

NOPE! ITS NOT FREEDOM, REASON AND TOLERANCE

(Unitarian Universalist Religious Lifestyle)

Lifestyle is living in a manner that reflects one's basic values and attitudes. In America, this reflection is generally a combination of class, politics and religion.

If you are a wealthy, republican, conservative Christian your lifestyle is going to be quite different from that of a poor, democrat, liberal Christian. Your values and attitudes will reflect those different combinations. The more radical the combination, the more radical the difference. We saw this played out quite graphically in the recent election. The average Texas Tea Party resident lives quite a different lifestyle than the average Colorado liberal mid valley resident. No doubt, this difference in lifestyle was reflected in how you voted.

Sometimes we can easier characterize the lifestyle of someone else than we can our self. For example, I suspect we can all characterize the lifestyle of the conservative Christian easier than we can characterize the lifestyle of the liberal Unitarian Universalist. This becomes clear when someone asks us to describe our religious identity.

For the past fifty years we Unitarian Universalists have been fond of a certain Trinitarian description of our religious lifestyle. This trinity is freedom, reason and tolerance. And we often recite this trinity when someone asks who we are. I respond to this oft repeated lifestyle characterization in two ways. First, I will state why I believe this trinity to be a misperception. And, second, I will state what I believe to be an adequate characterization of our religious lifestyle.

I begin with the notion of freedom. The intention in using this term is to suggest that we are dedicated to the right of each individual to arrive at their own beliefs without coercion. And this is true. We do not believe people must subscribe to a certain set of concepts in order for their lives to be redeemed.

On the other hand, neither do we own this lifestyle characteristic. Freedom is the birthright of the human mind. It's grounded in our ability to discern options and make choices. We sang a song the last time you and I gathered

together: Die Gedanken Sind Frie. It was sung by the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps during World War Two. The title means that the mind remains victoriously free. It means that our freedom to believe as we choose cannot be taken away from us no matter the nature of the coercion. It means we remain free to choose how we will respond to life circumstance no matter what it might be. And that is precisely why the inmates sang this song – to remind themselves that despite their horrific persecution they remained free to respond as they chose because freedom of mind was their birthright.

When I attended a Southern Baptist Seminary for my formal ministerial education, I was exposed to insights that, in my freedom, I chose to allow to shatter my conservative Christian beliefs. The other students were exposed to the same insights. Yet, out of my graduating class of some one hundred students, as far as I know, only two others responded to these insights in the same way as myself. While the three of us, in freedom, chose to change our beliefs – the others, in freedom, chose to retain theirs.

My mind was as free to choose my beliefs as a Southern Baptist as it is free to choose my beliefs as a Unitarian Universalist. Freedom is not a commodity. It is the gift of my humanness.

It may be that we sometimes confuse freedom of belief with the welcome of community. I am free to believe whatever I wish within the context of any community. However, if I choose beliefs that are not consistent with the values a community holds I may not be welcome there. And this is as true of Unitarian Universalists as it is of Southern Baptists. A Tea Party Christian would find it very difficult to feel fully accepted in this liberal Unitarian Universalist community. After all, there is valid reason why both groups have separate organizations. I did not leave the Southern Baptist religion because I was not free to believe as I wished. I left because the new beliefs I had chosen in freedom were no longer compatible or welcome in that religious community. Indeed, they were denounced as of the devil.

There are limits of welcome in every religious community. Anyone whose beliefs promote prejudice, hate, violence and degradation of other humans will not find a warm welcome in this Unitarian Universalist religious community. Such a person will be embraced as a worthy human being but their beliefs will be soundly rejected and a sense of any community of

commonality will not exist. The issue in this tension is not freedom of belief. The issue is welcome of belief.

The very soul of community bonding is those beliefs that are commonly held and which define a devotion to common values. In actuality, when someone joins a religious community it is a self-welcoming decision made because of a perception of commonality of beliefs reflected in a commonality of values. Freedom to believe as one chooses, then, is not unique to Unitarian Universalists. But it is the ground of welcoming membership in all religions.

It seems to me that it is critical for us to keep in mind that every act of freedom is also an act of bondage. As Kahlil Gibran concluded in his essay on freedom:

*And, thus, your freedom, when it loses its fetters
becomes itself the fetter of a greater freedom.*

When I break the bonds of one system of belief to enter the bonds of another system of belief it is an act of freedom. Yet, all I have done is enter a new system of belief boundaries. Every system of belief imposes boundaries on my attitudes and behaviors, whether that system is organized institutionally or not. And these new boundaries may shrink or enlarge my way of seeing. A set of beliefs is a box that prescribes what I will see or not see and what values will give guidance to my lifestyle. Just as I freely choose my bondage, I remain free within the bondage I choose. It is the paradox of freedom, without which I could not be free.

But this does not deny my freedom, rather, it affirms it. Freedom, then, is not an unrestrained float in space. It is the privilege of determining and maintaining the boundaries of my beliefs. Freedom is my capacity to determine my determiners.

So, if freedom is not the exclusive property of our Unitarian Universalist lifestyle, what might be a more accurate characteristic of our lifestyle? I suggest that a far better characterization is openness. Openness is our posture toward the universe that invites it to bless us with some new revelation of truth at any time it wishes. Denise Levertov captures this invitation in these words:

*Marvelous Truth, confront
us at every turn, in every
guise, iron ball, egg, dark
horse, shadow, cloud of
breath and air.*

*Dwell in our crowded hearts,
our steaming bathrooms, kitchens
full of things to be done,
the ordinary streets.
thrust close your smile
that we might know you,
terrible joy.*

What Levertov is inviting us to do is to open ourselves to the truth which even the most mundane has to offer. The implication is that there is nothing in the universe that cannot be a medium to convey a greater truth to us about our relationships and our living. And that when we so open ourselves the end result can be an evolution of knowing that is attended by a terrible joy. Terrible meaning overwhelming in its ecstasy.

Sometimes we have a problem with the whole issue of truth. We wonder how it is possible to be convicted of a truth and yet be open to having that truth surpassed by a new revelation. This is the paradox of openness. First, even if we arrive at a place of truth, it can never be fully known. It can only be known differently and more deeply over and over again.

And second, we participate in one of life's fundamental paradoxes. For those who choose openness as a lifestyle, conviction rests in the lap of this openness. All the while that I am living my beliefs in conviction and, literally betting my life on this conviction, I remain open to the possibility of some new revelation that might cause me to change the boundaries of my belief and shift the focus of my conviction. This is a happy tension for it expects to be surprised by joy at any moment.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us:

*A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little
minds....speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak
what tomorrow thinks in hard words,*

though it contradict everything you said today.”
(from Self Reliance)

Mohandas Gandhi put it this way:

My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at the given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth.

It is this paradox of conviction resting in the lap of openness that keeps me on the edge of my growth potential and the evolution of truth in my living.

Here is the bottom line. Everyone is free to believe what they wish, but everyone is not open to the evolution of belief that is only brought about by openness to new truth. In freedom, each of us chooses how open or closed to new truth we will be. As a religious community we have chosen openness as our lifestyle. And the great danger that always confronts us is not the loss of freedom but the loss of openness. If we have a sin it is in being content with where we are – in assuming that where we are is a place of finality.

The second word in our popular trinitarian litany of lifestyle characteristics is reason. This is normally stated as if only Unitarian Universalists use reason in their pursuit of truth – that all other religions are unreasonable because they do not believe the same as us. Actually, that is not only false it is rather arrogant.

Reason is that part of the mind's function that empowers us to create meaning from experience and give that meaning structures of logic. The error we often make in referring to reason is to assume that it floats freely in our mind without a frame of reference that calls it into being. The reality is that logic does not exist without a frame of reference upon which it can exercise itself. And the frame of reference for logic is always our belief system. Logic is our reason telling us whether something is consistent with our beliefs.

That is why two people can hold diametrically opposed views and both feel their view is logical. Their logic is simply utilizing diametrically opposed

sets of beliefs. Logic can prove nothing except whether or not our interpretation of experience is consistent with our beliefs.

My father was a Southern Baptist minister. At age sixty four he was killed in a head-on auto collision during a rainstorm, by a drunk driving on the wrong side of the road. The drunk driver, in his inebriated flexibility, survived the crash.

I had always been taught that when bad things happened to people it was either God's punishment for sin, God trying to get one's ear, or God testing one's faith. So, I asked my mother how she reconciled my father's death and the drunks survival with these possible interpretations, particularly in light of the fact that my father was diligent about living free of sin, listening to God's will, and, in death, he was beyond being tested. It was simple, she responded, without a moment's hesitation. It was because my father was saved and ready to go to heaven while the drunk was unsaved and unprepared to die. God had spared the drunk for another chance at salvation. Case closed.

The reason I even asked my mother this question was because I had already switched my belief system from Southern Baptist to Unitarian Universalist and my interpretation of logic was that the drunk's behavior was responsible for a good man's death and that life, at its core, is essentially unfair.

I assert that despite the radically different interpretations of the meaning of my father's death by myself and my mother, that the answers both of us gave were perfectly logical and consistent with our different belief systems. And no amount of additional reasoning would have caused either of us to change our interpretation. I also assert that our belief systems are based on faith while our logic is based on our belief system.

Therefore, reason is not the exclusive property of Unitarian Universalists. It is the property of every human mind. Like freedom, it is a birthright.

As Nietzsche reminded us:

Reason is only a tool.

And as Vaugenargues suggested:

Reason deceives us more often than nature.

Or, to put it in the words of Ashley Montague:

Human beings are the only creatures who are able to behave irrationally in the name of reason

When I try to assess what caused me to shift my system of belief from that of conservative Christian to that of liberal Unitarian Universalism, here is what I come up with. It was not that my old beliefs were illogical, rather, it was that they could no longer account for the new information and experience I was encountering. And, while my reason told me, if given time, it would figure out how to accommodate this new information and experience into my beliefs, my intuition kept telling me that my old beliefs were simply inadequate. And when I followed my intuition and opened to a new set of beliefs, it was these new beliefs that declared my old ones to be illogical. Intuition told me what I needed to believe in order to accommodate to this new revelation and reason, then, affirmed the validity of my intuition.

Miguel De Unamuno knew that, while reason was a valued gift, it also had its limitations. Here is his insight.

The supreme triumph of reason, the analytical faculty, is to cast doubt upon its own validity.

Reason is only one half of the mind's gift to humans. The other half is intuition. Intuition empowers us to jump past the limitations of reason to connect with the spirit or essence of something. Thus, it is the ground of our most profound experiences, such as love and communion. In the last fifty years, the secular world has come to recognize that all top notch corporate executives rely as heavily on intuition in decision making as they do on reason. In addition, intuition is a primal pathway of revelation for those products that bless our living and our spirits such as art and science.

Moreover, our answers to the compelling questions of human existence that reside in mystery can only be given through faith and faith is grounded in intuition. These answers of faith are the filter through which we push our

experience in order to create meaning. They make up our belief system, our view of reality. Thus, intuition is the very heart of how we create reality.

The bottom line is that all which is profound, all that moves us spiritually and all that is meaningful in human experience roots in intuition. What reason does is organize these things so we can be consistent in our living, communicate our thoughts and feelings, socialize in compatibility and live beyond chaos. Thus, reason is not, and never has been, an end to itself. Rather, it is a tool for achieving those goals of living consistent with our beliefs.

Therefore, reason as a description of our religious lifestyle is simply inadequate. It omits half of that gift of the universes that defines our humanity. That which best describes our style is mind-fullness – the use of both reason and intuition and a deep appreciation for how their integrated roles not only makes our living possible but blesses it with meaning and profoundness. Mind-fullness is that state of being in which the universe intended us to live and which opens us to the greatest possible truth. Mind-fullness is that gift of the universe that distinguishes between humans and the rest of creation.

The third popular characteristic in our misguided trinity is tolerance. Tolerance is the state of tolerating. And to tolerate means to put up with or bear up under. It denotes an action that is distasteful but necessary. It is this word that we normally use to affirm the right of people to hold to differing belief systems without being denigrated or persecuted for such holding. In brief, it is intended to state that we value the right to differ in our views of reality.

However, many inappropriate attitudes may hide behind this term. One example is a lack of passion toward one's own beliefs. As Alexander Chase puts it:

The peak of tolerance is most readily achieved by those who are not burdened with conviction.

Tolerance may be nothing more than apathy dressed up as noble ideal.

But, more importantly, tolerance fails to describe the reality of our religious experience. We may respect the right of people to believe differently, yet, we are determinedly intolerant of many attitudes and behaviors that are spawned by beliefs that differ from ours. And we are grossly intolerant of many beliefs that are our opposites. We are very intolerant of attitudes of racial and class superiority and prejudice, of hateful beliefs toward alternative sexual lifestyles, of male and female chauvinism, of the abuse and torture of other humans, of wars that indiscriminately kill innocent victims, of undemocratic attitudes and actions.

We are intolerant of beliefs that heap disrespect upon people and deny them their civil rights. We are intolerant of attitudes that are divisive and punitive toward unbelievers. We are intolerant of beliefs that place people in various forms of social bondage. The list is endless. Let's face it. We are not all that tolerant. Indeed, we are quite intolerant – and rightfully so because our beliefs require such a response.

If this were not the case then people in our movement would not be on the cutting edge of all of those social reforms that call for radical action.

The word tolerance is both inadequate and misleading as a description of our religious lifestyle. The great religious leaders of history have all expressed intolerance toward both beliefs and behaviors that violated their teachings. And like these leaders, our tolerance is selective rather than encompassing.

A word that is more to the point in describing our lifestyle is reverence. Reverence denotes a sense of sacredness toward life. It describes a commitment to values which enhance the quality of living for all people even if acting on these values requires being intolerant toward the religious behaviors of others. Moreover, reverence generates both anger and determined action over its violations.

Think of the reverence that is depicted in the stories about Jesus. On the one hand he was forgiving toward human weakness while at the same time being grossly intolerant of human hypocrisy. He forgave the publican while driving the Pharisees out of the Temple. Please note I said publican, not republican.

There is nothing milk toast or weak-hearted about reverence. It is both full of humility and compassion while being courageously outraged and active. Jesus loved his enemies while being totally intolerant toward their behaviors and attitudes.

The reverence I speak of is not limited to relationships with other humans. It encompasses our relationship with the universe as well. And it calls for us to extend our sense of worth and caring in this direction as well as toward other humans. After all, humans are only a reflection of the whole. Everything that exists is made of the same stuff. Reverence toward one part requires reverence toward all parts. Within this reverence we understand the universe to be an indifferent food chain while, simultaneously, seeing it as the holy ground of our very existence. This is another of the grand paradoxes of our living – the necessity of holding the universe’s indifference and holiness together in our perception of reality.

We could use the word respect. But respect is not a strong enough word. It does not denote this paradox or the profound commitment to its well-being that reverence demands. It is reverence that announces life as holy. So, tolerance, no! Reverence, yes!

These three words best convey the meaning and significance of our religious lifestyle, a lifestyle that roots in our system of beliefs – openness, mindfulness and reverence. It is this trinity that reflects our religious lifestyle. It is this trinity that drives us toward the nobility of which we are capable as humans. It is this trinity that we must model if we are to impact the world around us.

Openness, Mindfulness, Reverence: repeat them with me three times.
(Repeat)

Let this be our daily mantra. Amen.

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