"(Re)Making Religion"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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Traditions are *powerful*.
This week Jews across the globe follow ancient traditions of prayer and food, sound and silence. Such traditions have a way of linking people into a larger pattern that crosses time and place.

On the one hand, traditions have the power to ground us in a sense of who we are. Traditions can give a family, a congregation, or a whole religion a shared script of what happens on a given day or surrounding a certain event. For example, a small tradition in my family was that you always picked the meal and flavor of you cake on your birthday. This might be a small tradition, but I believe that traditions small and large have a deep impact in making us into who we are.

To explain what I mean, I'd like to tell you a bit about my love of celebrating Thanksgiving. As a child, my family would drive to have a large Thanksgiving dinner with my grandparents, aunt, uncle, and cousins. My grandparents lived on a farm in the countryside of Mid-Michigan and much of the meal was a harvest from the kitchen garden. Squash, beans, and potatoes were place around a large turkey in a very "traditional" meal. Dessert were always homemade pies—my favorite the pumpkin from my grandmother's garden.

In most ways, Thanksgiving at my grandparents was a delightful tradition that I looked forward to every year. Not only did I love the meal and the company, I also eagerly anticipated sitting down on Thanksgiving night, wrapped in blankets, to watch Julie Andrews sing "The Sound of Music." *Did anyone else do that back in the 70's?* These meals left such a positive impact upon me that hosting Thanksgiving dinner remains one of my favorite traditions.

However, part of the traditions of Thanksgiving in my family were very traditional gender roles. As the women helped to prepare dinner, set the table, and clean up, all the male relatives huddled around a television watching football and my male cousin and brothers took off outside to run around. Looking back, I can see the future feminist in me as I complained that it wasn't *fair* that I had to do dishes while my brothers did not. Of course it wasn't fair! In this way, the same Thanksgiving tradition that I valued also taught me lessons about the social expectations for women and gender inequality.

So, while traditions hold the power to ground us in a sense of who we are as a part of larger group, on the other hand, traditions can be confining and limiting. Traditions can hand people a shared script of how to act-speak-and be that *repeats* patterns of inequality and injustice. So-called *traditional* gender roles can leave women in the kitchen and men watching football. Likewise, proponents of the "*traditional"* family have excluded the validity and rights of families headed by single parents or same-sex couples. For good

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reason, the idea of *tradition* can raise the ire within some of us. Used to preserve an unequal, unjust way of life, *tradition* can be a blunt, rigid instrument seeking to maintain a confining, unjust status quo.

So, what are we to make of traditions? I don't think there is a simple, blanket answer of how to respond to a tradition. Rather, I believe that we have multiple ways that we might respond to traditions. Before getting to responses to tradition, the academic in mean insists that I must define my terms. What is 'tradition'? In short, I believe traditions are inherited patterns of what to act, do, and/or say in a certain situation or event.

Our life is actually full of a thousand patterns that give shape to how we move through the world.

For example, have you ever traveled to England or another British influenced country? As you likely know, in such countries traffic moves on the opposite side of road from what we're used to here. When I was in London a number of years ago, I learned that the same principle applied to people walking down the sidewalk. Walking about the streets of London, I became keenly aware of my ingrained expectations about how my body might interact with another body on the sidewalks. I'm sure we've all had the experience of approaching someone in a narrow path and each person steps right to pass by one another. In England, it was the opposite...people step left. I would step right, the other person would step left and we'd nearly crash into each other.

At a young age I had learned this social convention of how to walk down a sidewalk and it had simply become a subconscious part of how I expected to move in the world. Suddenly, in a different society with a different social convention, I felt confused and disoriented as I had to consciously attend to how to simply *walk*!

Each society teaches its members certain kinds of shared scripts like how to walk down a street. Having a shared script about how to act and what to expect of how others around you will act can certainly help to reduce anxiety. Our human psyches only have so much bandwith and it's very helpful to be able to relax into certain patterns that reduce the need for a higher level of attention. By giving us a way to make sense of the world around us, such social scripts can also reassure us of our part to play and how we "fit" within the world.

Traditions play this role of giving us shared social scripts that help to order and make sense of how the world works, what to expect, and how we fit in the world. In a family, traditions give a shared script that helps to connect people to each other through shared expectations, stories, and actions. The power of such shared scripts can be very clear to a new new romantic partner who must quickly learn the traditions of a beloved's family to secure a role and sense of belonging within the group. Who sits where at the dinner table? Which holidays are celebrated? Do you send a card, a present, or make a call on Mother's Day...or all three? This can be treacherous territory for a new member of a family group...am I right?

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Likewise, religious traditions give a shared script that helps to connect people in ways that often transcends *centuries*, even *millennia* like the Jewish High Holidays. Such ancient religious traditions order not only one's behavior of a given day or a particular week, they also tell a story about how the world works that is cosmic in nature—grounding all of human life within an *eternal* framework. Such timeless traditions can give people deep meaning by assuring them of how they fit within the whole of cosmic history.Religious traditions promise to teach us the patterns of the universe and our role within them.

So, yes, traditions *are* powerful tools for conveying meaning and belonging.
And yet. And yet, as we've already considered, traditions can also be used as a tool to sustain inequality and injustice. Traditions can confine people to a social script of how the world works that simply no longer makes sense. Societies change—they always do. Whether from politics or economics, technology or the arts, societies *change.* Geographical boundaries are redrawn; new laws are written and old ones struck down; the invention of iron or the combustion engine or the internet transforms how we live. As society changes all around us, the social scripts of a tradition that were created in another era may cease to make sense. Rather than helping us to feel grounded in the world, such old traditions can feel dissonant with the rest of our life. In this feeling of dissonance, traditions begin to lose their relevance and their meaning.

Given this complexity around traditions as both grounding and confining, what do we do with tradition? Do we toss them wholesale for their negative impacts? Perhaps sometime we need to—like the rejection of the institution of slavery as a 'traditional' way of life.

But, perhaps sometimes we don't need to entirely *reject* a tradition, but we need to create some distance. I feel that way about a lot of Christianity. While theologically there is much I reject, I still miss some of the traditions and rituals. When faced with a tradition that is at best a "mixed bag" of elements we value and other elements we reject, sometimes we need to figure out how to do some *editing* of tradition.

In our reading this morning of the Preface of the 1964 hymnal *Celebration of Life*, the editors of the hymnal explain their reasoning in how they literally chose to edit the tradition of singing in Unitarian Universalism. They convey *both* their view that religion is an inheritance *and* their conviction that "each generation needs to express itself freshly in its own idiom through song and spoken word." Seeking to strike a balance with the inherited and the current, the editors included both songs that reflected newer musical styles (such as folk) as well as inherited hymns—some of which the editors admit are best read "metaphorically" as their literal words no longer resonate well with current thinking.

If we compare the hymnals in our pews, we can see this same trend continue of the blending of the inherited tradition with newer tunes . . . and often with edited and reworked lyrics. Significantly, our current hymnal is called *The Living Tradition*. To me, this title captures the sense that a traditions do *not* need to be fixed in one point and time with an unchanging script. Rather, traditions can be—*should be*—alive! Changing, adapting, evolving.

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A few years ago, my son taught me a powerful lesson the need for traditions to evolve. When my partner Bill and I first met,we began having Thanksgiving with his ex-wife, their kids, and his ex's current partner, mother, or other family members. (*Very "modern family" I know.)* In their family, Thanksgiving always meant a rather eclectic groups of dishes—and always lasagna. My son was about seven when we began this tradition. For me, it was always nice to gather with others, and I enjoy this family, but I missed hosting a "real" Thanksgiving with turkey and pies. *Finally*, after about four or five year of this, we moved and had this new house where I could host Thanksgiving the way it was "supposed" to be. But, when I told my son the plan, he just looked at me and said, "Why can't we just have a *normal* Thanksgiving?"

Traditions live and change, adapt and evolve.

Traditions matter—we need those rituals, those events, those moments when we are called back to our values, our commitments, our sense of who we are. But, I believe that we are also called to engage in living traditions that *respond* to our changing world. We must make room for the new idioms,the new ways of expressing our stories,even as we acknowledge what we inherit.

We are all editors of our own religious traditions—we have been shaped by traditions and are called to be engaged in the work of the *living* tradition. *How* can we take what we have inherited and express it in ways that make sense today...that will keep it alive for another generation? Are there parts of our traditions that *no longer* serve our contemporary society? That no longer make sense with how we live our lives today? And, are there elements of our current culture that we should make more room for within our church...like we have for electronic communications?

These are dicey and difficult questions. Traditions are *powerful*. They orient us, they ground us, they tell us who we are. Changing traditions can be disorienting and even saddening as we are asked to let go of one way of being. Yet, by engaging in the work of editing and remaking traditions ... we also keep our traditions *alive*.

May we be a church that *both* respects our inherited traditions
and seeks to keep asking how we might
be better engaged with our contemporary world.
May we be a church with *living* traditions
that carries forth who we are to the next generation
even as we remember those who came before us.

So may it be.

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