

Why I am a Unitarian Universalist By Dick Furbush

The considerations that led me to leave the Congregational Church in the late 1960s and to join a Unitarian Universalist church are much the same as those that led the members of many Congregational churches, early in the 19th century, to transform themselves into Unitarian churches by votes of their members.

In searching for words that express the rationale for this transfer of allegiance, I have reviewed a little pamphlet many of us have read. It is by Dr. Jack Mendelsohn, who at one time served as minister of this society, and it is entitled "Meet the Unitarians and Universalists." He says:

“To us, creating a religious way of life is far too important to be left to the propounders of creeds and dogmas.

“We become Unitarian Universalists not by substituting one confession of faith for another, but by opening our minds to receive truth and inspiration from every possible source.

“The most fundamental of all our principles, then, is individual freedom of religious belief--the principle of the free mind.”

I had been born into, and had grown up happily enough in, the Congregational Church. My recollection is that both of the local churches where I was a member up through college years were liberal in thought and not very rigid in theology. Perhaps I was not then overly critical, but at least that was the impression I received.

After World War II, however, during the 15 years I was a member of a third Congregational church, and about the time the Congregationalists became part of the United Church of Christ, the neo-orthodox movement took over. At least that was the cause to which I attributed the growing sense I had that I was having to remind myself continually of the symbolic character of the words I was hearing and the ceremonies in which I took part.

In contrast, when Elinor and I began occasionally to visit a Unitarian church, I found its freedom from dogma, its reliance upon reason rather than revelation, and the complete freedom of belief it welcomed, to be more congenial to me.

In the pamphlet I have mentioned, Jack Mendelsohn quotes John P. Marquand as saying:

“As Democracy is man’s freest form of social life so is Unitarianism the freest religious life, and like Democracy, the Unitarian religion depends upon the separate thinking of every Unitarian to give it significance and vitality.”

In the first passage I read from Mendelsohn's pamphlet, he says that "Unitarian Universalists . . . receive truth and inspiration from every possible source." I can recall several examples of this variety of inspiration already this month.

First, I recall that, on the first Sunday of the new year, when Bill Bryan read aloud the names of our members who had died in the past year, Sylvia Appelbaum very movingly spoke the memorial prayer used in the Reform Jewish Memorial Service. Lois has now reprinted that prayer in the Angle. It reads:

"The departed whom we now remember
Still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed,
And in the hearts of those who cherish their memory.
May the beauty of their lives
Abide among us as a loving benediction."

And then last Sunday Dr. Westwood spoke on the Style of Unitarian Universalism. In that sermon he cited the concepts expressed by the Jewish theologian Martin Buber in his book *I and Thou*.

Dr. Westwood also quoted from the work of the Jesuit theologian and paleontologist, Pèrre Teilhard de Chardin.

These are examples from two Sundays. If you turn, however, to the Notes at the back of Peter Fleck's book *The Mask of Religion*, you will find a fine example of the wide range of the sources that prime the pump of his inspiration. They range from Archibald MacLeish and e. e. cummings to James Luther Adams and Paul Tillich, from Loren Eiseley and J. Robert Oppenheimer to Erich Fromm and Viktor Frankl, and from Hermann Hesse to Albert Camus.

I have read a little from the works of most of those authors. But I have not read anything from many of Peter's sources. And certainly, even from what I have read, I have not gained the insights that Peter has.

That is what I like about Unitarian Universalism. Its choosing from many sources and its openness are a constant challenge. That is why I am now a UU. I may not respond fully to the challenge, but it is always there. It makes me realize now intellectually lazy I am, and that is humbling. It is good to be humbled at least once a week.

Ellie Furbush read this essay, written by Dick some time ago, at our service on September 18, 2005. In July 2005, Dick passed away. Publishing his words here is but a small and humble tribute to his memory, but also a generous gift to pass on to the rest of us.

Thank you, Ellie, for sharing this wonderful inspiration with us.