

**“WHY THEOLOGY MATTERS”**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
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Call to Gather from “Who Do You Think You Are” in *Walking Toward Morning*  
by Victoria Safford

We sing our songs in different keys and cadences. We are on our own to make a faith out of nothing, which is to say, out of everything we have.<sup>1</sup>

Reading from “God Is What Knows How to Grow” in *Walking Toward Morning* by Victoria Safford

The story is older than the *Story of Salvation*. It begins in that event, that moment, that split second of light (or music or love, or fire, whatever it was) when matter and energy and being explode out of the pinpoint of no-being. For me the story begins behind the velvet curtain that separates what we know from Mystery. This is the story of the universe, the cosmology of stars and suns and life and no-life, all of which I call creation, even though I know of no creator. (Recently, I read that in the Hopi language there are no nouns like these, only verb forms, to describe such things, so all of this, all the cosmos, would be called "creating," and I think I like that better.) It is not a human-centered story; human history is part of something larger, more eternal and more infinite.

But ours is the laughing part of the story, the sorrowful part, the evil part, the compassionate part, the noticing part, the reverent part, the irreverent part, the conscious part. From birth to death we shine like stars and then explode, and our lives are recapitulations of that original creating. As a child once told the famous teacher Sophia Lyon Fahs, after studying seeds that became marigolds in a paper cup and after the arrival of a newborn sister, which meant the arrival of both unprecedented hatred and unprecedented tenderness, "God is what knows how to grow."

Each of us tells the story differently, setting our words to music all our own. Your song might not be all this inexplicable nature-mysticism but instead some kind of muscular, articulate agnosticism, or ethical humanism, or atheism, or liberal Christianity, or some kind of Western Buddhism, or an ethical, practical religion based on justice making and real action, or paganism mixed with feminism, or who knows what. God knows what it is. You sing your song in your own key, in your own beautiful voice, and the cosmos listens, reverently.

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Safford, *Walking Toward Morning* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), p. 18.

The story I live by is told to me by the only world that I can see and taste, the world I could begin to describe if I were an artist or a physicist or a dancer or a mathematician: the world that lives and dies in cycles and in seasons. It is an utterly unsupernatural story, an evolving, unfinished story; our part in it is the making of meaning, the making of questions and celebrations, and these too evolve and expand without end.<sup>2</sup>

### Sermon

The Commission on Appraisal is one of the more intriguing bodies within our Unitarian Universalist Association in spite of its rather bureaucratic-sounding name. The Commission is charged with conducting independent reviews of various aspects of our Association. In 2005, a four-year Commission study culminated in the publication of a report entitled *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. This report grew out of the Commission's extensive hearings, focus groups and written surveys examining the topic of theological diversity. The report is extremely well-done.

A startling observation very early in the report jumped off the page at me:

With rare exceptions, conversations about beliefs and theology are not regular features of our congregational life. Repeatedly people have told us, "We don't talk about these sorts of things at my church."<sup>3</sup>

Commission members felt that even in addressing theology, they were violating a widespread taboo in UU congregations.

The Commission points out that this is a relatively new trend in Unitarian Universalism. Back as far as the 1600s, sharing theology was a central part of the covenants our congregations created. First Church in Dedham, Massachusetts, for example, had house meetings in 1637 to develop their covenant. Alice Blair Wesley describes the process they used this way:

Each one could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question, and speak to that, or state any objections or doubts concerning what any other said, "so it were humbly & with a reachable hart, not with any mind of cavilling or contradicting." In other words...here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing. The record reports that all their "reasonings" were "very peacable, loving & tender, much to edification."<sup>4</sup>

So what changed? What has made us more reluctant to share our theologies? What is the source of the contemporary taboo against sharing theologies? The Commission hypothesized that the taboo comes from a "fear that if we start to talk about our beliefs, we may discover we are totally incompatible with one another, and our congregations will fall apart." Such a fear certainly could discourage deep theological

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<sup>2</sup> Safford, pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68-69.

sharing! And if true, then the more diverse we become theologically, the more reluctant we will be to share about theology because of the uncomfortable spotlight it shines on our differences. And certainly during the last forty years, we have become far more theologically diverse. An unfortunate result may then be the diminishment of sharing our theologies with one another. At a minimum, the Commission suggested, avoiding theological discussions results from fear of giving offense to those other theologies. In saying this they noted what UU theologian and educator Rebecca Parker calls our UU “culture of niceness.” They bluntly concluded that whatever the reason, our reluctance to engage theologically stunts our spiritual growth. “We ignore the question of how we talk about and manifest theology in our congregations at our own peril.”<sup>5</sup>

I agree with the Commission that a reluctance to share our theologies with one another is a perilous development. If we are afraid to share our theological differences because we might offend fellow UUs—or worse, because we might discover that there really is nothing that holds us together—then we risk making our congregations bland, shallow, and ultimately irrelevant. When we get together at services and in small groups and programs, such fear reduces our focus to superficial themes and slogans about which we can all agree. The substance of our individual beliefs is off-limits. And so is the possibility for greater depth in our faith. We are in danger of becoming in the Commission’s words, a faith that is “a mile wide and an inch deep.”<sup>6</sup>

The Commission further poses the challenging question of whether all this might be one big reason why in their estimate perhaps 85% of young adults who were raised UU leave our faith.<sup>7</sup> The Commission notes that most of our young seem to decide either to leave the faith or to go into the UU ministry. It would be nice to give them option of having a deep faith within UU-ism without having to go to seminary!

I do see one positive if this trend continues. We could adopt a great new marketing slogan: “Unitarian Universalism—the Lowest Common Denomination.” Wouldn’t that make a great bumper sticker?

I believe that building our individual theologies is the single most important thing we do at our Fellowship. It is not the only thing we should be doing here. It’s not even in my view the end goal. But it is the foundation of everything else we do. None of us can sustain the hard, often discouraging work of building relationships and a better world without a well-developed individual theology. To me, building relationships here and beyond our walls and a better world is the end goal of our Fellowship. But these won’t happen without each of us building our own theological understandings.

I believe that theological diversity greatly helps each of us build our own theologies. Sure, I could build my theology on my own at home or in the woods, but it wouldn’t be the same without my interactions with all of your theologies. This is the rich opportunity our Fellowship offers: we each gain so much in learning from the questions, insights, and challenges of others in our spiritual community. Parker Palmer writes, “To see truth in the round, we need many angles of vision, many voices of varied experience.”<sup>8</sup> To the extent we are theologically diverse, this congregation helps us see

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<sup>5</sup> Commission on Appraisal, pp. 6-8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 12.

truth in the round. But if we are silent about our individual theologies, then we will lose this opportunity. The single most compelling reason for coming together will disappear in a haze of bland niceness.

I resisted beginning the sermon by delving into my definition of theology. I have a hunch that many of you have already wondered just what exactly I mean by “theology.” I also have a hunch that by now it has occurred to many of you that theology literally means the study of God. Some of you maybe even wondered when you saw the title in the newsletter or newspaper: “Is Roger going to say we all have to study God?”

Since that really is not my point today, I’d like to offer a different definition of theology than the conventional “study of God.” As the Commission on Appraisal suggests, theology historically has had to do with many foundational questions about human life—questions like these: What is the nature of the cosmos and humans? How do we know what we know? Where do we find religious authority? How should we practice our values? What is the goal of our spiritual journey? What is the nature of religious community? And how should we define our individual and communal missions in the world.<sup>9</sup>

This covers a lot of ground and is pretty complex. I would simplify the definition by saying that theology helps us make sense of the cosmos and our place in it. Doing theology is the process of being attentive to our beliefs about the cosmos and our place in it. And then comes the crucial action component of theology: attempting to speak and act in ways which are aligned with our beliefs. All of this is the work of theology—both the making sense (as best as we can) of the cosmos, and figuring out how best to act in ways consistent with our beliefs.

I need to add one more important element of my definition of theology: theology is NOT exclusively or even primarily an intellectual activity. I think it is necessary to bring our minds to theological questions, but it is equally necessary to bring our experiences and our feelings to them. The UU theologian Paul Rasor emphatically states the theology “is not something we do just with our heads. We must also use our hearts and guts, as well as our hands and feet.”<sup>10</sup>

Note that in my re-definition of theology I haven’t said one single thing about God. In my understanding, theology does not necessarily have anything to do with God. It can include God or Goddess if some kind of divinity is part of your beliefs, but it doesn’t have to.

I continue to like using the word “theology.” In my opinion, it can be redefined in a way that is consistent with its deeper meaning over the millennia: it has always been about making sense of the cosmos and figuring out how best to act. You may disagree about its continued usefulness, which is fine. If you do, then don’t use it! Use a different word, like “philosophy” or “beliefs.” But whatever word we use, I believe it is of paramount importance to develop some beliefs about the cosmos and our place in the cosmos.

I think we do a pretty good job at this Fellowship of sharing our theologies. If the Commission on Appraisal’s perception is true, then I guess we’re somewhat the exception to the UU norm. Maybe being an exception is part of why we’re growing at such a fast rate relative to all but a handful of UU congregations.

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<sup>9</sup> Commission on Appraisal, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), p. xx.

I believe a very important reason for us having some success in sharing our theological diversity is the time of Congregational Response following each week's sermon. The Commission on Appraisal reported that less than five percent of the congregations it surveyed reported having a Congregational Response. Commission members believe this might be an undercount because some respondents took Congregational Response so for granted that they failed to mention it in their surveys. But in any case, it seems clear to me that a lot fewer congregations do Congregational Response today than was the case twenty or thirty years ago. Indeed, Congregational Response has a bad reputation among most ministers as well as many lay UUs—often for good reason. Far too often Congregational Response has lived up to its extremely unfortunate nickname: Talk Back. (I can honestly say that this is the first time in seventeen years here that I've uttered this nickname from the pulpit. I have avoided it like the plague.) In too many congregations Talk Back becomes a weekly opportunity to engage in intellectual nitpicking and on occasion even verbal assault. There was precious little spiritual benefit to it. No wonder a lot of lay people and especially ministers grew weary of it.

But Congregational Response doesn't have to degenerate into Talk Back. And when it doesn't, I think it can be one of the most valuable and effective tools we have for theological deepening. The trick—like so many things—is to do it well. Congregational Response works when people share from the depths of their experiences and theologies. It works when the responses focus on how the respondent's journey interacts with the message of the sermon. It works when it's not about one-upmanship or intellectual nitpicking. It works when a variety of people share rather than the same few week after week. It works when there is a general level of acceptance of others' beliefs and avoidance of attacking them. And it works when there is a willingness to speak with conviction about our own beliefs, safe in the knowledge that doing so will neither offend others who have different beliefs nor open us to attack.

All these are reasons why Congregational Response works so well here. We generally do it well. As a result, Congregational Response greatly deepens the whole worship experience. It is challenging in a good and not gratuitous way. It makes us consider others' theologies; as a result, it makes us reconsider our own. It helps us see truth in the round. It also embodies our belief that everyone has the right and the responsibility to build her or his own theology. Even if you never respond aloud, Congregational Response sets the expectation that all of us will bring the sermon as much as we are able into the stories and questions of our own lives.

I am convinced that Congregation Response is one of the top reasons why we continue to grow. It is consistently such a rich part of our services. Whether one is giving the sermon, responding to the sermon aloud, or listening to others' responses, Congregational Response provides a wonderful opportunity to go deeper.

Another very significant opportunity the Fellowship provides adults to go deeper theologically is our Adult Enrichment program. Covenant Groups, classes and on-going small groups are all about sharing our theologies and as a result going deeper in our own individual theologies.

Starting in June, we've had a unique opportunity to extend our theological sharing beyond our walls with members of a very different congregation from ours. Along with host Harmony Café and members of the Appleton Evangelical Free Church, we have

inaugurated a program of monthly theological conversations called Conversation Café. Our topics so far have included where we find authority for our beliefs, what we believe about the afterlife, and what we believe to be the greatest shortcoming of our faith. The conversations have been fascinating and illuminating, and I am very excited about this opportunity to expand our theological sharing beyond these walls.

In all of these settings—services, Adult Enrichment programs, and Conversation Café—I think two approaches in particular help us share our theologies well. The first is to frame our beliefs in positive rather than negative terms. Framing our beliefs negatively will almost inevitably put somebody on the defensive. It sabotages our sharing our theologies, and as a result prevents all of us from going deeper. The deepest theologies are never negations.

The second key approach is to avoid absolute certainty about our beliefs. Being certain in our beliefs shuts the door to open and honest sharing. As Paul Rasor points out, it is possible to hold one's beliefs with conviction and at the same time recognize that since we are fallible humans, we cannot be certain about them. Liberal theology requires us to be at least a little bit tentative about our beliefs.<sup>11</sup> My role model in this is Mahatma Gandhi. Certainly he held his beliefs with deep conviction and commitment, but all the while he worked hard to be open to the possibility that he was wrong.

Just as last week I said that Universalism is not an easy path, our Fellowship's foundational task of building our own theologies in the company of others is not easy. And the fact we have done this relatively well in recent years is not guarantee we will continue to do so. The truth is: it takes a lot of intention, a lot of attention, and a lot of work.

The UU theologian Paul Rasor puts this well in his excellent *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. So I'm going to give him the last word today:

Liberal theology is not for the faint of heart. It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make. The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture's values. Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rasor, p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185. For the sermon I am also grateful for Anthony Robinson's fine book *What's Theology Got to Do With It?* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006).

