

"A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning"

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The Unitarian Universalist Association has, as most of us know, adopted a set of Seven Principles and Six Living Traditions, meant as a guide for our own individual spiritual journeys. Even if you have not attended a Unitarian Universalist Church for very long, or if it is your first time, you can familiarize yourself with these Principles and Traditions...they are printed on the back of your order of service.

This, as those of us steeped in UU tradition know, is as close to a collective creed as we come!

Of course, for many of us, some of the Principles are more important than others and the same for the Living Traditions. These are, as I have said, not hard and fast rules or creed, or dogma...they are merely a guide for us in our own individual spiritual journey.

Many of us, myself included, take some of these Principles and Traditions more seriously than others...some we even treat by rote. Today, I wish to speak about the fourth Principle...the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Until recently, this is one of the Principles that did not hold much meaning for me...it was one that I treated by rote. Recent events in my own life, however, have caused me to examine this Principle more seriously, and to begin my own actual search for truth and meaning.

And now it is time for my disclaimer. Throughout this sermon, I will be referring largely to Christianity, for this is the religion in which I was raised, and am therefore most familiar with, outside of UUism. Please do not take offense to anything I may say - it reflects only my own personal experiences...and do not take my failure to mention other religions as a slight...I am not nearly as familiar

with other religious traditions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. (insert your favorite here!)

I will need to use Christianity as my backdrop, simply because this is the religious tradition with which I am most familiar, and have the most experience with. I was born and raised a Roman Catholic, and, by age 14, I had lost the faith. I had lost the faith due to the disparity between the words and the actions of those who practiced my then faith. It is not my intention here to go into details about this, or to rail upon the Roman Catholic Church...or its adherents.

I'd best categorize my own "faith" as Agnostic, currently. One of the problems I have had with religion, over the years, is the mentality of most religions, what I call the "one size fits all" mentality espoused and practiced by most modern religions. Now, I am a woman, and I KNOW the lie of "one size fits all." I also cannot claim to be an Atheist. I'm not a strong person, spiritually. I find faith very hard to hold onto, especially during times of trial and tribulation. Yet, I feel that poster that used to hang in Fox Mulder's office in the popular TV series, The X-Files can sum up my spiritual experience: I WANT TO BELIEVE. I truly do want to believe. However, the question of just where to put your faith is one that I find to be of such profound importance, it is difficult to know where to place one's trust...especially if you have had your trust violated time and again by religion.

Two years ago, about a year and a half after my father's death, my mother became a born-again Christian. At first, I despaired on learning this, for I had been making great strides in her eventual acceptance of my transgender status. I feared all the progress I'd made towards her eventual acceptance would be undone by "well-meaning" Christians who would convince her that what I was doing was "wrong," "immoral," or just plain "against God."

It did not turn out as I had feared. Rather, my mother and I became much closer, and our relationship, as well as her new-found faith, helped her to overcome her grief over the loss of my father, and our ever-closer relationship actually caused my mother to move even more towards acceptance of me as her daughter. She seemed happier than she had at any time in her life. This intrigued

me enough that recently I began to take more seriously the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

To that end, I began with two parallel discussion threads on an Internet bulletin board. One was addressed specifically to agnostics and atheists, and the other was originally addressed to Christians, but I later changed it to "believers" because some people got upset with me for not including THEIR faith in my thread.

As anyone with Internet bulletin board/chat room experience knows, these threads can become quite rancorous, full of what we computer geeks call "flame wars." It seems so much easier to insult people when you are not staring them right in the face! Then, too, my threads were on a very volatile subject, and many people have a very large emotional investment in their own faith. So, in order to keep the discussion civil, I posted some rules for the discussion threads. These rules were: 1. No Scripture-quoting; 2. No proselytizing; 3.No flaming or personal attacks; and 4. Original thoughts only.

I made it clear with my initial posting to start the threads that I was not interested in WHAT people believed...only WHY they believed as they did. At first, I despaired of getting the type of discussion I was really looking for. No sooner than I had started the thread, I got a response from one I assume was a Christian: "Give it up, kid, I checked, your name is NOT written in the Book of the Lamb, no point wasting your time."

This bald assertion struck me with the physical force of a slap upside the head! Here I was, making an honest attempt to undertake a free and responsible search for truth and meaning...and to be rebuked for this...well, I didn't know what to think. What occurred to me, on reading that was...does this person have any idea what is required of him in his self-proclaimed faith? Christians, I believe, are charged to "spread the good news." Well, how is the above quote in any way spreading good news? In fact, as I thought more about it, it occurred to me that this was one of the major problems I have had with the Christian belief system, faith, religion, call it what you will! It may, or may not...have been that poster's

intent to convert me. Whatever his intent, it seemed to me decidedly non-Christian to post something like that...after all, it served to further alienate me from the possibility of God. In that respect, it was precisely the opposite of what the Bible said a Christian ought to be doing. And I wondered how a self-proclaimed Christian could do such a thing? Did he not understand what was expected of him in his self-proclaimed faith?

Or did he feel my question was SO threatening that he could only attack me for DARING to ask such questions?

And that brought on another thought: I really would have an impossible time acknowledging or worshipping any God who would create me with a high degree of intelligence, bestow upon me free will...and then be threatened by the questions I would ask...or forbid me asking such questions. I'd have a hard time with any Deity so threatened by my asking the kind of questions I was asking...especially seeing as I'm asking them in an effort to understand. I managed, after a time, to get a civil discussion going on these threads; by constantly gently reminding posters who'd stepped over the lines. Eventually, I was complimented by many posters to the threads that I had started the most interesting and relevant threads they'd seen yet on that Forum...and marveled that I had managed to maintain a civil discussion of religion...because, particularly on the Internet, civility is hard to maintain.

What I eventually found were a few common themes running through the threads. On the thread for "believers," no one was able to provide "proof" of God's existence, in the classical sense of empirical scientific evidence. What they did provide were a series of testimonials, and I'm grateful to those who shared, though I may never know them.

That got me thinking this way: It appears that if one takes the Bible merely at face value, reading nothing into it other than that it is a book, like all other books...well, the Gospels are nothing but testimonials. The Old Testament seems a frustrating, complex, and often-contradictory rulebook, and the New Testament seems an incomprehensible book of prophecy. The Gospels by the way, being

that they are testimonials, nevertheless, they read in a manner that I find quite incomprehensible.

The point is...a testimonial is "proof" only if you believe the person giving the testimonial. I've a difficult time doing this with the Bible, because of the contradictory nature of the Old Testament, and the incomprehensible manner in which the Gospels and New Testament are written. I was thus grateful of testimonials I got on the Believers thread, which were at least not written in an incomprehensible manner. They were in straightforward English, and in terms I could understand and relate to.

The Bible, in my opinion is largely very poorly written, in terms of readability, and is far too open to interpretation...or misinterpretation. It is, shall we say, ripe with potential for abuse. Couple this with the problem of translation through the millennia, and you may begin to understand why the Bible has a credibility problem for Atheists...or for Agnostics such as myself. And when the credibility is in question, the testimonials contained therein also suffer a credibility problem...that is why the personal testimonials on the Believers thread were so refreshing for me.

Some merely spoke of being afraid to NOT believe, and being then condemned to hell and damnation for eternity for not believing. Many of the believers spoke of losing the faith and then coming back to it, many admitted that it was during the hard times, the times of trial and tribulation, that they had lost their faith.

Perhaps the most amazing testimonial I got spoke of a friend, who as a child, had leukemia. Apparently, what happened was that this kid's grandfather had prayed for him, and asked God, if He would, to give HIM the leukemia, and allow his grandson to live. Shortly thereafter, the kid began getting better. The leukemia went into remission for no reason the doctors could explain. The grandfather began to take ill. When they tested his blood, it turned out HE was now had leukemia! If this story was true, that is powerful stuff!

One of the more interesting replies on the Believers thread was actually a Bible extract. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, of promises not yet kept. The one who relied in this manner continued on: While this is an extract from the Bible, it has a much broader application for me – it defines optimism and idealism and hope as well...that people will treat each other well. That the sun will come up tomorrow, that peace is possible.

While this did not really answer my questions, it does provide for a good lead-in to some of the replies I got on the Agnostic/Atheist thread.

In the Agnostic/Atheist thread, two common themes seemed to dominate. One common theme was the purely analytical, those seeking some sort of empirical scientific evidence. The other common theme was people who had once been believers, and, for one reason or another, began to question their faith...or otherwise felt alienated from their faith. Having said that, you may now understand why I made such an issue of the posting stating that my name was not listed in the book of the lamb! It served to further alienate me! It seems to me that most that attempt to convert others are REALLY BAD at it...they generally succeed only in further alienating those they would convert and I feel that it is largely a problem of approach.

Instead of coming with a message of peace, joy, and hope...they either condemn people who do not believe...expecting that this will somehow make them believe...or threaten them with eternal damnation if they fail to convert. It seems to me that both of those common approaches would only serve to further alienate people. I mean, come on! If you come to someone with a message as comforting as a crown of thorns, how likely are they to listen to you?

My measure of a person has always been their ACTIONS...not their WORDS. It seems to me it is easy for anyone to SAY they are (insert your faith here.) But do you walk what you talk? If not, you have a credibility problem in my eyes. This is entirely justifiable, even in terms of the Bible...for does it not say, "By their fruits, ye shall know them?"

Anyway, getting back, for a moment, to the Believers thread; I found many of the testimonials there to be very interesting and compelling. If these testimonials came from people I actually KNEW in real life, they might even serve to convert me. But I'm not really able to make a value judgment on any person merely by my contacts with them over the Internet.

As might be expected, in the Agnostic/Atheist thread, many related very bitter personal experiences with various religions.

While most of the Agnostics were merely seeking some sort of scientific evidence of the existence of God, the Atheists, on the other hand, almost uniformly had, and related, very bad personal experiences with religion. Many of them pointed out "flaws" in the "so obviously man-made religions." Most spoke bitterly of the notion that God had been created just to threaten others to "be good" or face eternal damnation. Many also claimed God was just a means to exercise "mind control" over the masses.

Most of the Atheists related times in which God had let them down. I resonated best to these stories, since many of them reflected my own personal experiences in one way or another...as I have had, myself, my share of very bitter experience with religion. Perhaps the most moving, for me, was one particular Atheist who railed against God: Where is God when the innocents die? Where is God when the innocents suffer? Where is God when the evil prosper? Where was God when my mother was dying? Where was God when I performed CPR on her for 22 minutes, only to have her die anyway?

Where was God when the paramedics arrived and could do nothing?

It is with all this in mind that I ask the following questions - and I'll admit they are tough questions!

- Can one accept a God yet reject any and all forms of organized religion?
- Can one accept a God yet reject all the dogma?

- Can one accept a God yet remain humble, not feeling or seeing himself superior to non-believers?
- Can one accept a God, yet be uncertain as to the name, nature, or desires of said God?
- Can one accept a God while not claiming to have a monopoly on "the Truth?"
- And also remain flexible enough to change your assumptions about the nature of, and desires of that god as you experience more?
- Can one accept a God and still ask these kinds of hard questions?
- Is it possible God (assuming he exists) does not see asking these questions as a threat, but as an honest attempt to seek and know the nature of God? Are we allowed to ask these questions? Are we ENCOURAGED to ask these questions?
- It seems to me that a truly benign God would not be threatened by this, for if he were truly benign, it seems that the asking of those questions would eventually lead one right back to the God in question.
- I could not accept a God that would not welcome or allow such questions to be asked. Not saying that I will accept GOD, or a God or any god...I remain open to the possibility...but the thing that keeps getting in my way is what I witness in men.
- What I witness, time and again, is the self-righteousness, the greed, the lies, the hypocrisy, the dogma, and the air of superiority that seems to go hand in hand with all religions.
- So again, for me, the main question is...Can I accept GOD or a God, while simultaneously rejecting all religions...and the dogma that goes along with them?
- In conclusion, I find that I could only accept a God who not only allowed...but also ENCOURAGED us to ask these sorts of questions. After

all, why ELSE would God have created us with a high degree of intelligence, and given us free will, if not to engage in a free and responsible search for truth & meaning?