

Reading: One Light through Many Windows by Barbara A. Brannon

One light through many windows
in different colors shines;
one flame from many candles
burns bright within our minds.

One life to us is given,
its seconds ours to spend;
how manifold its living
and infinite its ends!

One God with many faces
we meet on many roads,
who dwells in holy places
and lives in low abodes.

One earth with many nations
must share a common sun;
a world of celebrations,
a universe at one.

One song with many voices
now rises from our hearts,
and from our separate choices
one chorus, many parts.

One light through many windows
in different colors shines;
one flame from many candles
burns bright within our minds

Ethics and Religion **By Rev. Don Southworth** **October 29, 2006**

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We begin this morning with a Sufi story. Mulla Nasrudin was outside on his hands and knees below a lantern when a friend walked up. "What are you doing, Mulla?" his friend asked. "I'm looking for my key. I've lost it." So his friend got down on his hands and knees too and they both searched for a long time in the dirt beneath the lantern. Finding nothing, his friend finally turned to him and asked, "Where exactly did you lose it?" Nasrudin replied, "I lost it in the house, but there is more light out here."

For some reason this story resonates with me when I think about today's topic, the third source that Unitarian Universalism draws from, "wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life". We are in the midst of a six part series in which we have been studying our sources, the rivers that feed the ocean that is our faith. If you are new to Unitarian Universalism, or even if you have been around for awhile, my hunch is that you have not spent a lot of time reflecting on our

sources. Part of that is because we usually spend more time talking about the seven principles than we do about the sources.

You might say that the principles are where we shine the most light and where we look when we want to find our key, or keys, to living a good life. But sometimes the answers to the tough questions life challenges us with, cannot be found where the light is the brightest and we must work a little harder to find our way. Think, for example, about our first principle. “We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Most of us say this principle is one of the guiding lights in our life but when it comes to making an ethical decision about removing the feeding tube from a Terri Schiavo or deciding when war and killing are appropriate, our first principle may not be enough for us to lean on. Which is why ethics and religion can be so important, even when they sometime seem like a darker place to look for answers in our lives.

But before we talk about ethics and religion let’s look at the third source a little more closely. In some ways this source differentiates us from most of the world’s religions. People inside and outside our congregations often ask if Unitarian Universalism is truly a religion. Since we do not have any creeds or common beliefs and definitions about God, some people, say we are not a religion. They argue if we all don’t believe in God, or if can believe anything we want (which we really can’t) than we cannot be a religion.

Sometimes when I am struggling to write a sermon I read other people’s sermons, including my own. I do this for many reasons, to get ideas, to learn from others and occasionally to remind myself that sometimes I do have something good to say. One of the sermons that I re-read the most is the sermon I preached the Sunday after September 11. It was the second sermon I preached in the last congregation I served and it was titled, “Clinging to... Religion?” I read it because in many ways on that Sunday I - like almost every minister, pastor, rabbi or imam who preached that week – had to speak about what gives us hope in our darkest and scariest days.

Here’s what I said about religion, “We cling to religion, not because of God, but because religion binds us together. In fact the original Latin meaning of the word was to re-bind. Our religion, binds us together in a search for meaning, a search for sharing with each other the questions and struggles in life and a search for doing, and living, right. This morning we re-bind to each other and to the principles and values that we hold dear. We cling to each other and we cling to the promise, the hope that religion - our Unitarian Universalist religion - offers. “

On that Sunday I believed Unitarian Universalism was a religion. And I still believe so today. But we are a different type of religion. And perhaps no source points that out more clearly than the third source.

I have used the metaphor during this series that the sources are the rivers that feed the ocean that is Unitarian Universalism. Each of our six sources bring something different to our tradition, the living waters, that is our faith. But the sources are much more than that. In many ways the sources are what we should study and reflect on BEFORE we jump into the pool, the ocean, that is Unitarian Universalism.

If our theology is *only* Christian, or Jewish, or humanist, or pagan, there is a good chance that Unitarian Universalism may not be the religious tradition for us. If we believe science and reason *never* has a place in faith, or if we believe that God and mysticism *never* belong in a worship service, Unitarian Universalism is probably not for us either. If we think that only one religious tradition, or only one scripture, holds all the answers to all our questions we almost certainly are not in the right place. Which speaks to the essence of our third source, “wisdom from the world’s religions”.

For many years I was religiously homeless. I liked to think I was on a spiritual path but I did not have a religious community or a religious tradition to plant myself in and to hold me accountable. People often encouraged me to try their religion – and I tried different forms of Christianity and Buddhism – but each of them, in varying levels of insistence, claimed their path was the only way. And as someone who was led into religion by Gandhi’s teachings that many paths lead to God or truth, I could never accept a religious tradition that did not honor all paths.

When I stepped into my first Unitarian Universalism congregation – and read the principles and sources – I could not believe my eyes. Here was a religion, a *real* religion with history and tradition and

community and ritual which taught that **all** the world's religions had wisdom that could be used on our spiritual and ethical paths. I was so excited that I was in seminary in less than two years.

The third source is what I use to call when I was in marketing and sales, our "niche" or "competitive advantage". In the third source we acknowledge that we do not hold all the truth and we turn to the wisdom of all the world's religions to help find answers to live the best lives we can. This is unusual teaching.

Our reading this morning was inspired by a metaphor that my colleague Forrest Church writes about in [A Chosen Faith](#), to describe the third source. Church compares Unitarian Universalism with a stained glass cathedral window that refracts and changes the light that comes through it in many different ways. He writes, "Fundamentalists of the right and left claim that the light shines through their window only. Skeptics can make a similar mistake, only to draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of worshipers, they conclude that there is no light. But the windows are not the light. The whole light – God, Truth, call it what you will – is beyond our perceiving. ...Religion is dangerous because its power is independent of the universal validity of its claims. Every generation has its terrorists for Truth and God, hard-bitten zealots for whom the world is large enough for only one true faith. They have been taught to worship at one window, and then to prove their faith by throwing rocks through other people's windows."

I love Church's metaphor. It reminds me of our story this morning and how sometimes we speak as if we know the whole truth when our experiences usually reveal only a small piece. Our third source reminds us that we only have one piece of truth and we need to constantly be searching for more pieces of truth in our quest to live the best lives we possibly can.

But we Unitarian Universalists, like all people who have been taught to worship at only one window, have our challenges when it comes to turning religious wisdom into our own spiritual and ethical truths.

Sometimes it can appear that Unitarian Universalism is like a giant buffet, or better yet a Baskin Robbins ice cream store where those of us who cannot live only on Vanilla or Chocolate go to feed our spirits with at least 31 different flavors of religion and theology. I imagine ordering something like this: "I will have a pagan Sundae with Christian nuts, Jewish cherries and some Humanist whipped cream. Oh can I have that in a Buddha cup? And don't forget the Islamic hot fudge and the Native American gummie bears. And can that all be religiously non fat?"

Not only do our stomachs hurt when we mix so many foods, our spiritual and ethical lives can become sick when we mix so many religions as well.

I am not suggesting that we are doomed to a religious life of only one flavor of ice cream, or even one flavor of theology, what I am suggesting is that it is important for our spiritual and ethical lives to create a sundae, or more importantly, an ethic for living that we can stand on. The English humorist GK Chesterton perhaps said it best. "The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."

In November 2003 the UUA conducted a Lifespan Religious Education survey throughout the country. People were asked to list the most important topics people that all ages should be learning in our congregations. The number one response, by far, was "life skills and ethical development."

This shouldn't have been surprising. Most people who come into our congregations are looking for ways to learn how to live more spiritual and more ethical lives. We are not seeking salvation, in the traditional religious sense of rewards after we die, we are yearning to face the ups and downs of life with more joy, more peace, more love. We want help and inspiration – from the world's religions, including ours, and from other people – on how to cobble together a life of integrity, of compassion, of service, of commitment, of love. We want help in knowing right from wrong and we want help in answering the big questions that life and death present us with almost every day.

It has been said that the ethical teachings of the all world's religions can be distilled basically into one sentence – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If we could all practice the golden rule everyone would be just fine, or would we? Ethical guidelines can be tricky things. We only need look at the greatest ethical contribution the Judeo Christian tradition has handed down to Western civilization for proof.

The Ten Commandments are the ethical, some would even say moral, foundation of western society. We know that they were a set of rules given to the Jewish people by God, through his middleman Moses. They eventually became a covenant that was written in a form that was fairly easy to remember. And they needed to be easy to remember because if the commandments, which were really laws, were broken, chaos would break out and the people of Israel might perish.

The Ten Commandments are the best example of what is right and what is wrong with ethics and religion. Religions – and religious people – often confuse morals with ethics and that is part of what causes us trouble. Morals are values which are based on looking at the world through a right or wrong, good or evil lens. We all have morals of course. And we all make judgments about what is right and wrong. Sometimes those morals are universal in nature, but often they are grounded only in our personal, limited experiences. We are on a slippery slope when we try and make our morals another's morals, when we think our truth is everybody's truth, when we think the light we see through the windows is everyone's light.

Ethics on the other hand are standards of conduct which are formulated to ensure that we effectively live together over time. They are well-grounded assessments, which may or may not be morally grounded, designed to take care of concerns for a community of people. They are seen not through the lens of right or wrong but instead through the lens of being effective or ineffective in helping to take care of a community.

The debate over placing the Ten Commandments in public places is a moral, not an ethical argument. When we look at the Ten Commandments as a moral document we are missing what the intent of the commandments were designed to be. Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt honor thy mother and father, thou shalt have no God before me – all of these were designed to protect a nomadic people who were struggling to stay alive. The Ten Commandments were crafted as an ethical covenant, a covenant the Jewish people made with God, and with each other, so they could survive.

The world's religions help us with our ethical lives because religions -at their best - offer a framework of values that helps provide examples of how to live in community. We all live in communities whether they be are families, our workplaces, our congregations or our towns or cities.

The world's religions, or actually the people who practice them, often hamper us in our ethical lives when they look at moral and ethical issues from vantage points that are 2,000 years old. While all the world's religious scriptures can be helpful in aiding our ethical decisions, they become useless when people use moral arguments disguised as ethical arguments to attempt to make sense of ethical dilemmas that faith communities of the past could never imagine.

Thou shalt not kill. How does that apply to war? To capital punishment? To removing life support from brain dead patients? To stem cell research? Too many religious people do not understand the differences between morals and ethics, and too many religious leaders are using religious doctrine and myths designed for a different world as rationale for ethical and even political decisions today.

So where does that leave us? Do we pick and chose which morals we embrace and build an ethical framework based on anything we individually chose to believe? Yes and no.

Our seven principles provide us an ethical framework for how to live our lives. But they are not a creed and they cannot be all we turn to for living a spiritual and ethical life. What do we do? I suggest doing what Richard Gilbert teaches in "Building Your Own Theology", our most popular Unitarian Universalist Adult Education class, and what we ask every teenager in our Coming of Age program to do – write our own credos. Our credos detail what we believe and what we hold to be true for our spiritual and ethical lives. Having a credo, a covenant, for ourselves that we can share with others give us a compass for our own piece of truth and a place to begin conversation and reflection – which is where our quest for better lives should always begin. A truth that will always be under construction since the light of love and truth that comes into our lives looks a little darker, a little brighter, a little different each day.

As Forrest Church writes, "One truth, many truths; one God, many faiths; one light (Unitarianism), many windows (Universalism). That is why we number as one of the sources for the living tradition we share "wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." Among other things, it reminds us to be humble, especially when we are sure we are right." In humility,

with wisdom as our guide, may we continue our ongoing search for ethical and spiritual truth. May it be so. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS

The words of Thomas Jefferson: “Were I to be the founder of a new sect, I would call them Apiarians, and after the example of the bee, advise them to extract the honey of every sect.” Enjoy the sweetness and go in peace.