

THE ELEVATOR QUESTION

A sermon preached by the Rev. John H. Nichols to First Parish of Wayland on November 10, 2013.

The elevator question is essentially this: “Imagine you have boarded an elevator on the sixtieth floor of a tall building. As soon the doors close, someone turns to you and asks, “So what do you Unitarian Universalists believe anyway?” What would you be able to say before the elevator reached ground level?” This question was regularly asked of candidates for the UU ministry.

According to legend, one student responded, “I’d say, ‘Gosh this elevator is slow. You know, I think I got on the wrong elevator.’” Another offered, “I’d say ‘what did you ask? I can’t hear you over the noise of the elevator.’”

Some time ago, I heard the “elevator question” posed somewhat differently to a group of UU ministers. The question was “If you were alone on a flight from Boston to Los Angeles, and the person next to you said, “So what do you do for a living” would you tell them the truth?”

Under those circumstances, none of the ministers present would admit to their profession. One minister said, “This has happened to me several times, and I always reply ‘I work for a company that makes rawhide dog chewies.’ No one ever wants to know anything more about me.”

The elevator question is difficult to answer because there are popular myths about Unitarian Universalism and we, sometimes, believe those myths. Here is a UU myth. “You can believe anything you want as a Unitarian Universalist.” This is not true. You cannot believe something that cuts the life and dignity out of a human being and be a Unitarian Universalist. You cannot be a racist, a bigot or a narrow minded fanatic and be a Unitarian Universalist. You cannot believe in having freedom without having to take responsibility for how your actions affect others. You cannot believe that only you and a small circle of people have the whole truth and be a Unitarian Universalist.

Myth Number Two is that we believe all religions are equally valid. This is not true. If all religions were equally valid, then the inherent contradictions between the beliefs of different religions would render religion itself meaningless. Religions that are inherently irrational or destructive of a person’s hold on reality are not valid to us. Religions that allow no disagreement or consign non-believers to a subhuman status are destructive in our eyes.

Myth Number Three is that where you have three Unitarian Universalists together you have five conflicting opinions. This is not true. Lutherans also say that about themselves, and it is truer of Lutherans or even of Catholics than it is about us. We differ over relatively little. It is also not true that we are a debating

society or a philosophy club; that while the rest of the world searches for a solid spiritual home, we just play with ideas. We have a spiritual home. The problem has been that we no longer teach each other how to find it.

When asked the “elevator question” I begin this way. We believe that every individual is a part of what is Holy. Understandings of what is ultimate or Holy or God do vary among us, but the incredible Power that creates, strengthens and heals in this world also created every one of us and has endowed us with something of the Holy. Of course I am speaking the language of faith not fact, but without that faith that something greater than we are has endowed us with worth, everything else we do believe doesn’t make any sense in the light of modern history.

Many prefer to speak of the dignity and worth of individuals, and that’s fine, but what, after all, assigns dignity and worth to individuals? Or do we just assume it? It seems quite a different thing to say that a part of the Holy -- a part of what makes life beautiful and special – resides in each of us. We are importantly touched by what is greater than we are. The Quakers call it, “That of God within each person.” We, UUs, also speak of the Spirit of Life.

The value of this statement about “that of God” or the Holy within all of us is not so much what it says to me about myself but what it says to me about you. Imagine what it would be like really to believe that our conversations could touch on the sacred, that our relationships could border on the Holy because we regard one another with the deepest respect and love. That belief that all relationships are potentially sacred is what is at the core of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Everything else flows from it.

Now let me just halt the elevator between floors to ask,” Where did we get this first principle of mine?” Did we find it in the works of Kahlil Gibran or in the poetry of May Sarton or in the writings of ancient Hindu sages or on National Public Radio. No. Our most basic principle comes from the Biblical faith from which Unitarian Universalism has grown. In that tradition, God created the world and saw that it was good, and then God filled the first human beings with the breath of God. However you interpret the Bible, however you understand that story or God, whether you are atheist, agnostic, mystic or theist, our very religious existence is founded on this principle.

Creation is good and we breathe the breath of the Holy. This is our religious ballast. Ballast is what kept large ships from being blown about like a cork on a stormy sea.

Our ballast comes from the Biblical tradition – however we individually understand it. Specifically it comes from this faith that there is something of the holy within each person. Without that idea we would indeed, get blown around in

the sea of ideas, and we actually might resemble a discussion group more than a religion.

When I speak of the Biblical tradition I am talking about something that is much broader than your childhood faith or your parent's faith or the faith of anyone we know. This tradition is not one monolithic point of view. Only fundamentalists and some Unitarian Universalists believe the Bible has only one point of view.

I am talking about a faith that embraces the author of Ecclesiastes who questioned whether there was any profit to being good and the author of Proverbs who believed that only goodness was profitable. This faith embraces disciples who believed that Jesus was God incarnate and other disciples who saw Jesus as fully human. This broad faith unites very different people around certain critical principles, which are also the ballast of our tradition.

Now to return to start the elevator moving again our first principle requires our commitment to try to reach that of the holy within each person and within ourselves. We are a faith for which good relationships are sacred. Accordingly, the second principle calls upon us to take our religious communities seriously.

The Genesis story tells us that in the beginning God did not create one person but two, and ever after God always acted on behalf of communities – never to enhance the status of some individuals at the expense of others. Large portions of this country were founded by attempts to live out an ideal of community, and our Unitarian Universalist faith shares the Biblical and the American conviction that our lives are supported best when we share a common life together.

Unitarian Universalists haven't always been true to this idea and so there is a notion in some areas of the country that we are strident individualists. This is a remnant of our Nineteenth Century history, but it no longer describes most of our congregations. We now believe the Holy within each of us is a power that is best felt not on the golf course or in the woods, but when we gather together.

And third, at the same time, the Holy within each of us struggles to bring an individual voice into being. And Unitarian Universalists affirm the freedom of conscience. Some have said, "Look, if God is so great why didn't God just create everybody to think alike. Imagine how much that unanimity would have saved on religious wars and persecutions!"

Quite to the contrary, for some reason we are gifted to struggle and develop very individual points of view. I emphasize this is our gift from creation. Choice is our gift from creation. Essentially we are given the opportunity either to use it wisely or to lose the opportunity.

From this gift springs a multitude of religious, political, philosophical and practical ideas. People disagree sometimes vigorously. The Biblical tradition affirms and Unitarian Universalism affirms the right of individuals to speak from their deepest convictions. It affirms the responsibility of each community or people or nation to listen carefully and weigh whether or not what is being said is closer to the truth.

In the liberal religious tradition and in the Biblical tradition we believe that truth emerges from a marketplace of differing, even conflicting points of view. It was not Creation's intent that we all believe alike. And so we have our own opinions, our own visions both of what is sacred and of how we can approach the sacred. It seems to have been rooted in the nature of things that there will be different paths to the truth.

Can I prove that? No. But it is central to my experience growing up as a Unitarian Universalist. It seems likely that the Holy neither expected nor entirely wanted agreement among all people, but, possibly, Creation intended that by forcing us to understand our differences we might be brought closer together.

Each of us contains a part of the Holy, which draws us together in community to be supported but also to be challenged and to find the courage to speak the truth as we understand it. But ideas need to have consequences, and that is the fourth point I want to make. It is one thing to envision that time when everyone will dwell together in peace and harmony, and hatred and warfare will have been abolished along with poverty. It is quite another matter to ignore the hatred, the poverty, the indifference and the pain that currently exists.

We believe – and we believe it because of our heritage in the prophetic tradition of the Bible – that when individuals are experiencing either the pain of injustice or the pains of want the fabric of every community is torn and it badly needs repair. This is not a very common point of view. The vast majority of the world's people might ask, "Why should it matter to us if there is poverty somewhere else? Why should we care if genocide happens some other place on the earth? Why risk our own security for the sake of those who are not our kith and kin?"

Many formally religious people accept this common sense view of the world. The sun rises, the sun sets. We get up. We go to work. We do what we need to do to get through another day, and then tomorrow comes and it is another day. For many religious traditions all of life could be like that, and people are rewarded for their patience eventually by transportation into another dimension of existence. Unitarian Universalism shares with the Biblical tradition the conviction that we are expected to use our gifts to do something for others.

What calls Unitarian Universalists to act is the faith that those who have visions of the beautiful society have a responsibility to put those visions to work. If we each touch on some part of the Holy, and if we receive from that vision a sense of how things ought to be, then we are committed to the idea that suffering and injustice must be eliminated. It is a rare religious tradition that foresees this kind of progress.

My fifth point is that we are committed to the idea that life is essentially good. Life is good no matter how our fortunes may rise or fall. The prevailing viewpoint of most Western people today clearly does not support this. Most people will affirm their lives when everything is going well, but at other times they will complain that existence is a terrible joke that has been played on all of us.

We share the Biblical conviction that the gift of being able to walk this earth, breathing the breath of life, living among friends and having meaningful work to do, perhaps even to make things better, is a gift that is far greater in power than anything that can ever be taken away from us. Even in the presence of war and destruction we recognize that life's power to create and to heal is never destroyed.

All right, the elevator door is closing. We are on the twentieth floor and descending. Here then are our fundamentals.

1. Life is good. No matter what happens the power of Creation among us binds and heals and, if we work with it, it builds. Bad things do happen, because human beings, in anger, confusion or madness cause them to happen, but madness is not the last word. Hope is.

2. Each of us participates in the Holy. There is "that of God" within each person, but each person is a different expression of the Holy. Therefore we are bound together into a community that is made firm by the thoughtful commitments of individuals and not by written creeds.

3. Good relationships are sacred in our tradition, because in a genuine relationship the Holy in me touches the Holy in you.

4. But each of us is given a conscience and, if we are careful we never lose our sense of urgency about the necessity of following that conscience in a way that is respectful of the Holy in others.

5. Finally, we believe that these ideas have necessary consequences in the real world of difficult decisions and suffering people. It is our responsibility to bring energy, hope and courage to that world even in its darkest moments.

Have we been perfectly consistent in all of this? No one is ever consistent. We have work to do on ourselves, amongst ourselves and in the world. May we take it up willingly.