

# Keep the Circle Whole: The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology

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## **Introduction**

Recently, Unitarian Universalists have been asking, Is there a center to Unitarian Universalism?

In the midst of all our diversity, our affirmation of pluralism, and our celebration of individual freedom of conscience in matters religious, what holds us all together?

The UUA Commission on Appraisal has produced a whole report on the question and its answer is, “We can’t say.”

Is this really true?

Is Unitarian Universalism like the old story of the blind persons and the elephant with a twist:

One of us touches the side and says, “It’s a wall.”

Another feels the leg and says, “It’s a tree.”

Another grabs the tail and proclaims, “It’s a rope.”

After surveying all of us, the one thing we can say for certain is, “There is no elephant.”

This is a little like Gertrude Stein's famous quip about her hometown, Oakland: "There is no there there."

Of course, now there is. Right on the border between Berkeley and Oakland there is a two-part art work. On the Berkeley side big block letters say "Here" And on the Oakland side big block letters say, "There."

That settles it for Oakland, there is a there there. But what about for us UUs? Do we have a theological center?

And, why are we asking?

Why are we asking?

When did pluralism become a problem?

UUsm continues to be predominantly white and economically privileged, but as more and more women have entered our ministry and theological leadership, and as we move ever so slowly towards being a multi-cultural, queer positive, multi-gendered, counter-oppressive community the old order of who is in power at the center has shifted.

Some who used to know where they stood have been de-centered. There is discomfort with the changing power dynamics. Will it ever end? Will our religious identity just be ever expanding diversity without anyone in control?

In response to this concern, I believe we need to remind ourselves that diversity is a sign of life. When the historically excluded and dehumanized move into community leadership, and the oppressed bring their full voice and experience into contexts where they have been silenced, this is an occasion for celebration, not hand-wringing.

Rich eco-systems are not monocultural. They teem with bio-diversity. Life is marked by the flourishing of difference and particularity, creatively interacting. Such diversity is beautiful and good.

So, to those who are anxious about too much diversity, I say,

"Sit back, relax, no one needs to ask whether the redwood forest has a center.

It's a zone of life to be entered.

Just be there.

Breathe."

### **Another Reason for the Question**

But there is another reason some are asking,

"What holds us all together? Do we have a center?"

They are not troubled by shifts in old structures of power and privilege as oppressed and marginalized identities are welcomed into leadership. Rather, they are alarmed by the increasing fragmentation and commoditization of life in our individualistic, consumer-oriented society.

The market place makes the consumer's individualized preferences its center. In this market-driven culture we are ministered to by a dazzling array of possibilities to choose from. Last week at the grocery store, I was paralyzed by the presence of at least six varieties of Special K. What's special about that! If our religion is just one more place where we are told we get to choose what we want, it begins to feel empty. It tells us we are nothing more than self-interested, even self-absorbed, consumers and freedom is nothing more than being able to go shopping.

Where is the claim of life upon us that moves us beyond fragmented individual consumerism, into community, connection, into binding obligations that relate us to something larger and deeper?

We are hungry for committed life.

Where is the freedom that comes from giving ourselves to a claim upon us and others that marks our life with meaning and purpose beyond ourselves? What will allow us to stand against the excesses of consumerism that are moving the planet towards ever-increasing gaps between the rich and the poor? And what will empower us to turn around the dangerous disregard for the delicate balances that sustain the earth's ecosystems?

Back in 1941 Frederick May Eliot wrote:

"The day has come for the Unitarian Church of America to cease being merely an aggregation of separate and highly individualist units, with no clear and definite sense of unity, no central purpose that compels obedience

and loyalty . . . no discipline that makes common action possible, no sense of holy vocation so that God's own purposes and grace may become incarnate once again in human lives and transform the face of the earth."

Gordon McKeeman, former president of Starr King School, commented at the GA in 2004,

"In our passion for freedom . . . we have accepted . . . a kind of institutionalized individualism, and we attempt to confront the excesses of a society which has placed individual freedom, individual initiative, individual responsibility at the top of its hierarchy of values, and are puzzled at the impotence of such arrangements to encourage group activity on behalf of the entire human family."

"Over and over people come asking for some help in developing a mature and modern faith. The freedom of belief that we do offer might be helpful to those in an adolescent stage, struggling with establishing an independent selfhood. But beyond freedom are many more stages to be attained in the quest for an effective faith."

Robert Bellah made a similar plea at GA in 1998, pointing out that UUism's emphasis on individual freedom is simultaneously our greatest gift and our greatest weakness:

"Beneath the surface glitter of American culture there is a deep inner core, which, I have argued, is ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every single individual. . . . but, by the very weakness of any idea of human solidarity associated with it in a culture dominated by the dissenting Protestant tradition, it opens the door to the worst in our culture. It easily leads to the idea that humans are nothing but self-interest maximizers, and the devil take the hindmost. It is that version that we see all around us. I don't think we can challenge that version until we come to see that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all being, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves. You face in your very denomination the most basic conundrum of American life. If you can solve it you may help lead the larger society out of the wilderness into which it has wandered."

His call is even more urgent now.

Now in 2006, our wandering in the wasteland of individualistic consumerism has taken our nation into wars to defend our rights to go shopping and to expand our control of the world's oil supplies.

The Commission on Appraisal's conclusion that the unity in our diversity cannot be clearly found is unsatisfying if it leaves us with a definition of our faith that cannot move beyond the wasteland of individualized consumerism.

Our spiritual longing for something larger and deeper, something centering and binding demands a richer theological answer.

### **The Solidarity at Our Center**

Our search for a theological center needs to be understood as a search for the solidarity and obligation that can carry us beyond this moral wasteland and energize our devoted action on behalf of the global community.

We might begin this search by re-imagining the way we speak of religious individualism and dissent.

I believe we are right to extol the lone courageous voice that holds out against the follies of groupthink.

We celebrate the dissenter who begs to differ when the crowd is gung ho for a course of action that will cause untold harm to life.

I have proudly worn the button, "Barbara Lee speaks for me!" in gratitude for Representative Lee's willingness to be the lone voice in congress that voted against the U.S. invasion of Iraq – a preemptive war that has now been exposed to the world as based on lies.

But look just a little closer: Behind the lone prophet who speaks up, there is a group – WE celebrate the lone prophet because there is a WE here – there is a whole movement of us who hold to values that are fragile, dissident, and life-giving.

Theologian Rita Nakashima Brock suggests that it is always a mistake to imagine that lone prophets are really alone. When Rosa Parks sat down on the bus in Montgomery, to stand up for freedom for African Americans, she was not just a tired woman who acted in isolation. She was the secretary of the local NAACP, a leader known and trusted in the black community. When she sat down, her community sat down. It was not her solitary action that instigated a movement for greater justice – it was the hidden solidarity that she embodied and called forth.

The same could be said of Martin Luther King, Jr. He galvanized a movement – yes – but his power did not come from the singularity of his vision, or a mere exercise of individual conscience. He voiced the conscience of a whole body of people, a community that shared the experience of racism and had a long legacy of resistance and hope. He wasn't singing solo. He was singing from the midst of the choir.

Rita Brock says we should think of Jesus this way, as well. It is a mistake to see him as an isolated, heroic individual. It is better to see him as the crest of a wave, the sparkling foam breaking brightly from the force of a whole ocean moving and swelling up from underneath.

I sense among Unitarian Universalists these days a deep desire to affirm the ocean that is within and beneath the voices of individual conscience that we celebrate.

(When James Forbes, the great preacher from Riverside Church in New York City, addressed the UUA General Assembly a few years ago he challenged Unitarian Universalists to find out and name that force active within and among us that moves us to be willing to march to the beat of a different drummer, to stand up for things like marriage equality, sex education, economic justice, environmental protections, and civil rights when others are reluctant to take courageous stands, or are willing to allow the tide of anesthetizing group-think to wash over the world leaving devastation in its wake.)

Yesterday in New York, nearly 300,000 marched against the war in Iraq. UUs were there in great numbers. A friend phoned me from the midst of the march. We're HERE she shouted over the phone. Lots of UUs. We're marching under a banner that says, "They may be the right wing but we are the rest of the bird."

Tomorrow, May 1, another wave of public demonstrations is planned to resist the policies that define immigrants as non-persons. UUs will be there. As James Field, one of our Starr King activists recently said in our theology class: there is absolutely nothing in our theology that would allow us to define any human being as illegal.

What is the name of this ocean that WE are?

Let's call it a circle of life.

Wendell Berry writes,

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,  
And the hands of those who come after us.  
We enter the little circle of each other's arms  
And the larger circle of lovers,  
Whose hands are joined in a dance.  
And the larger circle of all creatures,  
Passing in and out of life,  
Who move also in a dance ,  
To a music so subtle and vast  
That no ear hears it  
Except in fragments.

The circle is an image that appears frequently in Unitarian Universalism.

When the Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated in the early 1960s, the new logo depicted two overlapping circles with a kindled chalice slightly off center.

During that same era, Starr King School built a new chapel which Josiah Bartlett designed as a lovely, simple open circle of wood and glass. This chapel was meant to have no ornamentation or religious symbolism beyond its round architectural embrace. The sense of holiness that could be found there would be evoked as people gathered together in a circle and saw one another's faces.

There is no holiness to be ascertained apart from the holiness that can be glimpsed in one another's eyes.

St. Augustine said God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference no where.

This is one thing our faith is sure of: There is a spark of sacredness in every living being.

When life faces life within the circle of communion we can see the center that is "god," present in our solidarity.

If you have traveled on pilgrimage to Transylvania and celebrated communion with our Unitarian cousins there you know that they observe the communion ritual by standing in circles, and meeting one another eye to eye.

If we probe the image of the circle a bit further, it can give us considerable guidance on the question of what holds us together.

A circle is a boundary –it holds somethings in and it leaves somethings out.

Biologists tell us that life depends on boundaries. The elemental form of a cell, a form essential to life, is an enclosed sphere. Its membrane is permeable -- it allows things to flow in and flow out – but it is not indefinite or sketchy.

What is the membrane—the boundary—around what Unitarian Universalism holds inside?

When I teach Unitarian Universalist theologies at Starr King School this is one of the things we investigate.

Based on the study of our history, reading our great theologians, preachers and lay leaders from the past two centuries, it is assuredly possible to identify theological options that lie outside the circle of what Unitarian Universalism embraces.

While we are open to many things, there remains a definite boundary of what we embrace and what we leave outside. You can't really believe ANYTHING and be a UU. There are limits. Unitarian Universalism is not an empty cipher. It is not nothing. It is something. And there are some theological options that are outside the pale.

For example: You can hold the view that there is no God, or that God exists. But you cannot hold the view that God is the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens such that there is no exercise of human freedom. UUism is clear that there is some measure of freedom, accessible to every living being, given in the nature of things. We hold that freedom is real and is an essential characteristic of life.

You can define salvation, healing and wholeness in many ways. But you cannot hold to the view that there will be an ultimate separation of the saved from the damned in which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering. UUism is clear that all souls are of worth. There is

no final solution to be had by the privileged protection of some and the destruction of others. We hold that salvation is universal.

You can be devoted to a specific religious practice—Christian prayer, Buddhist meditation, or pagan ritual (to name a few)—but you cannot hold the view that there is one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places. Not even Unitarian Universalism. UUism is confident that revelation is not sealed. The sacred impulse towards justice, compassion and equity moves in many times and places, in myriad ways that call to us and teach us.

Finally, you can see this world as tragically flawed, wondrously gifted, or all of the above, but you cannot hold the view that salvation is to be found solely beyond this world – in some life after death or a world other than this world. While remaining open to mysteries that may be revealed beyond the grave or in realms beyond what we know at present, UUism is clear that the ultimate is present here and now, and can be grasped and experienced, even if only partially, within this limited frame of our mortal existence. This means we do not hold to a hope that is only attained in the sweet by and by. We hold that this world, this life, these bodies are the dwelling place of the sacred.

Within these theological boundaries there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent. But there is also a defining focus: a devotion to the flourishing of life.

Our sacred circle draws us together in passionate love for life.

And it sets us apart from religion that supports holy war in service to a God who is imagined as the destroyer of evil-doers; from religion that claims to be devoted to Jesus but regards the poor as insufficiently self-reliant; and from religion that looks to the end of this world, welcoming environmental apocalypse and war in the middle east as signs that this earth is soon to pass away and the elite faithful will be carried by the rapture into a new heaven and a new earth.

Our sacred circle holds a different heart.

(We are devoted to the sacredness of this world, this life here and now.

We do not look to a world to come as more valuable than this world.

We cherish our bodies, this earth, this time and place that is within our grasp.

We are devoted to the intimate, intricate, and unshakeable reality that all life is connected.

We honor and respect the bonds that tie each to all, that weave us into an inescapable net of mutuality. We vow to care for the interdependent web and reverence our place within it.

We desire all life to flourish and therefore we resist those social evils and systemic injustices that benefit a few at the expense of many, or that allow a privileged existence for some while others have their hearts and bodies broken by exploitation, prejudice, censure, or lack of access to the rights and resources needed for life. We critique any conception of God that functions to bless an unjust status quo or pass the buck of human responsibility onto divine forces.)

We affirm a covenant among all beings that we honor with our hearts, souls, mind and strength. We will do everything in our power to assure that this covenant is not broken.

And we seek to connect our circle with other circles of life,  
to expand our circle into ever widening ripples of influence for good.

### **Circles within Circles**

Ralph Waldo Emerson uses the image of the circle to speak of life's continual spiraling fluidity. For Emerson, each one of us is a circle within a larger circle, each one an expression of the ultimacy of flow, emergence, and change – with the potential to manifest ceaseless creativity, diversity, and particularity, connecting and overflowing.

While Emerson is famous for extolling the self-reliant individual, what he means by self-reliance is only accomplished by connection to and reliance on a force of life larger and fuller than the mere individual. He calls this something larger the “Over soul.” He writes:

Within us is the soul of the whole,  
The wise silence,  
The universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related;  
The eternal One ...  
When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius;  
When it breathes through our will, it is virtue,  
When it flows through our affections, it is love.

In his essay called “Circles” he says, “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning . . . and under every deep a lower deep opens.”

Paraphrasing his words about individual souls to be words about the circle of sacred community, I read Emerson as enjoining us to a circling movement that spirals outwards:

The life of [humanity] is a self-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the . . . soul. If the [sacred community] is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave. . . . The heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions.

What name do we give this depth that flows and emerges through us, manifesting in ever widening circles of compassion, connection, justice, wholeness, care, and hope?

Perhaps it doesn't matter what we name it.

Some would call it God.

Some would call it Soul.

Some would call it Spirit of Life.

Some would call it the Tao or the Buddha nature.

Some would call it Love.

As Unitarian Universalists we are at ease with many names for that ultimate flow that generates the movement of life from within us and all around us.

But, however we name it,  
this is our center,  
our grounding,  
our wellspring,  
our ocean.

We believe in life.

We give ourselves to it,  
heart, mind, soul and strength.

We covenant to be a circle of life  
manifesting the solidarity  
that will defend, protect, savor, and save life  
on this planet, our fragile and beautiful home.

We are a fierce and loyal people.  
We are not at heart out for ourselves alone.

We are out for life.

We are out for life.

Let the words of singer-songwriter Linda Hirschhorn be this sermon's benediction:

Circle round for freedom,  
Circle round for peace,  
For all of us imprisoned,  
Circle for release.  
Circle for the planet,  
Circle for each soul,

For the children of our children,

Keep the circle whole.

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