I participate in reason and the human project, in nature, in the arts, in the struggle for social justice, or in the creative Source of the universe, and if my participation is part of a self-conscious and disciplined spiritual quest, then it might be an avenue to self-transcendence. Self-transcendence occurs when we lose the egotistical self in order to find the true self as Jesus puts it in Matthew 10:39. Hinduism would put it similarly, it is seeing beyond the phenomenal self and finding the inner self that is identical with the Godhead.

This structure of participation and self-transcendence is nearly universal. There are both negative and positive reasons we as humans seek it. First, the negative: Freud, who

believed that there was no reliable evidence for the existence of God and considered beliefs in God an illusion, argued that we seek to believe in God anyway because we want to be protected from the terrors of nature; we want to be reconciled to the cruelties of fate, especially death; and we wanted to be rewarded in the hereafter for putting up with society's rules and prohibitions.

Christian theologian Paul Tillich put it more subtly. We seek participation and transcendence because we are hemmed in by the circumstances of our fate; because we must die, because we fall short of what we take to be our ethical responsibilities, and because our lives are never quite as full of meaning as we would like. The Buddha is in accord with Freud and Tillich. Sidhartha Gotama set off on his quest for enlightenment after seeing a decrepit old man, a diseased man, a corpse, and a monk who had withdrawn from the world seeking a better way. The Preacher from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew writings famously sums it up, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die." If the phenomena put before us in such unvarnished fashion by Freud, Tillich, the Buddha and the Preacher do represent what we each can expect in this life, then why not seek something more? Why not seek self-transcendence, ultimate transformation, Nirvana?

However, there are also positive reasons to pursue participation and self-transcendence. The human spirit is open-ended. It can always imagine something more, something beyond. World religions tend to agree that our deeper nature is aimed at the infinite and that we will not be content until we find it. Unitarians might more modestly say we shall not be satisfied unless continually pursuing it. The human spirit, when healthy, desires not to live in a claustrophobic, constricted thought world, but in a "world with windows" in the words of sociologist of religion Peter Berger.

Examples from world religions include the Hindu goal of throwing off the finite world of illusion to participate in the Godhead. The Buddhist seeks to extinguish the illusion of the finite self so he or she may participate in that mysterious infinite state known as Nirvana. The Taoist transcends the finite ego and has its place taken by the infinite power of the Tao, in which she then participates. The Abrahamic faiths all seek to overcome self-centeredness to participate in God or Allah to be "born again" in a new form of selfhood that completely transcends the ego with which one began.

But it is not just religions that point to the ubiquity of the model of participation and self-transcendence. Contemporary brain researchers have scanned the brains of those adept at meditation. They show that in a deep meditative state a significant quieting of that part of the brain that creates the boundaries of our sense of self. With that quieting the person's boundaries expand to the point that one experiences total oneness with a reality far beyond the self.

Now I'd like to return to our chalice, an empty bowl with a large rim. Its very shape suggests its inclusiveness. It can hold innumerable versions of the spiritual. Its happy pluralism is made possible by the common structure of participation and self-transcendence found underneath diverse spiritualities. But its pluralism itself offers a means to participation and self-transcendence. When these are gathered in one community where each is affirmed we are likely to be confronted by beliefs vastly different from our own which may lead to self-doubt but also to an expansion of our religious consciousness. Others' beliefs and practices challenge as well as inform ours, giving us new material for our spiritual quest. This openness to others beliefs can lead to genuine self-transcendence.

Consider this metaphor for the process of encountering many different paths within a Unitarian Universalist community. If we draw a polygon, that is, a many-sided figure. Let's say an octagon. It looks like a stop sign. But if we then draw a polygon with 100 sides, it will be almost indistinguishable from a circle. However, no matter how many more sides you add it will never become a true circle. The circle, of course, is a symbol of both completion and infinity, having neither a beginning nor an end. Our many-sided polygon works this way as a metaphor: the more spiritual perspectives we encounter and in which we can participate, the closer we approach spiritual wholeness, without ever perfectly reaching that state. Many-sidedness – in other words, pluralism – points us in the general direction of the consummation of the spiritual quest. While ever unattainable, it remains a worthy goal. And so returning once again to our chalice: the circular rim suggests how our encounter with religious pluralism beckons us toward completeness, toward a productive expansion of spiritual consciousness.

Now I would like to take a brief look at five of those hundred or more sides that make up the rim of the chalice: humanism, nature, the quest for social justice, the arts and the Creative Source of the Universe. They aren't mutually exclusive. In actual practice we may attach importance to any combination of them for all of them provide a means for participation and self-transcendence.

I begin with humanism. What does the term generally mean? Pythagoras in ancient Greece asserted that human beings are the measure of all things. There is no God to guide us, to provide us with moral standards, or to protect us from harm. By the 20th century "The Humanist Manifesto" maintained that humanism would "discourage sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking." Instead humanism was committed to the search for truth and the acceptance of only those things that can be backed up by reasonable argument.

Humanism with its exuberant optimism about human capabilities and the human future has had its critics within Unitarian circles as being naïve. The barbarity of the First World War and the later holocaust seemed to confirm this judgment. Efforts by the likes of James Luther Adams modified humanism to include a moral commitment to making the world a better place because it wasn't going to happen simply because of our humanity. Post-modernist thinkers also criticised humanism, arguing that human beings are not harmoniously centred around reason. Humans are of a fragile construction constantly pushed off-centre by unconscious forces not under the self's control.

While there is validity in post-modernist criticisms of garden-variety humanism, Unitarian Universalist humanists are religious humanists. While they deny any supernatural reality, their worldview is ever informed by wonder and also by a certain humility. The Unitarian religious humanist does not see human beings as a wholly autonomous and centred self. Humans lead an interdependent existence. Science unlocks the universe's secrets but those secrets, once revealed, inspire a sense of awe at the vast cosmos and a sense of our inextricable connection with and dependence on that cosmos. The result is precisely participation with other human beings in the on-going search for truth and the self-transcendence provided by new discoveries.

It is a small step from humanism as a focus for the spiritual quest to nature as a focal point. While the religious humanist takes a scientific rational-analytical approach to participating in nature, another approach is the Buddhist concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness means focusing one's attention just on what is happening right now. One trains oneself to keep one's consciousness alive to the present reality. As we participate in that reality we begin to

find our connection, our oneness with it. Instead of an isolated ego, we experience that we are nature not surrounded by nature.

The third focus is the quest for social justice. To be committed to it is a hallmark of Unitarian Universalism. Unitarians sought to end slavery and later segregation, have sought more humane working conditions along with unions, stood stalwart with the LGBTI community's struggle for justice, upheld the rights of women, furthered peace-making and today seek to right income inequality.

It is easy to grasp that our participation in these efforts allows us to empathetically participate in the lives of others, seeing them akin ourselves. This clearly entails self-transcendence.

Our fourth focus is the arts as an arena for participation and self-transcendence. We have all experienced being carried away by a painting, a film, a sculpture, a piece of music or any artistic production that affords us a new way of seeing the world. Being carried beyond our ordinary experience and perceptions is a form of self-transcendence. They can be a moment of ecstasy, which literally means to stand outside of one's ordinary state of consciousness.

Our fifth focus is the quest to connect to the Creative Source of the Universe. While some of us here may have no interest in looking beyond the forces of physics to explain the cosmos, many look to what transcends the merely physical. It is important to remember both Unitarians and Universalists began with an uncompromising theism, a belief in the Christian God. There is still room in the chalice for such a belief, but that belief is bound to be pluralistic, so we refer to God as the Creative Source. It may be a personal God or the less personal Tao or Buddhist Nothingness. But each becomes what Paul Tillich would call our "ultimate concern." This concern has the capacity to take us out of our ordinary mode of existence. Through our participation our life is rearranged. In that moment we experience self-transcendence. The logical conclusion is what is often called mysticism, being taken up in into being one with God, the Godhead, the Tao or Buddhist Nothingness.

This is a lot to take on board in one sitting, but I hope I have demonstrated that the internal structure of the spiritual quest of participation and self-transcendence is what allows for multiple contents to be poured into our empty chalice. The five quests that I described are not a chaotic juxtaposition of worldviews. They have deep, underlying structure in common. The empty chalice that allows us to walk separate journeys together is what makes Unitarian Universalism the uncommon denomination uniquely placed to re-enchant the world. The how of this I will explore next week.