

**5 October 2008 ★ Consider the Source(s), Part 1:  
“The Transcendent and the Prophetic”  
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This sermon is dedicated to a stranger named Jan, who crossed paths with me in Trader Joe’s on Friday, at the free coffee station. I urged him to get his coffee before I did, and either I seemed like a friendly listener or Jan had a deep need to share his story with me, because we quickly entered into a deep conversation. Jan, who looked to be in his 70s, told me about his years of military service in the Middle East, and shared his grief that the violence of warfare is replaying itself out in Iraq. In our fifteen minutes of quiet solidarity, we promised each other that things will be different after November 4<sup>th</sup>; I told him to keep speaking his truth. We shook hands, exchanging names as a farewell.

As Jan and I bid each other a good day and continued our shopping, I found myself blinking back tears. I remembered what a Unitarian Universalist blogger named Louise<sup>1</sup> says about those times when she suddenly tears up “for no reason” – she believes that God is speaking to her.

The message is, “Pay attention. This is important. Find out why you are moved by this.” And when I realize that I am important enough for these special messages of awareness, I cry a bit more. When I am in a quiet place of contemplation, waiting for the still small voice, I am listening. But when I cry, I am hearing.

My colleague, the Rev. Victoria Weinstein,<sup>2</sup> defines *revelation* as “a spiritual ‘ah ha’ moment that makes the world seem a sacred place.” Those “aha” moments come in many forms; sometimes, our tears are that gentle tap on the shoulder from the Everywhere – both a blessing and a call: “Pay attention. This is important. Find out why you are moved by this.”

★ For much of its history, our Unitarian Universalist tradition has placed a delicate and powerful responsibility squarely on us, as individuals: that of receiving, and interpreting, religious truth through our own experience. Unitarian Universalism “is not contained in any single book or creed... It trusts the value of direct experiences of mystery and wonder, and it recognizes the sacred may be found within the ordinary.”<sup>3</sup>

Our UU approach to “truth” and “revelation,” parts ways with more conservative denominations (evangelical Christians in particular), who believe that the Bible – and *only* the Bible – is God’s word, and thus “the final authority for all matters of faith, religious practice, and morals”<sup>4</sup> – or, as it’s often put, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”<sup>5</sup>

If there's one thing we Unitarian Universalists are *not*, where belief is concerned, it's settled. In fact, direct experience of the Transcendent is only one of our six UU Sources – all of which I'll explore over the course of three Sundays, as well as the newly revised Sources that may take their place soon. Let me remind you of the history of our six Sources, and then take a closer look at the first two.

☆ Remember: Unitarianism and Universalism have both been around for many centuries: Unitarianism grew out of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s; Universalist theology was present in the early days of Christianity, but didn't take the form of an organized religious movement until the late 1700s in America.

In 1961, the Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church merged into the Unitarian Universalist Association, bringing together two overlapping but different clutches of people. The UUA had to forge and shape a new identity. By the 1980s, our movement was witness to a new dimension of “spiritual reflection;” Unitarian Universalists sought to “refram[e] our religious principles and acknowledg[e] the shared sources of our faith.”<sup>6</sup> Thus were born our UU “Principles and Purposes.”<sup>7</sup>

The first version of our Principles (and Sources), created through democratic practice, were adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1984; they were amended in 1995. Since then, the Principles and Sources have become “the backbone of our religious community.”<sup>8</sup>

Many of us are familiar with the seven UU Principles (if not, stay tuned for another sermon series, someday), which list the values we affirm and uphold. But taken on their own, the Sources are striking... inspiring. Unlike the Principles, which to my ears read like a United Nations document, the Sources contain overtly religious language, and imply bold professions about our beliefs.

Do the Sources speak for you? Do they speak to you? Which words leap up, shining brightly? Which phrases do you wish you could polish? Let's explore the first two Sources together.

★ The Living Tradition we share draws from... *direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*

We've considered “mystery and wonder” throughout the morning, as you've had an opportunity to name your personal moments of awe and wonder. As we take that phrase apart, let's first notice the assumption packed into this phrase.

Our first Source implies that “the Transcendent” does, in fact, exist; that there is

something larger than us which inspires and opens us. The implication is that there is a multiplicity of paths to wonder – we each have direct and unique access to that which renews our spirits.

I've always been struck by the closing line, a reference to “the forces which create and uphold life.” What is “life,” beyond biology? What upholds it? The beauty of this Source is that the scientist can find wonder and mystery in DNA and quantum physics, even as the mystic can meet his or her Source-with-a-capital-S.

The second Source is just as interesting: The Living Tradition we share draws from... *words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.*

This is just one of the Sources where strong language comes into play. “Given the Unitarian and Universalist traditions of emphasizing the goodness and minimizing the sinfulness of humanity, we are often accused of sidestepping the problem of evil.”<sup>9</sup> This Source, though, claims that evil exists, but points to institutional structures – not necessarily individuals – as evil’s dwelling place.

There’s more: this Source suggests that the powers of evil are countered *not* by divine forces, but by people. By invoking “the transforming power of love,” it affirms that love is stronger than evil; that women and men have the power to confront and defeat its powers.

That mention of “women and men,” incidentally, was intentional. Women were named before men to reverse that sexism, and make women more visible. When the Sources were created in the 1980s, our Unitarian Universalist awareness of sexism was growing. Feminist and liberation theologies called UU’s, notes John Buehrens, former President of the UUA, “to a more prophetic faith, a more risk-taking faith, daring to name what is broken, to challenge assumptions and to take actions requiring discomfort and sacrifice, that we might contribute more effectively to the repair and transformation of our world.”<sup>10</sup>

There’s another syntactical trick here that I’m less enthusiastic about: this Source describes women and men as “prophetic.” It’s an easy thing to do, to name “prophetic” women and men: Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gandhi... you know: the Big Kahunas.

What would happen, however, if we moved the word “prophetic” to describe words and deeds, rather than women and men? After all, the world – with all of its harmful powers and structures – has been transformed and repaired by ordinary people who stepped forward when they could no longer keep silent; *real* people like us, who came

out of the ordinary. Character is nothing without behavior; if we were to speak of “prophetic words and deeds of women and men,” might we see ourselves more clearly as agents of love and transformation?

★ To illustrate why this is important to me, we need to go back to Trader Joe’s – back to the coffee counter, where talking to a stranger named Jan brought me to tears.

I mean no offense when I assert – although I don’t know him – that Jan is not a “prophetic man.” He is a kind man, bruised by the grievous cost of warfare and by our government’s imperialism. But the sheer force of his story, and the haunted look in his eyes, and his eagerness to share his powerful truth... that, in itself, was a quiet confrontation of the war’s evils, and a call to keep trying to transform the world with peace and compassion.

There was something more happening in that conversation, though. There was a third Presence between us, extending both a blessing and a call through the tears that welled up in my eyes. Tearing up “for no reason,” says Louise Hornor, is a message: “Pay attention. This is important. Find out why you are moved by this.”

I had spent the first half of my Friday stuck in that gruesome rut that traps us all, from time to time: imagining that both my value and my purpose arise from checking items off my list of responsibilities as efficiently as possible.

*Pay attention. This is important, the Great Mysterious was whispering to me. There is more value in sharing conversation with this stranger than anything on your “to do” list. Your purpose is to connect; it is to look into someone’s eyes and find a kindred soul there. You are seeing someone, and you are being seen. Take it in. That’s what you’re all here to do.*

That is “religious truth,” beloved ones. And how grateful I am to belong to this Unitarian Universalist faith, that recognizes it as such.

When and how does the Great Mysterious speak to you?

What does it need to do to get your attention?

What truth, what revelation,

will announce itself to you this very day?

Go with these questions in your hearts, and with eyes open for the answers.

So be it, my friends. Amen.

## Endnotes

1. UU Louise Hornor, a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, posted her comment on my favorite UU blog, Peacebang. Louise's travel blog is <http://ourodyssey.us/>. For her comment in its original context, see [www.peacebang.com/2007/07/12/god-is-still-speaking/](http://www.peacebang.com/2007/07/12/god-is-still-speaking/).
2. See [www.peacebang.com/2007/07/12/god-is-still-speaking/](http://www.peacebang.com/2007/07/12/god-is-still-speaking/)
3. The UUA's Commission on Appraisal. See [www.uuworld.org/news/articles/119311.shtml](http://www.uuworld.org/news/articles/119311.shtml)
4. See, for example, GotQuestions?: [www.gotquestions.org/Bible-God-Word.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-God-Word.html)
5. Comment from "Heather," [www.peacebang.com/2007/07/12/god-is-still-speaking/](http://www.peacebang.com/2007/07/12/god-is-still-speaking/)
6. See [www.uua.org/visitors/ourhistory/6186.shtml](http://www.uua.org/visitors/ourhistory/6186.shtml)
7. The Principles and Purposes are part of the UUA Bylaws: Article II.
8. See [www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml](http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml).
9. Discussion Guide to *A Chosen Faith* by John Buehrens. See [www.beacon.org/client/uu\\_guides/1617dg.cfm](http://www.beacon.org/client/uu_guides/1617dg.cfm)
10. "Our shared faith." See [www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/2385.shtml](http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/2385.shtml)