

Our Common Quest: Let Us Search Together
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How can we describe our religious journeys? What metaphor shall we use? You probably don't want to spend the next ten minutes brain storming metaphors. But if we divided into groups of three or four and did some brain storming we might come up with something like this. My religious journey is like—

a pilgrimage

or a daily commute in Washington traffic

it's like a crusade

or cross country skiing

Or our metaphor for religious journey might be—

running on a tread mill

a game of croquet, where one's ball at any moment might be sent off in the wrong direction

or perhaps canoeing, sometimes in peaceful water, sometimes through rapids

Or maybe we would come up with a religious journey that is like—

rolling the rock up the mountain – you remember Sisyphus

riding on the back of an eagle¹

yeast, working its way through three measures of flour²

or being held in our mother's arms

Each of these metaphors may be worthy of its own sermon, but this morning I would like to spend a few minutes with a narrower focus. Towards the end of the last millennium, a team of social psychologists published a book on religion that examined what being religious means from

¹ See Exodus 19:4.

² See Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:21.

a variety of angles.³ One approach was to look at three dimensions of religion; they measured religious orientation on three different scales.

The first scale was the external scale – it measured “the degree to which an individual’s external social environment has influenced [their] personal religion.”⁴ A person who considered religion an external matter would probably agree with statements such as–

One reason for my being a church member is that such membership helps to establish a person in the community.

or

Occasionally I find it necessary to compromise my religious beliefs in order to protect my social and economic well-being.

The second scale was the internal scale – it measured “the degree to which an individual’s religion is a result of internal needs for certainty, strength, and direction.”⁵ A person who considered religion an internal matter would probably agree with statements such as–

My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.

or

It is important for me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and meditation.

The third scale was the quest scale – it measured “the degree to which an individual’s religion involves an open-ended, responsive dialogue with existential questions, questions raised by the contradictions and tragedies of life.”⁶

Those who view their religious journeys primarily as a quest would probably agree that doubt is an important part of what it means to be religious, an important part of their religious experience; doubt doesn’t bother them.

³ C. Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade & W. Larry Ventis, *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 166-181.

⁴ Batson, p. 169.

⁵ Batson, p. 169.

⁶ Batson, p. 169.

Questers typically expect their religious convictions, their theological views to change as the years go by. They might say, “As I grow and change, I expect my religion also to grow and change.”

Often, those who view the religious journey as a quest would say that the question of God, the question of Ultimate Concern, wasn’t very important for them, until they began to ask questions about the meaning of their own life.

They might say, “I have been driven to ask religious questions out of a growing awareness of the tensions in my world and in my relation to my world.”

They might acknowledge that their life experiences have led them “to rethink [their] religious convictions.”

For questers, questions are likely to be more central to their religious experience than are answers.

All three dimensions – the external, the internal, and the quest – can have roles in the religious lives of Unitarian Universalists. But I believe that we are known more than other groups for our quest orientation. It is thus the metaphor of religious journey as a quest, or as a search, that I wish to explore this morning.

In particular, I want to describe three forms that this quest can take: first, the quest for meaning, then the quest for justice, and finally, the quest for peace. I know that there are others, but three is enough – the quests for meaning, justice, and peace.

I

Let’s start with the search for meaning.

I find this quest approach to religion in the familiar hymn by the great 19th century Unitarian hymn writer, Samuel Longfellow, “Light of Ages and of Nations.”⁷ Longfellow’s line, “revelation is not sealed,” has for me become a motto, summarizing my approach to the religious journey. We never stop learning; there are always new ways to see things.

For me, this meant, when I was in college, that I would decide to major in philosophy. Then, almost 20 years ago, and much to the surprise of my undergraduate self, it meant studying at Wesley Theological Seminary, and exploring the Bible. A few years later, religious quest meant looking more closely at myself, through psychotherapy.

⁷ *Singing the Living Tradition*, #190.

Viewing the religious journey as a quest is nothing new. Who were the first, the earliest religious questers? [*solicit responses*] [*provide hint, if necessary: you'll find them in the Bible.*]

Adam and Eve, our mythical ancestors.⁸ They got it started. They saw the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the wonderful, ripe fruit. God had said, “don’t touch it,” but of course they were curious; the tree inevitably drew them. And it was OK. God expected them to eat the fruit. God is no dummy; God is at least as bright as your average parent.

Give your child an attractive box, tell them, “now whatever you do, don’t look inside it, because there’s something very special there,” give your child this fascinating box, and then leave them alone with it. Sooner or later, Adam and Eve were bound to sample the wonderful, forbidden fruit.⁹

It’s hard to see our cute babies turn into adolescents, making their own decisions, becoming their own selves, but we would have it no other way, and neither would God.¹⁰

There’s the story, it’s being going around for ever, of the old guy, after a long life, who reaches the pearly gates and there is greeted by St. Peter. “What will it be?” Peter asks, “if you want heaven, take your first left, if you want the discussion group about heaven, take your first right.” The person who views religion as quest will choose the discussion group, every time.

And, I might add that a supportive religious community is the best place, the safest place, for a person to pursue their personal religious quest.

But the metaphor of the discussion group about heaven suggests to me that there are some destinations we never reach, there are some questions we never answer. Thus, I don’t think that humanity will ever find an answer to the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? That is, why does the universe exist at all?

⁸ Genesis 2:4-3:24.

⁹ See Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

¹⁰ While my reading of the Adam and Eve story may sound heretical to some, a related interpretation can be found in the early years of Christianity. In the second century of the Common Era, someone wrote what is called “the Gospel of Truth.” It discusses the image of Jesus nailed to the cross, an image that usually recalls sacrificial death: Christ died to atone for the sins of humanity. The Gospel of Truth instead sees Jesus as “fruit on a tree,” and the tree is the tree of knowledge of good and evil described in the book of Genesis. Adam and Eve were punished for eating this fruit, but the author of the Gospel of Truth explains that *this* fruit, ‘Jesus the Christ,’ conveys *genuine* knowledge.” See Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003), p. 121. How different Christianity might have developed, if this view of the meaning of Jesus on the cross had not been stamped out as heretical.

Or maybe there is an answer, but we won't find it in science, in astrophysics, in cosmology; we won't find it through the systematic exploration of theology. Let's look in a different place.

Doesn't the mother see the answer to the most ultimate questions in her new baby. As one psychologist explained, "Nature is nowhere more graceful than in the way she endows each newborn infant with seductive abilities. . . . There is a world of mystery and hundreds of thousands of years of genetic wisdom behind our experience that a baby is 'cute,' . . . A mother can be forgiven her sense that her infant is looking at the windows of her soul when the infant so quickly fixes on the dark spots that are the mother's eyes. The appeal this has for the mother, who gets hooked into looking back, can hardly be a lucky accident."¹¹

I want to take the experience between mother and infant, the love, the bonding – I want to take this experience and generalize from it. We can see the meaning of life, we can see the purpose of the universe in the face of any human being – we were all infants once. Thus the face of the war refugee in the Sudan or in Syria, in Iraq or on Lesbos, in so many places around the world. These faces speak to us.

II

This leads me to the second form of religious quest, the quest for justice. If you've read this morning's paper, you'll probably have seen many examples of how the world is not the way we would like it to be. I'm not thinking here of the results of yesterday's baseball games but, for example, of the ongoing warfare in the Middle East. Would anyone planning a world want to end up with–

- a world where millions of people are suffering from war?
- a world that has a human race that has not learned how to feed all of its members?
- a world not yet recovered from Ebola but now threatened by Zika?
- a world where one species abuses and exploits the others so severely that the very survival of these other species is threatened?
- a world where the current generation of one species so selfishly warms the globe that it may doom its own future generations?

This cannot be the way the world is supposed to be. Who's responsible for all this? Can we blame God for this mess?

¹¹ Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 17.

I don't think so. What God said to us more than twenty seven hundred years ago, through the prophet Amos, God could just as well say to us today:

21 ¶ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.¹²

Let that be the passage that those seeking to be our next president hear.

Religion is not just an individual matter; religion is not just exploring theological questions; religion is not just singing hymns together on Sunday morning; religion is not justifying our moral prejudices by ascribing them to God. No, religion is not *escaping* from the world but *being in* the world, seeing the world for what it is, seeing it more clearly than you've ever seen it before, and feeling compelled to join with others to make a difference.

Jesus agreed with Amos. Jesus, like Amos, was concerned with conditions in *this* world. When Jesus was asked to read from the Bible, he went right to the prophets, and read this passage from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹³

Jesus, like Amos, like Isaiah, like so many others whose prophetic voices we find in the Bible, was concerned with justice. Religion, for him, was not about how to feel good; it was not about one morning or one day a week; it was not about pseudo-spirituality. No, religion is about how we live our lives, in all their fullness; religion is about how we treat other people, even those we find inconvenient; religion is about how we live in community – in the world community as well as the community of the local congregation.¹⁴

¹² Amos 5:21-24.

¹³ Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, 58:6. The "year of the Lord's favor" is a "year of jubilee," the year in which debts are forgiven, and land is restored to the dispossessed. See Leviticus 25:8-12.

¹⁴ In the words of our hymn,
 We'll build a land where we bind up the broken.
 We'll build a land where the captives go free, . . .
 Come build a land where sisters and brothers,

We are not saved by committing ourselves to the right theological propositions. We are not saved by a benevolent God out there who is tending to our welfare. We are neither saved nor damned by the results of one election.

If we are to be saved, if the human race is to survive, if life on this planet is to continue in a friendly way, it will be accomplished by our working together. By our working together, for a very long time. We will not create the realm of God on earth, the realm of peace and justice and sustainability, this year or next; we will not create this realm in our life times. But let us resolve to work toward that goal.

III

And this brings us to our third quest, the quest for peace, for wholeness, for *shalom*. We live in a time of stress and uncertainty. We live in a world in which Pandora's box has been opened, for better or worse. The vision of Amos, the vision of Jesus, has not yet been fulfilled, nor will it be any time soon. But our lives go on. We experience love and sorrow, births and deaths, health and sickness.

I remember the time, a few years back: the phone rang. It was Ann, a member of the congregation Kerry was serving at the time. "It's Ann," I told her. "Tell her to hold on," Kerry replied, "while I find my calendar." On the other end of the phone Ann responded, "she won't need her calendar, it's not about the child dedication." A few days before, Ann and her husband, after several years of first trying to have their own child and then of searching for a child to adopt, Ann and her husband had brought home a wonderful four-year-old. Ann had mentioned to Kerry after church that she wanted to meet Kerry to talk about having the child dedicated as a member of the religious community.

But the call was not about that. No, she had just learned that the three-year-old son of close friends of hers had drowned, in a freak accident. That's what she needed to talk about.

This story and the next two, by the way, are based on real situations but have been substantially altered to conceal the identity and protect the privacy of those involved.

Then there was the Sunday, when I was visiting my mother out in Michigan and went to one of the local Unitarian Universalist churches. During the time for sharing joys and concerns, Bob, in tears, told us how intolerant his family was. Those of us in the congregation had difficulty hearing him through his tears and weren't sure what he was referring to.

anointed by God, may then create peace:
where justice shall roll down like waters,
and peace like an ever flowing stream.

Singing the Living Tradition, #121, Barbara Zanotti, "We'll Build a Land."

Was he referring to his parents' discomfort with their son's sexual orientation? Or was he referring to his faith community's intolerance toward the more traditional theological perspective in which he and his partner sought to bring up their young daughter? It wasn't clear. But the important thing was that we were there for him in his time of need.

And a friend out west told me a while back about Charlene. She's in her 80's now. Her theology, which she is always happy to share, is way off in another dimension; and she's gotten increasingly deaf. But a more faithful choir member you cannot imagine.

Each congregation has its own Ann's and Bob's and Charlene's. Each congregation needs to help them find peace in their lives; we need to be there for them, to listen to them, to hold their hand. And each of us *is* an Ann or a Bob or a Charlene. We all need comfort; we all need peace; we all need to be made whole. We need to be there for each other. And we need to be there as well for all the Ann's and Bob's and Charlene's who haven't yet found us. We need to make room for them, to be ready to welcome them.

So may it be. *Shalom*. Amen.