

**Being the Perfect Stranger**  
**The Unitarian Church of Montreal**  
**Rev. Diane Rollert, 11 January 2009**

Somebody recently sent me this quote from Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*:

*In the back of [my maternal grandfather's] mind he had come to consider himself as something of a freethinker --bohemian, even. He wrote poetry on occasion, listened to jazz, counted a number of Jews he'd met in the furniture business as his closest friends. In his only skirmish into organized religion, he would enroll the family in the local Unitarian Universalist congregation; he liked the idea that Unitarians drew on the scriptures of all the great religions ("It's like you get five religions in one," he would say). Toot [his wife, Obama's grandmother] would eventually dissuade him of his views on the church ("For Christ's sake, Stanley, religion's not supposed to be like buying breakfast cereal!")...*

This past December 23rd, Barack Obama and his family observed a memorial service for Obama's maternal grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, aka Toot, at the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu. I guess she must have had a change of heart about the Unitarians. She was right, though. Religion is not supposed to be like buying breakfast cereal.

Of the many things that inspire and challenge me as a Unitarian Universalist, the fact that "the living tradition we share draws from many sources" is at the top of my personal list. If you consider yourself a card-carrying Unitarian Universalist, then you may have one of those little cards in your wallet or pocket that conveniently lists the Principles and Sources of our religious faith.

*Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and enables our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.*

It's right there on the card.

Although Unitarian Universalism grew out of a liberal Protestant tradition, ours is a faith that is forever transforming itself. Our tradition is built upon the rejection of creed-based religion. Dedicated to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we gather as a religious community that recognizes each individual's right to his or her own unique spiritual journey. We believe that no individual can claim to have found the ultimate truth to which all others must ascribe. Instead, we see ourselves as belonging to a living tradition that does indeed draw from many sources.

Our minister emeritus, Charles Eddis, can tell you great stories about the lengthy democratic process we went through in the 1980s, as part of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations, to craft these words to complement our Purposes and Principles:

*The living tradition we share draws from many sources:*

*The direct experience of 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;*

*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;*

*Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*

*Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves;*

*Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;*

*The spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

Each of these sources is, in affect, a nod to the major constituents of our association, from theists to humanists, to pagans, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians. Like all things Unitarian and Universalist, it is a work in progress. There are those who argue that certain items on the list should be modified. There are others who argue that we should throw the whole list away. For each person who would like to remove or rewrite a specific source, there is another who says they will be heartbroken if a single word is changed.

Years ago, I asked a group of Unitarian Universalist parents to write their dreams and aspirations for their children on little pieces of sticky paper. We then tried to match those dreams to a large poster of our UU Principles. The idea was for each person to stick their dream next to one of the Principles. But the group quickly got frustrated. Inherent worth and dignity, democratic process, and the interdependent web weren't wide enough to embrace all they had to say. There was something missing. So we turned to our Sources, and the group sizzled with individual epiphanies. Everything they were yearning to express was there among those six sources: transcending mystery and wonder, words and deeds of prophetic women and men, wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish, Christian, Humanist and Earth-centred teachings and traditions.

Our sources provide us with a deep well from which to nourish and replenish our faith. How radical it was for our forefathers and mothers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to venture away from the Bible, discovering wisdom in the Hindu Upanishads or the teachings of the Buddha. These are the roots that led us to widen our emphasis on world religions and multiculturalism, in worship, in what we teach our children, even in how we adorn our buildings.

Think of the intriguing windows that grace our Phoenix Hall. The symbols of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and our Unitarian chalice are beautifully etched in windows that stretch across the eastern wall. I love the way visitors respond to those windows. They serve as a powerful testimony to our openness here. That inspires me.

Yet, what inspires me also challenges me deeply. There's a discomfort I feel when we assume that no scripture, no tradition is off limits to us. There's a discomfort I feel when we pick and choose what we want, taking what we consider to be the best parts of other traditions and leaving the rest. Can we rightfully lift anything out of its own context and claim it as our own? Are we voyeurs, thieves, respectful guests or loving co-creators?

For a long time Unitarian Universalists have been criticized for their willingness to blend and bend other traditions to fit their needs. “Unitarianism is the salad bowl of faith,” one of my professors in seminary used to say with disdain. In recent years, we’ve become more self-conscious about the pitfalls of mindlessly mixing and tossing our religious inspirations.

In the 1990s, First Nations and Native American brothers and sisters brought to light just how destructive our mixing and matching could be. Too often we treated the myriad of First Nations traditions as if they were one tradition. Too often, First Nations people have seen cultural symbols that were formed by individual communities over millennia become trivialized or be used by non-native peoples for their own financial gain. When we take things out of context we rob other people of their voice, especially when we come from the dominant culture. Rev. Danielle Di Bona, UU minister and member of the Wampanog nation puts it this way, “If it’s not in context, if the user is not walking with us, if the user is not part of our struggle, then it is presumptuous.”

I still remember the well-loved curriculum “Holidays and Holy Days,” that I taught as a new Unitarian when my children were young. What did I know? I was handed a binder of lesson plans and I taught what I was told to teach. On any given Sunday the children would be introduced to Islam, Confucianism, or Hinduism or another world religion along with a related holiday. Each session was packed with hands-on experiences, from learning the positions of a Muslim call to prayer, to making clay lamps for Diwali or dipping parsley into saltwater during a Passover Seder. It was a lot of fun, especially since my co-teacher was responsible for the cornucopia of international food we served each week. (The kids tentatively tasted while we feasted with gusto.)

But in ensuing years, the curriculum came under heavy criticism. Its whirlwind tour through the religions of the world came to be considered too superficial, leaving children with a limited and stereotyped understanding of each culture. Often it meant teaching anything except Christianity, because we didn’t have to engage with our discomfort (even though “Holidays and Holy Days” did have a Christianity lesson plan. But most of us didn’t teach it). We could touch upon those things that were nicely exotic and ignore the rest – visit for a while, but never have to stay. It was exactly where we could go so wrong, playing tourists with faith, rather than deeply engaging in it.

This is our challenge. How do we find the balance that informs and inspires but does not trivialize or steal from our sources? How do we honour our sources of spiritual inspiration without co-opting them? If we have never been slaves, can we sing songs about being freed from slavery? If we are not of the First Nations, can we sing, “The Earth is our Mother, hey-yunga ho-yunga”? Do we drop all references to scripture or rituals that are not directly our own for fear of doing “the wrong thing”?

Our critics would say that we have strayed too far from “the faith of our fathers.” Yet that’s exactly what we want to do. We want to grow beyond our Judeo-Christian Western European roots. If we draw only from those things that are familiar, we also make a statement. Ignorance or absence of something is not neutral. To paraphrase a friend of mine, if we only play music by Haydn and Handel we’re sending the message that only the culture of “dead white guys” is worth considering. (Though to paraphrase another friend: but we’re really good at doing dead white guys’ music – we’d be fools to give that up.)

Blending is a natural part of religion. People and religions are not static nor do they exist in a vacuum. All religious traditions adapt and change over time. Just as there is no monolithic First Nations spirituality, there is no monolithic Islam, no monolithic Buddhism, and so on. Dig deeper and you will find vast differences. Dig deeper into any religious tradition and you will find things that resonate and things that make you uncomfortable. This is our responsibility: to engage with the things that inspire us and challenge us – not to simply claim for ourselves what makes us feel good, as if we were somehow entitled to take anything we choose out of context for our own purpose. At the same time, we can't let ourselves off the hook by never taking any risks, by never venturing into unknown territory. We have a responsibility to listen and to learn. We have responsibility to put things in their appropriate context – something that isn't always easy to do well.

As we went through the process of defining our mission, there was much talk of reaching out to other faiths, of learning more about traditions beyond our Jewish and Christian roots, of widening our worship experiences. This was something that our Social and Environmental Concerns Committee took into consideration as they planned their focus for this year. “We want to understand more about Islam,” they said. With all that is happening in the world right now, I appreciate their choice.

Starting next week, we will have guests once a month who will speak with us about their faith as Muslims. I'm asking our guests to speak from their hearts about why their faith matters to them. I'm asking each of us to open our hearts and our minds, to be more than tourists, critics or consumers. I am asking each of us to be mindful of what it truly means to be part of a living tradition that draws from many sources, that seeks wisdom from the worlds religions in order to inspire us in our ethical and spiritual lives. Our commitment to pluralism comes with a responsibility to fully understand our own roots, to accept where we have come from, and to allow ourselves be shaped and changed by the new ideas and experiences we encounter. This is more than shopping for cereal. This is serious work.

Abraham, Ibrahim, is sitting by the oaks of Mamre, by the door of his tent, in the heat of the day, when three strangers arrive. Who are these strangers? We don't know. The language in the Torah and the Qur'an is hard to understand. Are they each some aspect of Yahweh or Allah? Are they the Lord's messengers, or simply nomads? Perhaps it doesn't really matter to Ibrahim. “Peace,” they say. “Peace,” he responds and he offers them the best that he has, because that is what you do when strangers approach your door. Hospitality to the stranger, hospitality to the new member in the community, hospitality to the unknown wisdom waiting for us, hospitality to all we encounter on this journey: this it what it means to fully embody a living tradition.

Hospitality is the home of peace. If we don't remember, who will?