

Bread or Stones?

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John, his wife, and their three children had been coming to First Unitarian Church for about a month, before I met them. I first met John's wife with their infant daughter. She told me how much her kids loved the RE program. It was a typical conversation that I often have with returning visitors during coffee hour. "My husband would love this place!" she said. Sure enough a couple of weeks later I met John, and spoke with him at length while he told me his story.

John had a conservative Baptist upbringing. Recently he had just begun school again, and was reading more widely than ever before. One of the new books he had encountered was the Bhagavad Gita—perhaps the most sacred text in the Hindu tradition. The Gita is a story about duty, responsibility, and encountering God in unexpected places. In our normal Sunday morning worship services here at First Unitarian Wilmington, we almost always have two readings on that morning's topic; one ancient and one modern. John was attracted to our worship services because the ancient readings were texts from many different

religions. The morning he and I spoke the sermon had been based on a passage from the Quran. John found himself drawn to the spirit of religious exploration in the UU church, but also to the deep engagement with the symbols, teachings, and practices of the many world religions. Soon he and his family were, and continue to be, regular attendees. They have since brought his sister and occasionally her children to the church as well.

Oh, I forgot to mention that John and his family are African American. They are part of the rapidly growing diverse band of newcomers that have found their way to our historically white upper-class congregation. I wish I could tell you that this trend is all part of a grand plan I had to attract greater diversity of age, race, class, and other cultural differences to our church. It wasn't. I have nothing against such planning—indeed every congregation should be intentional about its practices of radical hospitality toward whomever they feel called to serve. But this happy accident isn't really so miraculous. In fact it can be summed up in just a few words: feed their spiritual hungers.

In Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us really the only church growth strategy that has ever worked. Chapter 7, verses 7-10 he says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if

your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?” Of course not, Jesus answers himself. How much more so might we be received by the Holy?

When people come to our churches for the first time it is quite often because something really messed up is going on in their lives. It might be a crisis of faith, the loss of a parent, becoming an empty nester, a child’s probing religious questions which the parent has not really answered for themselves, or that tried and true wakeup call known as “facing death in a serious way for the first time.” In my last ministry we had people visit, and eventually become members and leaders, because of 9/11. People knock on our doors because they have deep spiritual hungers; hungers which they often cannot articulate. The question for us Unitarian Universalists is: when they knock on our door, are we going to give them bread or a stone?

This is why worship is probably the most important activity of our, and any other, religion. Thus because it is such a central event in our congregations, it is vital that we study and perfect our practice of worship. It is good that we have come together today to learn and refine our learning on this fundamental moment in the life of all our congregations: worshipping together. For worship is the first place where people are going go looking for the nourishing, life giving bread of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. As leaders of worship, we must ensure that bread is what they are getting. Sadly though, too often, like

Charlie Brown trick-or-treating at Halloween, we can too easily distribute stones to the folks that come to us.

“Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want!” How often have you heard that one? Now if you are coming to us from a very repressive religious tradition, that message is a breath of fresh air. It is liberating to not rub up against all of the things you “have to believe” in order to be a good Catholic or a good Jew or what have you. But if you are coming to us without all that baggage, if you are on a spiritual search, perhaps for the first time in your life, and your world has been rocked by some catastrophic change, and you don’t have your bearings or some meaningful signposts along life’s journey, then “believe anything you want” fails to be a life giving message. You don’t need more questions; you need something to hang your hat on. You need some truth, something to live by. It doesn’t have to be the once and for all definitive truth, but it has to have some substance even if it is evolving truth.

We Unitarian Universalists need to be careful that we are really giving out bread and not stones. Perhaps because we lack our own confidence sharing our faith with others, we fall back on that “believe anything you want” stuff. We have a tendency to turn to some rather shallow answers. The “elevator speech” or the latest bumper sticker may provide the snappy comeback to the newcomer inquiring about Unitarian Universalism. Perhaps you have memorized the Principles

and Purposes or the Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion. That is getting there but they are still not it.

For Unitarian Universalism to really be relevant to the people who are coming to us, we need to be deeply engaged with our history, the sources of our tradition, our personal faith, and the culture of the world around us. None of those things can be neglected nor glossed over. What does Channing or Emerson have to teach us about problems or situations that we face right now, right here? What truth might we find in the Bible, or the Tao Te Ching, or even the Bhagavad Gita? What truth do these sources present to us that may be difficult to hear, but important to heed? I fear that the temptation is for us to take the parts of our tradition and the other sources that we like or that already fit with our predisposition as liberal rational people, and we skip the stuff we don't like because it is too hard to wrestle with it. While there are limits to this of course, we should not be afraid to go deep, even with ideas, beliefs, and symbols that we may not like at first.

For example, one of the central ideas of Unitarian Universalism is the notion of the covenant. That is the communal commitment we make to walk together, to make promises to each other, to help each other, and yes even correct each other when that proves to be necessary. When I first came to this church, one of the first things I wanted to do was to rewrite the covenant they spoke during worship. It was an opportunity to make a key part of the worship our own; not merely repeating

someone else's commitments. It was a chance to firmly and clearly state who we are as a Unitarian Universalist congregation and what was important to our collective life together. Since then, every Sunday when we recite our covenant, it becomes a moment to deeply reflect on who we are as a church and what we are called to do as a faith community.

Thus I urge you to dare to go deep. Dare to be bold. Dare to be unique and different in your worship, so long as it is in service to baking that life giving bread that people come to us to receive. Just say something that has substance to it. Avoid giving out the stones of reflexive, shallow slogans that have been boiled down to the lowest common denominator. Such things might have their uses as marketing tools, but they are not the substance of faith for Unitarian Universalists. Avoid being bland and trite. Granted, as soon as you move away from being the lowest common denominator, inevitably someone will complain that they are not happy or that they are dissatisfied with change. When that happens to me, I try to remember the words of a great sage—Mike Meyers in the movie Wayne's World—who astutely observed, “Hey, Led Zeppelin didn't make songs that everyone liked. They left that to the Bee Gees.”

May we have the courage to give people the bread they are looking for in our worship. May we never falter in our own spiritual growth from continually trying to go deeper. And may our time together today open us up to new possibilities. Amen Blessed Be.