

On the life-altering journey from the edge to the center of our faith, how should we compose ourselves? What shared attitudes, values, aspirations, and practices do we need to get where we're going? How can we have these without veering off into the Ditch Of Orthodoxy? Come, pilgrim, and ponder your progress.

OUR CARAVAN: WHO WANTS TO BE IN THAT NUMBER?

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Last fall, Galen Guengerich, the senior minister of All Souls UU Church in New York City, asked his young daughter Zoe what Unitarians believe. She responded, "We believe whatever we want to believe." He reflected on this and was brought to this question: What if someone had asked his daughter where she lives, and she had responded, "I'm free to live wherever I want"? And that question might lead us to ponder this one: If you walked up to a caravan on the edge of the desert and asked someone, "Where's the caravan headed?" and the response came back, "We have the right to go wherever we want," would you join up? What does it mean to be a gathered church? Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

Six years after the publication of his best-selling jailhouse allegory, John Bunyan retraced the progress of the pilgrim. In Part Two of The Pilgrim's Progress, the travelers include Christian's wife and children, as well as various friends and companions. Children are born en route. Their metaphorical pilgrimage bears a closer resemblance to the particularities of human life – life in a caravan.

Last Sunday, I described the destination of the pilgrimage in terms that I felt were broad enough to embrace almost any religious content: a place in which we are a part of, rather than apart from, all with which we belong -- including family, community, nature, and all of humanity, as well as that hard-to-name life force that some people call God. In at least three ways, the nature of the destination affects the profile of the pilgrims needed make the caravan go.

First, there are those for whom the destination already represents a source of power in their lives higher than their own individual strivings – a power pulling them along. The caravan needs some people who have had this experience and can convey it to others. This gives the journey an urgency that enables those who feel it to persevere when trouble comes -- as it inevitably will, when the pilgrims happen upon a place whose only task is to trouble them with

questions that can make or unmake a life. When they're anxiously looking over their shoulders to see what they've left behind, feeling their way through the dark.

Second, the caravan needs some people with a strong sense of the value of deep community. If the destination is wholeness and reunion, the work of getting there will have to be done communally, healing what has been torn apart. Unlike the shallow, sentimental kind, deep community is found in particularity, not generality. It is, as Rumi suggests in one of this morning's readings, a matter of being woven into one fabric, so that when one thread is pulled, all feel it. Of being the walls that support a common roof, keeping a common store of grain dry. And as this morning's testimony from Savannah Williams so ably reminds us, a spiritual caravan cannot achieve that depth if the weaving of lives is limited to Sunday morning.

Third, the caravan needs diversity. Wholeness and reunion come from an enlargement of the soul. Some of the most important soul-enlarging possibilities are presented by those from whom we are most different. This makes diversity a valuable spiritual practice – one that forwards the pilgrims' progress. The caravan needs some people who can see this value, without making the mistake of treating diversity and community as the ultimate purpose of the pilgrimage.

So. Populated by a diverse band of pilgrims with a commitment to deep community, and energized by an intense longing for the destination, the caravan sets forth on its pilgrimage. Its progress is determined by the effectiveness of its spiritual practices – activities, disciplines, and rituals that strengthen their experience of connection and wholeness. Thus a shared belief that there are in fact spiritual practices that support the movement toward wholeness, and that some practices do this more effectively than others, is an important part of the profile of the pilgrims.

What constitutes a spiritual practice is limited at first to the most obvious and explicit religious behaviors and rituals, such as worship and rites of passages like weddings, memorial services, and coming of age ceremonies. As the pilgrims' spiritual experience deepens, others are added – things like pastoral care, covenant groups, educational programs, social justice work. Even tending the camels and mending the tents eventually take on the character of spiritual practices.

The leading edge of the caravan is represented by the search for and the trying out of new spiritual practices -- or old ones, adapted from other religious traditions and integrated into our own historical context. As the Unitarian historian Conrad Wright has observed, "our distinctiveness and our cohesion are to be found not in the faith we profess, but in the fact that we profess it in the context of a particular historical tradition which belongs to us and no one else." What's important is not to be original, but rather, to be authentic.

We often sing a hymn called "Gathered Here." (#389) It goes "gathered here in the mystery of the hour, gathered here in one strong body, gathered here in the struggle and the power. Spirit, draw near." It has a pulse-quickenning, chanting kind of beat. The words are poetic. For me it calls up an image of a tribe gathering around a fire. All fine. But what does this hymn mean in our particular historical context? What strong body might we be talking

about? What might we say to each other about our experience of “the mystery of the hour,” or the spirit we ask to draw near?

Now, I have to be careful here. There is an old riddle that asks why we Unitarians are not so great at singing hymns. And the answer to the riddle is that it’s because we’re always reading ahead to the next verse to see if we agree with it. I don’t want to encourage THAT, but we do need to ask “does this ritual express something important from our own experience?”

Over time, this leading edge search results in an accumulation of what we deem worthwhile. The word for this is tradition, and it represents the center of the caravan. Now, when we Unitarians encounter religious traditions, an allergy is often triggered by our recollection of churches where tradition was used in a very suffocating way. It may sound a little like orthodoxy, which we talked about last Sunday as hobbling spiritual transformation.

Tradition doesn’t have to be a ball and chain. In 1935, the first-ever Commission On Appraisal of the American Unitarian Association issued a report on where liberal religion should be going. It made this hopeful prediction:

“There will gradually emerge a body of common opinion which will, at any one particular time, be recognized as the common possession of the whole group. . . . They will . . . be unafraid to say with some real degree of definiteness, “These are things which today we believe to be true.” They will realize that they may believe differently tomorrow . . . but they will affirm, with conviction, that they hold this body of doctrine at the present moment; and they will regard it as of great importance to formulate thus from time to time the varying stages of their growing belief so that it may serve as the basis for worship, ethics, and program.”

This notion of religious conviction for the time being represents a continuing process of first cultivating and then eliminating parts of the accumulated traditions. The parts that get eliminated represent the trailing edge of the caravan.

The most important context in which the issue of tradition arises is the encounter with newcomers. Some will be uncertain and will want to travel with the caravan awhile to try it out. They represent a source of the new truths and meanings for which the leading edge of our caravan is always searching. They are the new blood.

And then there will be others who voice convictions that seem to represent some of the practices, rituals, and beliefs our caravan has examined but rejected. From our perspective, it is as if this group is somewhere behind our trailing edge.

When newcomers approach us and ask, what do you believe, what practices and rituals have you found worthy, where do you live and where are you going . . . what shall we say to them? Shall we give answers like the one given by the daughter of the minister of the New York City UU church who Sam described in the call to worship? Shall we say, each of us has the right to believe whatever she wants to believe, live wherever she wants to live, journey wherever she wants to journey? And if a particularly astute newcomer then says, “yes, I understand that

you have those rights, but tell me what have you come to in exercising those rights,” . . . how shall we respond? Could we really blame a newcomer for wondering whether a person who won't say where she lives might not actually know where she lives, and for wondering whether a person who does not know where she lives might not actually know who she is? And if WE met such a noncommittal person, would we really want to head off across the desert on an urgent and difficult pilgrimage with her?

How might this kind of conversation go with a newcomer who seems to be coming from back behind our trailing edge? Our welcoming hymn is come, come whoever you are; but that's hardly the same as come, come whatever you think, is it? A few years ago, the UUA created an online listserve in which much was said about whether Unitarian Universalism has a theological center and edge. One participant offered this comment: “As for the whole God proposition, I'd say, well of course you can be a Unitarian and so believe, just don't tell me why you're right about it or attempt to engage me in argumentation about an unprovable topic. You've got your faith, I've got mine”

I ask myself, what kind of conversation would I have if this person visited WUU? When he said “just don't tell me why you're right about it or attempt to engage me in argumentation about an unprovable topic,” I would feel obliged to say, “well, actually, we talk about unprovable topics around here all the time.” And his comment about “you have your faith and I have mine,” sounds to me like quite a conversation-stopper. I would have to respond, “in this church we say ‘we’ about our faith; we believe that sharing it with each other is very important.”

More conversation might put things in a different context. But at the end of all that, if I felt that the traditions of our caravan were irreconcilable with the traditions this person had chosen to embrace, wouldn't I have to say so candidly? Isn't that person entitled to an honest rendering of what the 1935 Commission on Appraisal called “the things which today we believe to be true”? And what if this person was not a newcomer, but rather, a longtime member? Other than as a Monty Python skit or Garrison Keelor joke, I think we can rule out a Unitarian excommunication. But what do we do when the caravan, as it moves along, leaves behind something that member considered a cherished tradition? Does every member get a veto on embracing new traditions and eliminating old ones? What of the pilgrims' need to progress?

There is one more important piece of the pilgrims' profile: story. As the heretical UU minister Burton Carley has written:

“It takes sustaining narratives to inspire us beyond self- involvement. The way home needs the presence of a story or stories that describe and illustrate who we are. What is required of us is to give expression poetically, metaphorically, theologically, to what it means for us to be a gathered church.”

Not just any story will do. If our pilgrimage is to take us from fragmentation to wholeness and fulfillment, it has to be a salvation story. Salvation – another word that causes our UU psyche to start producing antibodies, to start calling up images of a lake of fire. But there are other ways to talk about salvation. As the heretical UU minister Davidson Lohr said in talking about salvation stories,

“I don’t mean anything supernatural. I mean a tradition’s understanding of the human condition, its malaise, and its prescription for satisfying the deep yearning that has always marked serious religions, and its sense of how and why living out of this story makes our lives more fulfilling and useful to the larger world.”

Here we encounter an ironic difficulty. Historically, most of the great stories of religious salvation have arisen in the context of extreme material suffering and adversity. As comfortable, affluent UUs, most of us don’t fit that profile. But would we say that there is nothing from which we need to be saved? Living in a country that has poured thousands of young lives and nearly a trillion dollars down the rathole of a war that served no purpose but the cynical political agenda of its leaders, can we say that? Living in a country characterized by runaway, addictive consumerism, can we say that?

But let’s say you’ve somehow successfully separated yourself from these spiritually dismal swamps. You recycle, you drive a hybrid, you support good charities, you are not addicted or enslaved to anything, you are considerate of those around you. Might there still be an essential part of you that finds all of that . . . less than enlivening? Is it possible that you need to be saved from your utterly rational, moderate, comfortable existence?

In the midst of all these prescriptions for how to populate a spiritual caravan, there sits an obvious question. For nearly fifty years now, our historical context has been framed by the Unitarian Universalist Association. Shouldn’t we be looking to that organization as our caravan, or maybe caravan of caravans anyway? And if not, why not?

Here we have to make a distinction between the religions practiced in UU churches and the Unitarian Universalism embodied in the Principles and Purposes, the Sources of the Living Tradition, and variously presented to the world by the UUA in the mass media. The local varieties, or some of them at least, look to me like real religions – Buddhist, Christian, Pagan, Muslim, and various blends of traditions. The national religion called Unitarian Universalism, on the other hand, does not look like a religion to me. And the UUA does not look like a caravan on a pilgrimage, attempting some unachieved, magnificent difference in the world, far above and far beyond the stony narrowness of 25 Beacon Street.

On the UUA website, there is a document summarizing the history, beliefs, and organization of Unitarian Universalism. The section on beliefs refers to the former doctrines of Unitarians and Universalists at a much earlier time. It describes UUism as a “liberal, creedless religion,” and refers to various religious traditions as “sources.” And it affirms religious tolerance and the development of individual religious truth from personal reflection and experience. It has no description of anything like what we have been discussing as the destination of a religious journey; no articulation of what it might actually mean to be a deep religious community; no salvation story and no conception of human nature that would suggest any need for salvation.

The UUA’s seven principles are essentially a set of liberal political beliefs mostly about individual liberty or what might constitute secular good citizenship. The UUA’s six “Sources of

the Living Tradition” refer to real religious content, but nowhere does the UUA identify anything from any of these sources that has actually become a shared religious belief of UUs. The Sources are like hefty leatherbound books arranged on a library shelf to impress visitors; books filled with extraordinarily valuable ideas; but ultimately, books that make no claims on anyone who professes the religion called Unitarian Universalism, because these books are simply free-floating “sources” – of no greater dignity than the rest of the contents of any good public library.

I thought all of this might be about to crack open in 2005, when the UUA’s Commission On Appraisal issued a long-awaited report on theological unity and diversity. The Commission observed that “theological diversity alone is an entirely inadequate basis for a strongly associated congregation of individuals, or for a truly functional association of congregations.” It asked, what are we “calling people into community for? . . . [I]f we are a religious community, shouldn’t we be able to articulate theologically and religiously what it is that unites us?” It wanted to know, “If we say to anyone or everyone, ‘you belong,’ what is it that they are invited to belong to?” It warned that to ignore the issue of unity in our theological diversity would put our religion in peril of being “reduced to an agglomeration of liberal religious boutiques, loosely associated and without any real organizing principle,” and even in peril of failing to survive at all.

Bold words. But in the report, the leaders of our movement did not say what they thought our theological unity is or should be. The closest they came was a listing of self-congratulatory adjectives describing us as “grounded, ecological, profoundly human, responsible, experiential, free, imaginative, relational, curious, reasonable, and hopeful.” The Commission called this listing “a powerful vision.” But I couldn’t see any power or any vision. And I still can’t today.

I believe it is clear that the UUA is committed to being all things to all people of every conceivable religious stripe. The one group that cannot be accommodated by such a philosophy is those who believe in a shared pilgrimage, shared religious values, shared spiritual practices, and a shared salvation story. As Chris Walton, editor of UU World, has observed in his personal blog, with disclaimers of presuming to speak for the UUA in any way, “the theological diversity of the UUA makes the creation of a meaningful doctrine of the church at the general level virtually impossible.” A religious caravan needs demographic diversity, not theological diversity. Religious pluralism is an important value in secular society. And in a church of freely associated people, there certainly is no requirement of theological unanimity. Without some core of shared religious understandings, however, the enterprise will fail of its spiritually transformative mission.

CONCLUSION

If we want a pilgrimage, we will have to organize the caravan on our own. Well, not quite on our own. I’m sure you noticed the “heretical” label I applied to the UU ministers I’ve quoted this morning. Acknowledging that he is committing heresy, Galen Guengerich is offering from his pulpit in New York City some answers to the question of shared belief. In one form or another, the same heresy is being committed by Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs, Davidson Lohr, and Burton Carley, in St. Paul, Austin, and Memphis. And then there is my co-minister, who is fully

complicit in these crimes, as is my longtime mentor, Robert Latham. It would not take much research to lengthen this list.

Galen Guengerich says he is doing this because “our usual way of describing ourselves doesn’t even begin to suggest that we are a religion.” Heresy, he says, is just what we need, citing a religious scholar who calls heresy “a sudden explosion of faith.” I say he’s right. I feel like part of that explosion. When I read and listen to these colleagues, I know I want to be in that number. And what number do you want to be in?

AMEN.

****Issues addressed in this sermon will be part of a Lifespan Faith Development Program on December 13 (see today’s Wake-up Call). The sermon also is a continuation of the theological trajectory initiated in two prior sermons: “Things Commonly Believed Among Us?” (September 2, 2007); and “Our Journey: From the Edge to the Center of the Faith” (December 2, 2007). Texts of both are available at www.wuu.org/wordpress . Click on “sermon library” in the menu listing on the left side of the page.*