

The Loudest Voice

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

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Reading - "The Promise and Paradox of Community" By Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellnor-Rogers

Life takes form as individuals that immediately reach out to create systems of relationships. These individuals and systems arise from two seemingly conflicting forces: the absolute need for individual freedom, and the unequivocal need for relationships. In human society, we struggle with this tension. But in nature, successful examples of this paradox abound and reveal surprising treasures of insight.

Life's first imperative is that it must be free to create itself. This freedom is so much a part of life that biologists advise that we can never direct a living system, we can only hope to get its attention. Life accepts only partners, not bosses, because self-determination is its very root of being.

Life's second great imperative propels individuals out from themselves to search for community. Life is systems-seeking; there is the need to be in relationship, to be connected to others. *Independence* is not a concept that explains the living world. It is only a political concept we've invented.

Evolution progresses from these new relationships, not from the harsh and lonely dynamics of survival of the fittest. If we look at the evolutionary record, it is *cooperation* that increases over time. This cooperation is spawned from a fundamental recognition that one cannot exist without the other, that it is only in relationship that one can be fully one's self.

As systems form, the paradox of individualism and connectedness becomes clearer. Individuals are figuring out how to be together in ways that support themselves. They do not act from a blinding instinct for self-preservation. Nor do they act as passive recipients of someone else's demands. They are never forced to change by others or the environment. But as they choose to change, the "other" is a major influence on their individual decisions. The community is held in the awareness of the individual as that individual exercises its freedom to respond.

Over time, individuals become so intermeshed in this process of co-evolving that it becomes impossible to distinguish the boundary between self and other, or self and environment. There is a continual exchange of information and energy between all neighbors, and a continuous process of change and adaptation everywhere in the system.

As a system forms from such co-evolutionary processes, the new system provides a level of stability and protection that was not available when individuals were isolated. And new capacities emerge in individuals and the system overall. Communities increase the capacity and complexity of life over time.

Human communities have difficulty embracing the inherent paradox of these needs. We reach to satisfy one at the expense of the other. Very often the price of belonging to a community is to forfeit one's individual autonomy and self-expression. In the most restrictive communities, our need for freedom creeps in around the edges, or moves us out of the community altogether. We give up the meaningful

life that can only be discovered in relationship with others for a meaningless life that at least we think is ours.

An African proverb says "Alone, I have seen many marvelous things, none of which are true."

What we can see from our pursuit of loneliness is the terrible price exacted for such independence. We end up in deep, vacant places, overwhelmed by loneliness and the emptiness of life.

In human communities, the conditions of freedom and connectedness are kept vibrant by focusing on what's going on in the heart of the community.

What called us together? What did we believe was possible together that was not possible alone? What did we hope to bring forth by linking with others?

These questions invite in both our individuality and our desire for relationships. If we stay with these questions, we can create communities that thrive in the paradox.

Sermon – “The Loudest Voice” – By Gretchen Haley

On my Facebook feed recently, there was this article about how people who watch Fox News are actually *less* informed about events in the world than they would be if they watched nothing at all.¹ Did you see it? Viewers were “18 points less likely to know Egyptians overthrew their government” than people who watched no news at all. I find this fascinating, that information could actually create *less* knowledge rather than more.

It made me think of the story Nicolette shared, the old fable of the blind men trying to describe an elephant. Every one of them thought they knew everything about that elephant, but really, they just knew a part. And knowing that part in isolation made them totally wrong. Maybe I’m being generous to apply that story to Fox News viewers. Maybe it would be better to acknowledge they aren’t even touching the elephant. Which is, ironic, I suppose.

In today’s world, it’s hard to imagine *anyone* making a claim of being able to describe the whole truth - the whole elephant. There’s so much information out there, so many voices claiming what’s true and what’s right, and so many different and often conflicting studies, different cultures and value systems accessible to us – no matter how diligent we may be, it seems pretty clear that we only have a piece of the truth.

And yet, interestingly, it feels like that’s just what a lot of folks would like to do – claim that they’ve got it. Politicians, news reporters, community organizers, ministers. Our neighbors and friends; sons and daughters. They’ve got it all figured it out, regardless of what “it” is. And then, once they’ve got it, then they work hard to convince everyone around them that their way is the best way. The search for truth in today’s “information-rich” world mostly can feel like a contest for whose voice is the loudest and most tenacious – regardless of whether those voices are actually true, or right, or good.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/21/fox-news-viewers-less-informed-people-fairleigh-dickinson_n_1106305.html

Though the potential sources for truth are newly extreme, the questions of how we know what we know, and to what we grant authority for discerning the truth are age-old, beginning with a debate about the reliability of a serpent claiming he knew which were the best fruits to eat. Or at least, beginning then if you grant a certain kind of authority to a certain book of scripture.

And for a long time, at least in Euro-Western history, people did. Between the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and the tradition and leadership of the Christian church, you had most of what you needed to know. Which was somewhat problematic and, well, life-threatening, if your life reflected something other than the truths espoused by such authorities. If you were, say, Jewish, or Muslim. Or an outspoken woman who refused to claim religious revelation as a source of power. Or...anything else outside the “truth” as found in these sources of authority.

The Rise of Science in the 18th and 19th centuries changed all that. Science and reason gained cultural currency as sources of legitimate authority. Philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant solidified what’s known as the “turn to the self,” by asserting that the only legitimate source of knowledge, the only source really worthy of us granting it authority, is our own experience. We can only trust what we’ve seen, what we’ve known, what our experience tells us is true. We are the best sources of authority.

Reason, or revelation; scripture, or science. Tradition, or personal experience; wise teachers or intuition. All these are possible answers to – *How do we know what we claim to know? What are our sources of authority, of ultimate knowledge and meaning-making? And when these sources come in conflict, how do we decide which ones take priority?*

Philosophers call this the field of epistemology. In addition the things I’ve already named, you might also include testimony from a trusted source, societal norms, culture, authority figures, and personal relationships as possible answers to this question of what holds authority in our search for truth and meaning. There may be others, but I think I got most of them.

In a class I taught once, we explored our answers to this question of what we grant authority. Without specifics, almost everyone in the room said science, reason, and personal experience. Did I mention these were Unitarian Universalists?

Then, we turned to some very specific statements, a few of which I’m going to share with you. And as I did in my class, I’ll ask that you try not to focus on whether you think these statements are true or false, whether you agree or disagree. Just consider how you’d decide whether they were true or false. Here they are.

1. Sugar causes teeth to decay. (Not whether it’s true - just how do you decide?)
2. The ideal nuclear family includes one mom and one dad. (How do you know?)
3. Extraterrestrial life exists.
4. Your parents love you.
5. Churches should govern themselves.
6. Christmas lights need to come down by New Year’s Day. (I know, that one’s obvious.)

So, what are your sources of authority? If you're like my class, I'm guessing it's more than just science, reason, and personal experience.

Officially, Unitarian Universalists claim six sources – starting with direct and personal experience- there's the Enlightenment influence; but then also, words and deeds of prophetic women and men; and wisdom from all the world's religions; fourth, Jewish and Christian teachings, which is where scripture would fall; five, humanist teachings, and there's the guidance of reason; and finally, spiritual teachings of earth-centered religions and the teachings of the natural world.

Some Unitarian Universalists have suggested we should add a seventh source – and specifically name the Unitarian Universalist tradition and history. I agree, but I wouldn't stop there - I'd add an eighth (though you might say it's *implied* by the Unitarian Universalist tradition and history). It's a source that's hinted at by our third principle - encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. But it's one that becomes *unavoidable* in a world where we realize we're all blind men holding a piece of the elephant.

In a world where we realize that truth in isolation is not truth; and where life outside the context of relationship is not life. You probably guessed already. My proposed eighth source of authority would be, the gathered community. The community who has promised to walk together, in right relationship, in mutual obligation. The community as it has been, as it is, as it yet may be. The relationships we have committed ourselves to, the good of the whole, the wholeness of us all, the health of our relationships, the kindness we show each other, the hospitality, and the gifts we share. Without being a part of such a community, truth is not fully discernable, and life is less than whole.

To return to the Enlightenment for a moment, the 18th Century philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher made a similar argument. At the time, he was the only one in his posse of German philosophers still claiming a religious identity. His peers had all decided religion was passé, un-enlightened - particularly because of its tendency to squelch individual autonomy in favor of doctrinal alignment. They didn't agree that a person needed to go to church to figure out the truth, they could do it all on their own. In today's terms, you might say they were spiritual, but not religious.

So Schleiermacher made five speeches to his buddies. The equivalent of five youtube videos today – or five tweekchats perhaps. He called his series, *On Religion, To Its Cultured Despisers*. (Just as a side note, you might find it interesting that in his early speeches, he used the term "Infinite" or "Ultimate" rather than God. In his later speeches – I think once he thought he'd effectively redefined his terms, he re-introduced God – and some other terms he'd been setting aside early on to avoid confusion.)

In his second speech he laid out his vision – a vision of an entirely different understanding of religion than was common in Europe at the time. He called it "pure religion." Maybe you recognize the term from Emerson and the Transcendentalists – Schleiermacher was an influence – he is after all, considered the father of liberal theology.

In his "pure religion" a person doesn't go to church to get the truth from some external authority. The individual first experiences an *intuition* of a greater truth. And then, because each person's experience

and understanding is limited, the person goes to church to share this sense of truth with others, and to expand their piece through interaction, and dialogue.

Margaret Wheatley would say – here begins the co-evolutionary process. Individuals come together into a single gathered community. Individuals, with their particular pieces of the whole shape one another, grow each other. And, as she says: “There is a continual exchange of information and energy between all, and a continuous process of change and adaptation everywhere....New capacities emerge in individuals and the system overall. Members develop new talents and new abilities as they work out relationships with others. Both individuals and systems grow in skill and complexity.”

Critical to a meaningful use of the gathered community as a source of knowledge and authority - is the presence of diversity. The more diversity the better. The more places where our individuality and self-expression meet up with the boundaries of another individual and their self-expression, the more possibility for “exchange, and growth, as an individual person chooses to respond to another.”

This is why one of my UU minister colleagues, makes it a practice to bring to her congregation voices she believes they’ll disagree with. Or why we might gauge our success as a religious community by how often we feel uncomfortable with what the minister is saying, how often we hear a story from our neighbor that feels strange and challenging, and how capable we are of receiving one another’s difference in celebration, and joy. All these would be indicators of opportunities for exchange, for co-evolution.

A number of you were in the Bright and Spirited Path class a couple months ago when one of our attendees shared about calling a prayer line as a way of growing in spirit and seeking spiritual support. The prayers on the other end of the line said to our friend when she asked for their help – are you ready to receive Jesus into your heart?

In response, she said, *ok, sure, let’s try that.*

The class laughed, and I thought, how Unitarian Universalist! To just see what happens when we try things on that at first might seem uncomfortable – to see what new thing might be possible.

Now, diversity is not without limits in a community. Healthy diversity draws a boundary at those perspectives that would suppress diversity itself. Fundamentalists can be found at all ends of the spiritual spectrum – and in all cases dogmatism and the fear it generates derails truth-seeking in community, and instead keeps people on edge.

But in that space between stifling conformity and so much diversity that even fascism becomes a legitimate perspective –there lies our path as a gathered community. As Wheatley says, “As connections proliferate and the system weaves itself into existence, boundaries,” between individuals become the precise location of interchange, deepened relationship, and mutual growth. There, the community becomes a source of knowledge, a source of authority. Not because this gathered community has a single answer or a single truth, or that everyone in a system agrees – that would be the opposite of what I’ve described. But because a larger truth emerges out of healthy interaction in a

diverse community, that the health and flow of a given system creates life, creates truth – in ways simply not possible without it.

Deep and real dialogue in this kind of diverse community often feels pretty dangerous, because it opens us open to real change, to real growth. As people who embrace the promise and paradox of human community, our congregations bravely counter the culture’s tendency to conflate self-determination and autonomy with the whole truth or the best and realest life. We affirm both the inherent worth and dignity of *every individual and the interdependent web of all life*. With each new member, our covenant must be renewed, as we realize anew how many marvelous ways there are to truth, how marvelous are the ways of life.

Embracing this paradox as a source of truth means we’ll encounter difference and disagreement – a lot. We’ll disagree about words and what words mean. We’ll find we have all different reasons for why we show up on a Sunday morning. We’ll realize we hold different understandings about how the world works, and our particular purpose on this earth. Some of us will love that the minister’s a young, queer white woman, and a mother of young children. Some of us wish there was a minister with more experience, or long for a time when we had multiple speakers. And some of us will think none of those things matter if the minister would just stop calling herself a preacher, and the things she does, prayer.

These sorts of differences can be frightening, and our very human impulse is to avoid them. To try and make them go away by not talking about them, or hoping we can just find better common ground. Or, instead, we might just excuse ourselves, leave the community entirely, go it alone. In any of these, we end up cutting off the unnamed but potentially most important source of authority to Unitarian Universalism – the gathered community. For the gathered community to be a source of truth and life – and the elephant story and Margaret Wheatley and our principles, and pretty much the whole of our tradition and history all indicate it must be – for the gathered community to work, we need these differences. We need to meet them with openness and consider, how might they be asking us to grow? What do they have to teach us? These differences are our congregation’s strength and our possibility. They are the heart of our faith.

But to navigate these sometimes scary differences safely, we also need to return to the questions Margaret Wheatley poses - *What called us together? What did we believe was possible together that was not possible alone? What did we hope to bring forth by linking with others?*

These are living questions that change and grow as we change and grow – which means they are questions we should talk about often and in many different ways.

For today, I invite us to consider one answer. It’s the answer you all recited earlier in the service, the answer you recite every Sunday. *Love is the Spirit of this Church.*

What called us together? *Love.*

What did we hope to bring forth? *Love.*

What did we believe was possible? *Love.*

So that when we encounter these marvelous differences, we can remember that our hopes in coming together with others in all their strange and surprising differences – was to grow love. Grow love in ourselves, grow love in the world. Not to convince each other we've got the truth, or to be the biggest or the loudest voice in the room, but to encounter one another in all our diversity, in all our different pieces of the truth, and to use that opportunity to grow love. So that *love* could be the loudest and lasting voice.

Love is the spirit of this church.

As it is in our community, so may it be in our lives, and so may it be in the world.

Blessed be, and amen.