

**“The Many Ways of Wisdom”**  
**by Scott Gerard Prinster**  
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**Opening Words**

“The Word” by Mary Oliver

How wonderful! I speak of the soul and seven people rise from their chairs and leave the room, seven others lean forward to listen. I speak of the body, the spirit, the mockingbird, the hollyhock, leaves opening in the rain, music, faith, angels seen at dusk -- and seven more people leave the room and are seen running down the road. Seven more stay where they are but make murmurous disruptive sounds. Another seven hang their heads, feigning disinterest though their hearts are open, their hope is high that they will hear the word even again. The word is already, for them, the song in the forest. They know already how everything is better -- the dark less terrible, the ocean less hungry -- when it comes forth, and looks around with its crisp and lovely eye, and begins to sing.

**Wisdom from the Journey**

from an essay by Ronald Knapp, in *The Transient and the Permanent in Liberal Religion*

For all my years in the Unitarian Universalist ministry, it seems to me we have been a movement inundated by wave after wave of fads: human potential fads, fads of social concerns, theological fads. All have been seen as having some cosmic significance, some ultimate value, before they fizzled and disappeared.

At the heart of Unitarian Universalist faith lies the idea of *radical freedom of belief*. No one – no minister, no church, no officer of our Association – has the authority to tell individual Unitarian Universalists what they must believe. Individuals must work out matters of belief for themselves.

But... freedom of belief can lead to all kinds of absurdities unless it has a powerful corrective. It is... easy to arrive at the absurd notion that “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you believe it.” Well, it does matter. That is exactly the opposite of what is vital in liberal religion. Unitarian Universalists are not called to believe what they want to believe, but what they are required to believe by the careful deliberations of their own minds to believe.

It occurred to me...that “believing what one wants to believe” is the essence of fundamentalism. One does not believe in the virgin birth, or the immaculate conception, or the literal resurrection of Christ from the tomb because there is any evidence that persuades. One believes in spite of evidence. One believes because in one’s heart one wants to believe.

The free and disciplined search for truth is at the very heart of our faith. It is not an easy faith. Ours is not a shortcut religion. It requires no less than a life-long commitment to the disciplined search.

**Reflections**

Each September, amidst the traditions of back-to-school and the new arrival of college students, a new crispness in the air and goldening in the leaves, the cry of the geese already heading south, we also recognize the autumnal ritual of people shopping around for a spiritual community. We ministers are especially mindful this time of year of the considerable number of people here at First Unitarian Society for the first or second time, trying out this community to

see whether it might someday occupy an important place in their lives. Although there are always visitors and newcomers in a congregation this size, I know from the cycle of the year how many people are today looking around, wondering whether they have a place here, and whether we could have a place in their lives.

Sitting among you in the benches, mixed in with friends and strangers, are people who have come for a variety of reasons. One might have grown up without a formal religious identity, and be wondering whether there's really anything worthwhile to this spirituality business. Another might have been raised in a religion that left them feeling broken and unworthy, and are afraid to trust another institution with their heart. Another might be struggling with just having come out of the closet and wondering if she will truly be welcomed here, and another might still be making sense of his recent divorce, and trying to rebuild a community of friends. A couple might be struggling to respond to their young child's newest questions about religion. Another might be trying to make sense of the ethical issues that are arising at work, and another might find retirement raising new questions of his life's purpose. Others might be here in hope of focusing their passion for justice, others needing an oasis of beauty in a harsh and vulgar world, others still wanting support in feeling intellectually more alive and engaged. Every weekend, people sit in these benches and ask whether this could be a place that will help them feel glad to be alive and eager to share their gifts with the larger world. Each of them is almost certainly looking for something different from their neighbor, and wondering if there's room in this tradition for them. As Mary Oliver's reading implies, what sets one person's heart to singing might send another person scrambling out of the building -- how do we as a movement respond to such a diverse range of backgrounds and needs?

The fact that we would even bother to ask this question of how we might welcome a diverse constituency makes Unitarian Universalism pretty distinctive among religious movements. Rather than claiming that one size must fit all, we have been working to acknowledge and bring together people from their diverse journeys into a community that is meaningful, respectful, welcoming and inspiring. During the intergenerational story at yesterday's service, I told about Fudgie Bear and his friend finding two very different paths that led to the top of a mountain. Our children, even the younger ones, thought it completely reasonable that there not be only one "right" way to get to a goal, which gives me a lot of hope for their future. This image from mythology and psychology, of many paths leading to the same mountaintop, has had a lot of appeal for seekers, who know that life circumstances have a way of knocking us onto an entirely different trajectory. Rather than claiming that there is only one way to pursue a life of meaning (and that this one way is coincidentally *our* way), Unitarian Universalism recognizes that there are many ways to go through the world with an open mind and open heart. In a time when the religions of the world still look at one another with such ingrained suspicion, what a gift we bring the world in practicing greater understanding and appreciation for those on other paths. Even in pursuing the same goals of wisdom, compassion and justice, we find that there are many traditions and expressions that might help us get there.

One model that we might use to explore the diversity of paths to the mountaintop is that of different theological traditions. I turn to the work of my retired Michigan colleague Fred Campbell, whose book *Religious Integrity for Everyone* is an introduction to functional theology through four theological traditions: naturalism, theism, humanism and mysticism. As with most models, though, I want to pay attention to the danger of appearing too simplistic. I think that you'll see that these traditions are not completely distinct from one another, but rather meander

toward and away from one another and occasionally overlap, weaving their way toward that same peak.

The tradition of *naturalism* is based in a conviction that the heart of what it means to be alive is grounded in the world of nature -- that is, it is in the web of life that ultimate meaning, ultimate purpose and ultimate values are revealed and expressed. In the dance of birth, growth, productivity and death, in the interrelationship of predator and prey, eater and eaten, in all the deep kinship that is shared throughout life, we find a richness and complexity able to elicit awe and reverence out of us. Although much of our culture sees the natural world as simply the means to human ends like production and profit, the followers of naturalism do not hold up human goals and welfare as the highest good -- that highest purpose is instead located *in* nature, encoded naturally in the programming that calls all life to flourish and interrelate in that great web of interdependence that lives in and around us.

The tradition of *theism* is rooted in an awareness of a power beyond the material world, a presence toward which our hearts are drawn. I want to proceed carefully in describing this because theism has traditionally been done so badly throughout the history of religion that it's easy to be turned off by tired language or misused symbols. Theism offers an understanding of an ultimate reality of what we might call goodness that touches something in us and calls us to respond in kind. This tradition recognizes that there is something eternal at the heart of creation that we might capitalize as Wisdom or Love, and followers of theism find purpose and meaning in opening their hearts back to that great presence. Rather than getting stuck on traditional images of God and the images that we have created in reaction to centuries of dogma, the path of theism transcends the limitations of human expressions. Theism speaks of the deepest level of creation through the wordless language of love.

The tradition of *humanism* is grounded in the marvelous potential of the human mind and the human community. Rather than look to another plane of being for guidance on what to focus our devotion and energies upon, followers of humanism reserve their passion and reverence for this life and all its possibilities for humanity. With the tool of rational knowledge, we strive for an ever-growing understanding of the richness of creation and the special gift humans have developed for appreciating this creation and our own continually unfolding promise. The knowledge we have gained of the universe is ample inspiration to call us each and all to express love, do the work of justice, and cultivate peace.

The last of the four traditions is that of *mysticism*, which is inspired by a kind of knowing that is fundamentally different from the scientific knowing celebrated in humanism. In mysticism, the root of all being is felt in a way that links everything at the most basic level. There is an essence at the very heart of existence that we recognize and identify with -- not just that we can *relate to* that essence, but that we are all *of* that same essence. There is a Oneness in mysticism that includes everything -- nothing is separate from the root of all being, nothing is drawn outside the circle of all belonging. Because this is felt and understood in a way that is utterly unlike rational knowledge, completely unlike thought, we are at a loss to reduce to words the enormity and completeness of this knowledge. But, once you've felt and understood that Oneness, it is unforgettable.

One of the things that remains unsaid about the four paths in Fred Campbell's model is just how challenging it is for many of the folks who come to Unitarian Universalist congregations to join themselves to a tradition. Especially for those of us who are not accustomed to claiming a religious identity, or who have experienced oppressive religious

institutions, it's no small thing to trust our hearts to a tradition at least partly formed in other times by other seekers.

Religious traditions serve an important function, even to those of us of the freethinking temperament, but they are a complicated endeavor. As I said before, there is something in many of us that cries out against the idea of only one path that everyone must embrace. We who have taken our seeking seriously know that others have also done their searching with honesty and integrity and arrived at different answers from ours, and we know that being forced to shoehorn ourselves into a tradition that is not authentic to us is harmful to the curiosity and wonder that we cultivate as seekers.

At the same time, however, there is something disappointing about the image of everyone simply making their own path through the wilderness. The idea that each of us will simply have to clear our own way through the brush, unaided by those who have gone before us, and unhelpful to those who will come after, strikes me as missing out on an important opportunity to be students of one another's life lessons.

No, for a tradition to be a constructive aid in our journeys, it can neither be one-size-fits-all nor completely trivial and offering no guidance at all. But what *are* we accepting, then, when we choose to join a tradition? Well, I don't believe that people actually *want* to have all their thinking done for them, despite the number who actually end up in that situation. We often make compromises if it will gain us something important, like a community that welcomes us, or a sense of clarity, but I don't think that most people would knowingly trade away their own minds for these if it were clear that this is what the bargain ends up being. In the same way, I don't believe that people actually want to end up utterly alone in their seeking, clearing a path that no one has tried before and no one will ever walk again. Many of us have sought values like independence or integrity, but would not have agreed to live in estrangement if we had known this as the eventual result. Our life choices often have long-term consequences that we couldn't foresee, and I'll be preaching more about this at the end of December, but for now I'll simply say that we can choose more wisely with this risk in mind.

What I believe that constructive participation in the liberal religious tradition looks like is that, whatever our path, we proceed on our journey by the light of critical thinking. It is never the role of a healthy tradition to take away from us the resource of reason. I think of recent conversations among my colleagues about Unitarians' traditional stance on war as one example. Many of us had assumed that our tradition has been to oppose military action in general, based on our pretty overwhelming consensus on the most recent wars. Our older colleagues reminded us, however, that Unitarians were actually overwhelmingly in favor of the World Wars, especially the second one. It was a radical stance then for ministers to oppose the war, and only a few actually did, at considerable risk to their careers. What I've come to see from conversations like this is that it's not the role of our tradition to give us a once-and-for-all stance on any issue, but to provide us with a historical toolbox of values that helps us to reach a conclusion about every new ethical issue. It is not the point of our tradition to protect us from ever having to think again, but to support us in how we each go about our thinking.

It's taken me years as a Unitarian Universalist to recognize the value of being a member of a religious tradition, because I was so afraid of entrusting my heart to a path that others had created without my explicit control. But over time I've come to trust that tradition, and to be grateful for the guidance it gives me as I try to take seriously the most important issues of our lives. I want to extend a special welcome to those who are signing the membership book this morning, and offer to both them and our established members the vision of walking in the

footsteps of those who have asked these questions before us. For the possibility of a religious community where many paths are welcome, and for the very presence of those paths, that we might not have to walk alone, I hope that you will join me in being grateful.