



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

It isn't easy being a "Living Tradition"

Clay Nelson © 16th April 2023

This morning I would like to focus on what it means to be a living tradition. As Unitarian Universalists we sing about it. We proudly proclaim it as what we are. But what does it mean? Most simply put our beliefs are etched in pencil and not carved in stone. But there are consequences. Like being green, being a living tradition isn't easy.

It is a big topic, so this is the first of several random musings exploring who we are, how we got here and where we are being led. My hope is that we might better understand our Kaupapa, our mission and purpose.

For those who have only worshipped here, you may be under the false impression that all Unitarians are the same, like a rose is a rose is a rose, but no, we are more like a floral arrangement with no two flowers alike. Historically and now, we vary greatly.

Modern Unitarians in Transylvania, the birthplace of Unitarianism, are Christian anti-trinitarians. They celebrate communion and have bishops.

In the 16th century, the Polish Brethren adopted the ideas of Italian anti-trinitarian Faustus Socinus. His ideas eventually made it to England and greatly influenced 18th-century chemist and natural philosopher Joseph Priestly, considered the founder of British Unitarianism. He sought to merge Enlightenment Rationalism with Christian theism. He eventually had to flee England to the US when a mob burned down his home.

Priestly tried to promote his Socinian ideas to American Unitarians. Still, they didn't listen as they were too involved in breaking away from their Calvinist forbears and fighting about what a Unitarian had to believe. Unitarians were adamant about right beliefs. For example, some believed Emerson and Thoreau's transcendentalism stood outside Unitarian thought. The controversy lasted fifty years and, to this day, it influences who we are, and it is at the core of our being a living tradition.

How is our living tradition manifested today? There are now only 3600 Unitarians in 173 congregations in the UK and only a handful with more than one hundred members. The challenge for the fewer and fewer ministers is breaking the preference of many for small congregations. Many congregations survive on their endowments, and the minister does four to five funerals a week. Sadly, the Unitarian traditions in the UK are on life support.

African Unitarians in England's former colonies are not numerous but are passionate. Most of their ministers have rejected their evangelical upbringing, but not without some cost. They face prison and even death for their Unitarian values.

In the US, where UUs are most vital, we see how hard it is to find two Unitarian Universalists who believe alike. In Boston, the denominational home of UUs, is America's first Unitarian Church, King's Chapel. It was formerly an Anglican church, but the Bishop of London failed to assign a new priest. They eventually called James Freeman, a layman who no longer held to the 39 Articles Anglicans were to accept. After his lay ordination as the first Unitarian minister in America, he edited the Book of Common Prayer, removing all references to the Trinity. That book is still in use by the congregation. In all other ways, it is an Anglican church celebrating Holy Communion on Sundays.

Predominantly along the east coast, many congregations are black sheep Christians still imbued with their Calvinist roots. Those that have Universalist roots differ primarily by class from their Unitarian cousins. Unitarians were more urban, highly educated and upper-class. Universalists were more rural and working class. They firmly believed that God is love. Unitarian and Universalist minister Starr King once described their difference: "Universalists believe God is too good to damn them, and Unitarians believed they were too good for God to damn."

As one moves westward in the US, UU churches become more diverse. Many are humanist. Some are pagan, earth-centred, or Buddhist. This diversity results in various worship experiences, but a few have become commonplace: lighting the chalice, joys and concerns, time for all ages and, of course, what we call morning tea.

Continuing West, we come to the Australian New Zealand Unitarian Universalist Association. Its membership includes us and a small fellowship in Blenheim that meets once a month with a minister and five very different congregations in Australia, most of which are quite small. None have a minister. The largest does not worship and is more like a rationalist society.

All these different beliefs and ways of worship make it very hard to explain who we are, what we value and how we put our faith into action. A living tradition without a holy book, ecclesiastic authority, or revealed truth is a petri dish for chaos.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, to which we affiliate, formed a commission on appraisal to bring some order to who we are. Their [2005 report](#) concluded:

Three years of study and conversation have not brought us to a complete consensus about a common core to our faith. Yet we have found much common ground along the way. . . . Respecting the integrity of individual perspective, we offer the following statements as descriptive of who Unitarian Universalists are theologically:

We are a grounded faith. We are a faith with roots, however lightly held, that go back two thousand years and more. Unlike other more recently evolving

non-traditional faiths, ours is solidly grounded in both the realm of history and the realm of ideas.

We are an ecological faith. The "interdependent web" concept of our Seventh Principle is not new to history (the "Net of Indra" in Hindu and Buddhist thought has been around for several thousand years). But in the West, this vision of interconnectedness has had an uphill struggle to displace a more hierarchical vision of the nature of the cosmos. We have placed the web squarely at the centre of our shared worldview.

We are a profoundly human faith. Whether we see our charge as loving our neighbour or ending the suffering of all sentient beings, whether a transcendent dimension is part of our worldview or not, our primary focus for religious action is the well-being of this world. We wrestle with our ideas about human limitation and human power and acknowledge that our understandings are imperfect.

We are a responsible faith. At our best, we are able to respond to our deep sense of interconnectedness with both the natural and human worlds. Whatever our source of religious inspiration, we understand that humanity must take its responsibility for the state of the world seriously. We humans have created many of the ills from which we and all creatures on this planet suffer. We have the ability to ameliorate suffering, if only we find the will to do so. Our diverse sources of religious inspiration power our will to act.

We are an experiential faith. We are focused more on experience (our own and that of trusted others, past and present) than beliefs. We do not hold with beliefs that contradict our experience, although we recognise that there are realities that can draw us beyond the present limits of our knowledge.

*We are a free faith. We are free both as individuals and as congregations. We recognise the authenticity and integrity of each individual's life journey, and concepts such as "building your own theology" or "composing a faith" resonate with us. We are a faith of heretics (from the Greek *haireisis*, "to choose").*

We are an imaginative faith. We engage with image and story, garnering wisdom from many traditions and building bridges between them, making a place where creativity can flourish.

We are a relational faith. While we support the individual journey, we ground it in a caring community. Relational language occurs more frequently than any other in core-of-faith statements shared with the commission.

We are a covenantal faith. We are held together, from our Reformation roots, by our chosen commitment to each other rather than by creed, ecclesiastical authority, or revealed truth. We began to reclaim that heritage with the language of our Principles. More recently, we have come to recognise ourselves as a dialogical faith; the explosion of covenant groups in our midst

reflects this. We are reminded of Francis David's admonition over four centuries ago: "We need not think alike to love alike."

We are a curious faith. Freedom and tolerance have been central to our tradition at least since the Reformation. The psychological characteristics and values of people drawn to our ranks suggest openness is a compelling characteristic, even if we do not always live our values of tolerance, acceptance, and respect as well as we might. We acknowledge that our perspective is limited, that we could be wrong, that we live in the midst of uncertainties, yet we are ever open to new insights.

We are a reasonable faith. We do not ask people to check their rationality at the door, and we encourage the practice of disciplined inquiry toward personal and societal assumptions. We challenge idolatries, especially our own. We are positive toward the findings of science, while questioning the values that at times motivate choices in that area, as in every other.

We are a hopeful faith. We are a faith of possibilities, aspiring to be (though we often fall short) a transformative faith, a justice-seeking faith. We would create a space for the realisation of possibility, whether we call it the "commonwealth of God" or the "Beloved Community."

Nearly 20 years have passed since the commission's report. For a living tradition, that is a lifetime. Today's sermon is the first in a series of three. My third sermon will address the commission's latest report on who we are today and what vision pulls us further into our faith without certainty.

But next week I will share how we came to determine our mission and purposes as a living tradition.

Meditation / Conversation starter

What did you hear?

How does it affect your faith?