

To Get, Or To Grow

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

June 8, 2025

The Rev. Craig M. Nowak

It is a sad state of affairs that our current political climate is such that I'm grateful to have a vomit emoji at my disposal to respond to almost any text or story about the cult of cruelty presently masquerading as a government of, by, and for the people.

Depending on your temperament ...and stomach, you too may find the constant flow of bile and excrement cheaply dressed in the garments of policy and executive orders nauseating, infuriating, and occasionally so absurd as to be laughable. I confess that I transition between these various responses from day to day and sometimes hour to hour depending on what is making headlines on a given day.

But what I find truly insufferable...and this may surprise some of you to hear from your minister...who believes firmly in the prophetic role of religion in civil society...what I find most offensive in the political discourse of this nation, and have for a while, is the use or rather the misuse of religion by politicians, the media, and religious leaders themselves.

The sad truth is religion is too often yet another shallow talking point which seems to energize some, anger others, and scare the hell out of just about everyone else.

And I can understand why. Over the last decade or so we've heard Christian candidates say Muslims shouldn't be allowed to be president. We've watched influential religious leaders engage in staggering feats of intellectual and theological gymnastics to justify support for a candidate- now president- who would have their tradition's prophets, including Jesus himself, arrested and deported. But hey, he gave them some politically useful Supreme Court justices. And we've seen candidates even claim supporters of their opponent hate God.

Now, to be clear, I don't begrudge a candidate or politician the right to talk openly about the importance of their faith while serving or campaigning for office. But overt religious bigotry, brazen hypocrisy and just plain asinine assertions leveled at or by politicians, candidates, supporters and opponents for political gain begs the question, what exactly is religion for?

Now, if you were to ask that very question of my father, he'd likely respond, "Religion? Religion's good for nothing." And he might well add, "Religion does more harm than good in the world." Now, I imagine he'd likely exempt Unitarian Universalism from that assertion, not because he's a Unitarian Universalist. He's most definitely not. But he has seen its impact on my life and, by all measure, it has done more good than harm.

Which raises an important point. Religion is often blamed as a source, and sometimes THE source of humanity's many ills. But is religion itself the problem? And if not, what is?

Carl Jung, known to the world as the founder of analytical psychology, was also an avid student of religion. Jung suggested, "the problems of the world are not caused by faith; they are caused by the lack of authenticity and openness in faith..."

This lack of breadth and depth in faith which is unfortunately promoted within many communities of faith themselves, and what troubles me about the use of religion as a political tool, is reminiscent of the predicament of the blind people in the Jain story that was our story for all ages this morning. Their refusal to acknowledge anything but their own experience as valid is the true source of their blindness, for in defending their view; they exhaust the energy needed to plumb its depths. Their lives then, are sustained not by the living waters of faith, but drowned in a stagnant wading pool of folly.

Contrast this with Mary Oliver's invitation to not only look, but to engage. Her poem begins, "Every year the lilies are so perfect I can hardly believe..." The experience is one of awe and wonder. Later she asks, "But what in the world is perfect?" And a new and deeper reality begins to set in.

Things previously unnoticed come into view. "I bend closer and see", she writes, "how this one is clearly lopsided- and that one wears an orange blight – and this one is a glossy cheek half nibbled away- and that one is a slumped purse full of its own unstoppable decay."

What is going on here?

Through the poem Oliver traces an unfolding spiritual journey. From the poet's first religious experience of life's wonder through her transition away from religious fervor and certainty towards a mature faith. A faith that evolves over time. A faith that both gives attention to and embraces the particular while it also cultivates and lifts up awareness of the universal. It is this experience of multiplicity, within unity, that religion, given room to grow, speaks to us and calls us to bear witness through the living of our lives.

Oliver's poem starts where we all start: wonder and awe at the world around us, a world into which we have been thrust without our consent. It is a magical if at times confusing place. Inevitably as our experience of this world grows, the awe and wonder yields to a realization previously unnoticed: life is infinitely diverse and it is transient. Sooner or later, we gain awareness of our own "unstoppable decay." Things change. We change.

Our response to this reality, not the faith label we adopt or reject, becomes our true religion.

We can shun or act out against life's diversity, human and otherwise or deny life's impermanence and thus our connection to all people and all life, with exclusionary words and deeds, laws and social structures to buttress our walls of denial and fear... or... we can, as the poet suggests, "be willing to be dazzled- to cast aside the weight of facts and maybe even to float a little above this difficult world."

Some might read this as a naïve avoidance of reality, but it is in fact, a challenge. A challenge to accept the realities of life and to grow spiritually, to be mindful of the wonder of life despite the difficulties, to let go of those things which impede the cultivation of compassion when we are most tempted to hold on tight, and to transcend the bonds of our own experience that we might find the courage and strength to live less selfishly, opening us to more readily appreciate and affirm the precious gift of life's diversity and interconnectedness.

To live with and into this breadth and depth of faith is to me, the heart of Unitarian Universalism and one of the reasons our forebears fought hard to resist the adoption of creedal statements. That we might be a faith, "where people with different beliefs worship as one faith, where religious inspiration comes from not one but many sources." A faith with room to grow.

And indeed, Unitarian Universalists remain unbound by creed or common theological assertion, but instead covenant with one another. That is, we promise to walk together and support one another in our spiritual exploration, development, and growth over our lifespan.

Given the choice to get, or to grow a religion, Unitarian Universalists have historically chosen the latter.

Indeed, as D.H. Lawrence said of religion, one must "...slowly and painfully gather one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification." Though Lawrence was not a Unitarian or Universalist, his words point to an essential truth: religion must befriend that which it fears most... questions and doubt. As Unitarian Universalists we are charged with the task of growing a living faith...

fluid, not fossilized; a faith of humility, not hubris; a faith of practice, not perfection.

Now we don't always get it right. To grow or deepen spiritually, we must be willing to listen, not just with our ears, but with our hearts and minds. For "listening, writes the Zen teacher, John Tarrant, "is the most basic form of love". Indeed, listening keeps the space needed for growth open.

A distressing paradox of modern life is that we have the ability to be "in touch" with virtually anyone 24/7, and yet we seem increasingly "out of touch" with one another, less able to truly listen and therefore transcend difference and self concern. It seems we're better at talking than listening, to others and ourselves. We take comfort in our habitual scripts. Ironically, we know our lines... but not ourselves.

Still, our tired monologue creates a sense of security by allowing us to think we're in control or have things more or less all figured out, as with the blind folks in our story for all ages. The quest for comfort, security, and control, history shows us, continually devolves into fear. Fear of different people and different views.

"I think one of the our most important tasks", said Adlai Stevenson, "is to try to convince others that there's nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless". As Unitarian Universalists, we are continually called to shift our gaze from our own narrow experience toward the experiences of others, to pay attention to and honor those differences. Only then can we legitimately claim and call one another to lift up the common, the universal within us all and enter, "into the white fire of a great mystery" as Mary Oliver writes, where we come to know that life is "more than the sum of each flawed blossom rising and fading".

With room to grow, religion becomes a labor of love that has already won the day. Love practiced by attention and acceptance of one another, our diversity of diversities, and through which we find ourselves on a path of spiritual growth. A path which, with nurture and commitment within an authentic, open, faith-filled community, will deepen as it also widens.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be