

A Living Tradition

Rev. Craig M. Nowak
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
October 22, 2023

Hang around most UU (Unitarian Universalist) churches long enough and you're bound to hear someone, usually the minister, quote Lewis Fisher, dean of Ryder Divinity School in Chicago, a one time Universalist seminary, who wrote, "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move."

Nearly a century later, Fisher's words still appeal to today's Unitarian Universalists as a way to capture the dynamic, evolutionary nature of religious liberalism, not to mention our faith's penchant for social activism. Indeed, I've often felt that sense of movement as progress that Fisher's words imply when engaged in social action whether marching in Black Lives Matters protest, co-leading an interfaith domestic violence vigil, or rallying support within a congregation to launch a coffee house for LGBTQ youth.

Yet, if you've been in UU (Unitarian Universalist) circles long enough to have heard Fisher's declaration that we, as a faith, move, you're almost certain to have also heard the exhortation of one of Fisher's famous contemporaries, the Universalist minister Olympia Brown, who as we heard and read together, said, "Stand by this faith."

And I feel this sentiment at work in me too as I appeal to the authority of Unitarian Universalism's various historic sources, am inspired by the words and deeds of our wonderfully and woefully human forbearers, and in learning about and carrying forward practices and rituals near and dear to the congregations I've served.

So which is it, do we move or stand?

It's an interesting question because there are churches that are criticized and congregants and clergy in those churches who criticize them for either being too concerned with standing or too committed to moving. The former said to mimic a private club and the latter to resemble a political action committee.

Do we move or do we stand?

It's a question that both excites and angers people. A question that can spark heartfelt, if difficult debates and enflame resentments and division. It can even sew the seeds of apathy and drive people away.

Although phrased as an either/or question, suggesting one is preferable to the other, to my mind the question invites reflection rather than demanding or even suggesting a definitive response one way or the other.

Reflection requires we hold the question in creative tension, seeking not an answer once and for all, but a deeper appreciation of two seemingly contradictory positions.

I often find I reflect best on these kinds of question when they're held loosely in my mind while my body is engaged in some other activity, like walking. And indeed, some time ago, while walking a trail along a river, I came to a bend in the river where the flow of the water was split because of a large rock standing in the center. Pausing to watch the water flow around this rock, I began to think about how this rock has likely been there for years and years, standing firm as the changing waters of the river pass around it, sometimes gently, and other times with great force and fury.

Later, sitting in my Zen garden at home, staring at a statue of the Buddha, my attention began to shift back forth between the statue and the water of the pond behind it rippling in the wind, forming, over time, a single image of stability and movement.

In saying "Stand by this faith.", Olympia Brown preaches a law of spiritual gravity, that is, the importance of roots, of having a foundation, anchor, ballast....whatever metaphor you like....to ground or provide a measure of stability in the midst of constant change. And that is the faith to which we she refers and upon which everything else associated with that faith stands. Like the statue of the Buddha in my Zen garden or the flaming chalice here beside me. As symbols, they stand, spiritually speaking, not on their own accord, but upon the tradition and teachings they represent.

But even as she'd have us stand by this faith, Brown doesn't suggest we stand still. She also said, "Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation."

Brown reminds us while the foundation that is our faith may provide a measure of stability, it doesn't grant us immunity from the changes of time, nor the responsibilities, at times, of challenging ourselves and changing our practices.

And so Lewis Fisher, Brown's contemporary, preaches a law of spiritual detachment when he insists we do not stand, but move. His words remind us not to confuse rigid attachment with stability. Indeed, history teaches us standing by one's faith does not mean refusing to move. If anything, moving is sometimes the only way to truly stand by our faith. A point made in our first reading from Heraklitos this morning.

Remember we were once an avowedly Christian denomination, open perhaps to varying theologies so long as they were still rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And recall

that women, people of color, differently abled, and sexual minorities, myself included, were not always welcomed into our ministry and at times, not even our pews.

Indeed, like the rock in the river, our faith has not merely stood entrenched as the waters of time have passed, it has witnessed, shaped, and been shaped by them. Holding, in creative tension the impulse to stand or move, our faith has invited reflection and responsiveness to changing times. As Unitarian Universalist minister Judith Meyer writes,

*This is what we do with our faith:
Live in this world knowing that we will lose each other,
loving despite the hard bargain it demands of us,
doing what we can so that truth may be safely lived,
measuring our faith by the difference we have made,
building up faith communities to continue after we are gone.*

Meyer describes a dynamic, but enduring faith not a static one bound to a particular age. This is what makes Unitarian Universalism a living tradition. And as it has been, it will continue be our rooted responsiveness rather than our defensive reactivity or rigidity in the face of change that will determine whether or not we endure.

Statistical data on the state of religion in the United States has long suggested future challenges to the endurance of faith communities amidst rapid social and generational shifts. In March of 2020, that future arrived in the form of a global pandemic. Since then, I've asked the congregations I was then serving, the ministerial search committee for SUUS (Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society) last year, as well as Rev. Jade and Rev. Terry what one word they would use to describe their faith community since the pandemic hit. These are some of the answers I received from those UU's (Unitarian Universalists): "Close; connected; resilient; effective; responsible; hopeful; scrambling; thankful; progressive; community; courageous, supportive."

Answers which suggest both stability and movement. I'm glad for that. For a church that only stands, stands only for itself and a church that only moves gets nowhere fast. So, stand or move?

This time in which we live, so charged with anxiety, economic uncertainty, war, angry and hopeful protests for justice, calls us, as every age prior not to choose one or the other, but to affirm both.

Stand. Stand by this faith.
And move. Move in response to the agonies of this age.

And remember, SUUS (Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society) does not stand on its own accord, but upon the long tradition, sources, and teachings of our faith. When we

recognize, honor, and appeal to the values, relationships, and Association that binds us, we affirm as did those Universalists and Unitarians, who upon the vote to merge in 1961 sang together, “As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to seek the sea, our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be free...”

And just as SUUS (Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society) does not stand of its own accord, it neither moves of its own accord. It moves by you, its members and friends, living this tradition and its teachings, this faith, into being, responsive to changing times. Just as the Unitarian and Universalist Youth, who at their Continental Convention some eight years before the 1961 merger initiated by the adults, lifted their voices together in song, singing, “We would be one in building for tomorrow a nobler world than we have known today.”

You, by showing up today, undeterred by the challenges of an unfamiliar opening hymn this morning, inviting each others joys and sorrows, turning toward, not away from the pain of a hurting world, you continue to stand by this faith, nurturing a measure of stability as we also seek to move in service to the larger community beyond our walls, living together our living tradition.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be