

## **Renew Within: Spiritual Transformation**

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This morning I am starting a new sermon series based on the work the Board did on the new Long Range Plan. Some of you are certainly familiar with it, but for those of you who are not, it is called “Renew at First U” and it is a compelling and exciting vision for where we see First Unitarian Church going in the next three to five years. The Board is to be commended for its foresight and vision in creating this plan. There are three ways in which we “Renew at First U”: renewal within, renewal among, and renewal beyond. This morning I am going to tackle the first of these: how we as a congregation can renew within. Meaning how do we help individual people, that all of us and those who will some day join us, find what they have come to church looking for in the first place: some nourishment for a hunger that can hardly be defined or described.

Now in most churches, the answer given to feed that hunger would be God. They would say that we come to church because we need to be in relationship with God or at least deepen our understanding of God. In the Unitarian Universalist church things are a lot more complicated than

that. The problem is that we think we know what we mean by the word “God.” Call me a post-modernist, but I think that words are but an imprecise approximation of our thoughts and feelings. Yet we have almost no other alternative for communication. The word “God” is really just a symbol that points to something.

To say the word “God” conjures up all sorts of things in people’s minds. For some it is a reality that is closer than their next breath or heartbeat. It is the presence of the Holy that pervades all of life and all of the universe. For them God is a loving force in the world. But for others the word God brings up images of an old man with a beard sitting up in the sky; as one of my colleagues described it, as sort of cross between Zeus and Charlton Heston. Such an image may have been relevant or meaningful to a previous age, but it is certainly hard to reconcile with our modern scientific understanding of the world. Perhaps if the Hubble telescope captures a picture of Charlton Heston up in the sky, then perhaps the sceptics would believe. Or check to see if there is a talking ape standing next to him.

The word “God” means too many things to too many people to really be of much use anymore. And I am not the only one who thinks so. The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich at the end of his career suggested a ten year moratorium on the word. Then if after a decade of non-use it contained some meaning, then it should be reemployed. Needless to say no one has taken him up on his suggestion. However

the Unitarian Forrester Church, a student of Tillich's, offers us a very intriguing metaphor. God, or reality, or the Truth, whichever you prefer, is like light streaming through a stained glass window in a cathedral. Some people like one specific window over another. Some get it in their heads that only their little stained glass window is the right one, and so they ridicule, convert, kill, or in some way diminish the people who enjoy another window. Note that no one, none of us, ever sees the light directly. We are always seeing reality through the refraction of the glass. I think this is an important metaphor to bear in mind as we consider the different understandings all of us have of that three letter word "God".

The Unitarian statesman Adlai Stevenson writes:

"I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there's nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination."

That understanding of our differences is a key aspect to our renewal within. Yes we all come to church with some hunger, some may even call it a spiritual hunger. I prefer to call it *existential* hunger because it is fueled by unexamined existential questions such as: who am I? What does it mean to be in community? Can I connect to another human being in a meaningful way? What purpose does my life have? How can I be of use to the world? Yeah, some churches will give one universal answer to all those questions: God, God, God... Surely there are UUs who would agree. But Unitarian Universalism asks us to slow down and think through the answer. Don't rush too quickly to this term "God" without thinking about it, living with it, opening your heart to it, and then answer the big existential questions. The answer may very well be God, but it might not. To renew within means that each and every one of us intentionally takes the time and resources to answer those questions well.

I am a big fan of the food analogy for the spiritual life. Hunger, physical hunger, is universal to the human species. While I won't go so far as to say that every single human being experiences hunger in exactly the same way, I have no way of knowing that so precisely, it seems to me to be a safe assumption that we feel something pretty close. The human beings in China, Canada, America, Germany, and Brazil all feel something, some biological drive that makes them desire food. However what do they eat to satisfy that desire? Rice, maple syrup,

hamburgers, sausage, or steak. All of these will take away our hunger, but they are all very different. There is difference in how our hunger is satisfied. I think something similar happens with religion. We all feel some existential angst or doubt or uncertainty or anxiety. How we satisfy that hunger, be it with God or Gandhi, Buddha or Bono, Harris or Hitchens, we are still renewing within.

People, particularly new to Unitarian Universalism, often ask how we make this work. It is not easy of course. I think of my own family and our diverse opinions about food. My wife hates tomatoes but loves tomato sauce. I love omelets but am repulsed by hardboiled eggs. But perhaps the most divisive debate in the Snyder clan over food has to be over ketchup. A few years ago my parents were at McDonalds eating lunch. My Dad got up to get some ketchup for his french fries, and he asked my Mom if she wanted ketchup for her fries. She looked at him with disgust and said, “In thirty years of marriage have I ever ate my fries with ketchup? No!” Thus began one of the infamous fights in Snyder family history. And like all of our infamous family fights, it spawned a running joke. Now anytime, anyone goes to get ketchup they always ask my mother if she wants ketchup with her fries. As it turns out some of us in my family love ketchup and some of us hate it. I am with Mom, I can’t stand the stuff; haven’t since childhood. However, my son Thomas dips his fingers in it and licks them off one by one.

Lately, after seeing the grimace of disgust on my face, he dips his whole hand in ketchup and chases his Dad around the house.

In the Snyder family, some of us love ketchup and some of us hate it. But I still love my son with all my heart. My parents are closing in on forty years of marriage. This is not a difference that divides our family, but instead becomes the fodder for jokes and makes life together interesting and fun. As Stevenson says, differences are not to be feared or reviled but embraced as that thing which makes our lives meaningful.

So it is with our theologies in a Unitarian Universalist church. While we all feel a hunger for some engagement with larger issues, the theological and philosophical ideas that nourish us, that which feeds the soul, can be as different as the cuisines of India and Germany. Neither is wrong. Both are valid stain glass windows in the cathedral of the world. Perhaps the Unitarian Universalist church could also be compared to a culinary school for the soul in which new recipes are invented and old ones are perfected. Whereas some faiths might say that only one kind of food satisfies, we have the courage to try something new in our quest to renew within.

Of course there is the question of how do you know when you are full? What does spiritual satisfaction feel like? Well at the risk of straining my metaphor, I think you know when you have something that satisfies your existential hunger when you experience joy. If what you

believe or live gives you deep joy, not just superficial pleasure but deep and abiding joy, then you know you have it. You have been renewed.

Von Ogden Vogt, the Unitarian minister wrote extensively on worship in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. How do you describe worship when we can't all agree on what is being worshiped, if anything? His answer is one that I think captures it well. He said that worship for UUs is the celebration of life. Worship is a celebration. Too often I think religion has a reputation for being a very solemn and somber affair. I think religion is about what speaks to you at a deep level. What you have some passion and energy around. It is that aspect of your life that makes life worth living, gives it flavor. Granted these things may not be traditional. They might include things like writing or journaling, working in your garden, taking a walk, contemplating the elegance of an equation or a chemical reaction. It doesn't have to be something "churchy." That is the whole point to Unitarian Universalism: we count as religious things that others might not. It all comes down to what gives you deep joy, that which feeds our existential hungers.

The Buddha mentions four things that are the pinnacle of the spiritual life. These were called the four supreme states or sometimes the four boundless abodes by the more poetic translators. These four things were the supreme expression of enlightenment. They are love, compassion, equanimity, and the subject of today's ancient reading:

sympathetic joy. That is joy in the delight and happiness of others. It is one hundred and eighty degrees away from jealousy or schadenfreude. When someone else is happy, then you are happy. Or you do something for someone else just to make them happy or relieve their suffering even when there is no specific benefit for you directly. It is the joy you experience when you get someone just the right gift for Valentines Day.

Although equanimity is officially considered the highest of these four, and today being Valentine's Day I probably should make a case for love, but I think sympathetic joy is the leader of the pack. It has it all really. To feel sympathetic joy for someone, you need to feel a very strong connection to them. You identify with them. Their happiness feels like your happiness. There is tolerance for their differences, but more than mere tolerance. You know and appreciate who they are in all their particularity. You are able to set aside your own selfishness and egotism for a moment and let another person's happiness move you. And what is the pay off for you? There is some actually. You get to experience their joy. So now in addition to your own joy, you are moved by the happiness of others as well.

For all of that to happen you have to have done a lot of renewal work. It does not come easy. It is possible, but not if you believe in God long enough and hard enough. Nor if you scoff the belief in God long enough and hard enough. Sympathetic joy is the pinnacle of appreciating the light coming through another's stained glass window.

How do we get there? I think first we need each other. Such fruits are rarely obtained by oneself in isolation. As part of our efforts to help people renew within, our church will be providing opportunities to feed our existential hungers, the space to experiment safely and with trust, those answers to our big questions.

Fundamentally, though, the key to sympathetic joy is building connections to people beyond the superficial. So often UUs are comfortable behind rather intellectualized conversations and relationships. We need to risk moving beyond our comfort zones in order to truly make connections with others. You see this, for example, with groups like Open Circles. But I also see it in the UU Christians and the Godfrees. Deep loving connections of sympathetic joy are possible between people, regardless of belief or non-belief in God. We are fed regardless of having eaten chicken or steak. The point is that we work toward reaching the highest level of spiritual sophistication that we can.

To “Renew at First U” we must start at the retail level; with the individual. That is of course how the world is transformed, one person at a time. Whatever other grand plans we may fashion, either as a church or as a denomination, we can never lose sight of the fact that everything comes down to the individual who walks through our doors looking for spiritual nourishment, be it for the first time or the first thousand times. Unlike other place you may go, we do not have a one size fits all answer to the existential questions of life. Your spiritual

growth is not a spectator sport in Unitarian Universalism. Ours is an interactive faith where each of us must fashion for ourselves the answers so readily available to others. This can at times be frustrating when asked by a stranger what Unitarian Universalists believe, as if there were a cookie cutter answer. But we can be grateful that our free faith allows for uniqueness and creativity in answering the big questions like, who is God? We need not rely on that Charlton Heston in the sky. For when we do the work of renewal within, every answer becomes a source of our joy. May we never cease to ask and answer the big important questions of our lives. And may we always celebrate with others the answers that they find. Amen Blessed Be.