

The First Source: Direct Experience
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Shortly after I transferred into the Unitarian Universalist Association as a minister I led a Sunday service in Burlington, Vermont. If ever you think that Unitarianism must always be a fringe religious movement you need only to visit any small town in New England. The Burlington Unitarian church commands the centre stage of the town square like Unitarian churches do in many New England towns. During my reflections that particular Sunday morning I mentioned something about the importance of the sources of our religious tradition. I may even have said that as a Canadian I feel more resonance with the six sources than I do with the seven principles. After the service I was surprised when several people approached me and, rather sheepishly, admitted that they had never heard of the six sources. In turn I directed them to a hallway in another part of that rather imposing church building. On the wall there had been hanging for many, many years, open for all to see, a beautiful calligraphy of the six sources of our religious tradition. For them these sources on the wall had faded from their minds and melted into the wallpaper.

Since then I have come to realize that the sources have not usually played a huge role in our community of religious communities. Last year in Ottawa at the Canadian Unitarian Council Conference the need was expressed to study our sources more deeply. Since February is Sharing Our Faith month among Unitarians and Universalists in Canada some thoughts on the sources seemed appropriate. I hope to spark further interest among you.

Why look at the sources?

So, why is it so important that we acknowledge these sources of our free religious movement? Doesn't the present count more than the past? Rev. Charles Eddis, Minister Emeritus in Montreal, once said (quoted in Phillip Hewett's book, *Unitarians in Canada*), "To be a prophetic Church, we must return to our sources, and refresh ourselves at the waters of their spring..."(p 323). Our sources connect us with those people and movements which have had an impact on us as individuals and upon our institutions. Not knowing our sources or being disconnected from them is like planting a tree in the air and expecting it to flourish.

We need to know more about our brand of Christianity, of Judaism, of the radical Reformation, the humanist movement and other world faiths, including earth-centered ones. We need to become more informed about the history of Unitarians and Universalists in Transylvania, England, the United States and Canada. I admit that the history of our tradition is long, complex, and full of names and doctrines that would twist the tongues of the best of us, yet, as is often said, not to know the sources of our movement; not to know the history of our struggles and insights, our blindness and errors, condemns us to repeat them.

Without these roots we lack nourishment. We will wither and will die. It is perhaps part of the reason we have remained a small group in Canada of only 5000 members for so long. It is sobering to realize that there are perhaps 130 times as many Muslims. Without a vital connection to our sources others begin to believe that we are just a modern fad, built on wind, lacking stability. Without connection to our roots we risk being carried away in all directions, pushed by every new fad that comes along. It almost goes without saying, though I will say it anyway, that being nourished by these sources does not mean that we must be chained to them. They are a jumping off point for a future that is ours to create.

Discovery

I have a very personal connection to our sources. If it hadn't been for the sources I probably would never have become a Unitarian minister. If anything made me sit up and pay serious attention to this Unitarian and Universalist movement of ours, it was discovering the sources. At that time I was not feeling very much at home or nourished by the Presbyterian Church and knew I needed to leave. Where might I go? I had some brief contact with Unitarians in Montreal but I hadn't paid much attention to them. They seemed too American for my Canadian blood, too rootless, with too many idle platitudes. They seemed too elitist. It was the Unitarian minister in Nashua, New Hampshire who passed on a little book to Ann saying, "Ray might find this interesting." Actually I never paid for the book and years later when I reminded Steve Eddington of that fact and tried to pay for it he said, "I think the movement got good value out of that gift." The book was titled *Our Chosen Faith*. It has since been republished under a new title *A Chosen Faith*. The original book dealt with the five sources and the newer one included the sixth. I can remember the very first time that I read the first source of our religious tradition. There were tears in my eyes; tears of joy and disbelief; like the discovery of a long-lost friend or a deeper self. The little book opened my eyes to the fact that this movement of ours has the potential for depth and breadth and is worth investigating further. So here I am.

The Kernel of the Source: a Story

"The living tradition we share draws from many sources." The first source of our tradition is "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 that create and uphold life." These words have rich meaning, too much for us to consider in the brief time that is mine this morning. I want to concentrate on the beginning part even though the latter part of the source is important too.

Today I want to concentrate simply on the first two words "Direct experience." If you grew up within a Christian environment, or just listened in on one, you probably sang or heard children sing the song "Jesus Loves Me." "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so." If you ask a Christian how it is that they know or how are they certain that what they know is true, or why it is they believe what they believe, they will most

probably say something like this. It is written in the Word of God. Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so. For them that is proof enough. Muslims would reply in a similar fashion. If it is written in the Koran it is true. Jews point to the Torah while Buddhism – perhaps outside the North American variety - turns to the teachings of Buddha for the confirmation of truth. Hindus might point to the Gita or the Upanishads, Baha'is would cite the teachings of Baha'ullah, interpreted by the Supreme Council while Mormons would point to the writings of their prophet Joseph Smith. For many of the major and minor religious traditions the authority cited for why they believe what they believe is often a book of divinely inspired teachings.

I must confess that there is an attractive simplicity in such an understanding of truth, one which some days I envy. From time to time I wish that my probing for answers to ultimate questions could rest upon such a foundational authority, so solid and sure. For them it is enough and the question has been settled. They know what they know to be true because they have placed their faith in a tradition which tells them so. In spite of all that life can throw their way they stand solid upon the rock of this authority and are seldom shaken. Obviously there are some problems with such a faith stance, especially when two or more groups, each with their solid and sure truths collide with one another. Be that as it may, it has an attraction.

Now, what of you? The core question which our first source is probing is the question of our personal epistemology. In other words,

“How do you know that you know what you know to be true?”

What is the source and on what authority do you base your knowledge and, in particular, your religious knowledge?” “Direct experience” is what our first source cites.

Let me tell you a story. Each person entering the ministry of our association these days must pass before what is called the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. The MFC, as it is called, often strikes terror into the hearts of most students. In the minds of many ministers the words MFC and HELL are somehow intricately connected even though for many years both Unitarians and Universalists have dispensed with the concept of hell.

After having spent 3 or 4 years of your precious life at university and then three more at seminary plus a year of internship and untold expenses, you must appear before a committee of leaders in the Association. After presenting a short address comprised of your best thoughts, or for many of us, our best thought, and being grilled for 20 minutes on everything from your metaphysics to your mate, they inform you whether or not you are acceptable as a minister in the Association. If they say no, quite simply a fifth of your life goes down the drain, so no reason to be stressed-out, is there?

My interview went well and was challenging in the best sense of that word, especially when one committee member asked me the core question, "What is the source of your religious authority?" "Excellent question," I thought to myself. "But did I have an answer, even not an excellent one?"

I knew my honest answer but did I dare to speak it in this context? Would my answer be understood? Had I been a wet-behind-the-ear fresh-out-of-seminary student, I might never have dared to voice my answer. Yet with my heart in my mouth I replied, "I am. I am the source of my own authority and my authority is informed through my participation in a human community." I received a passing grade so I guess they didn't think it the height of hubris. Let's tease that answer apart a little for it is what this our first source is speaking about.

I am

One of our readings this morning spoke about Elijah, the Prophet of Israel, (1 Kings 19). It may have seemed out of place but I will try and tie it in. The prophet Elijah had lost his bearings, lost touch with his wisdom and life direction. He had lost his touchstone for truth. As is often the case he returned to a familiar place looking to be reassured and find the traditional wisdom and truth he had lost. He looked in the thunder and earthquake and fire, but "the Lord" god, truth or an authoritative voice was not there. Finally he looked within himself and there, to his surprise, he sensed the transcending mystery directly in a gentle whisper or a still small voice within.

In the Hindu Tradition, in the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna says these words to Arjuna, the chariot driver,

"I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature...I am the mind: I am the consciousness in the living... I am the beginning the life span, and the end of all...I am the knowledge of the knower."

Osho or Rajneesh said it this way,

"Where can truth be found? You must look within, deep within yourself... You will be surprised to hear a still small voice, which you have never heard before; you cannot decide whose voice this is. No, it is not your mother's voice, it is not your father's, it is not your priest's, not your teacher's...then a sudden recognition that it is your voice...Discover your voice. Then follow it with no fear. Wherever it leads, there is the goal of your life...it is only there that you will find fulfillment..."

Looked at from this angle our first source is quite a bold statement, is it not? It says that the ultimate authority on which to base your life is found within. It states that each of us has the capacity for direct experience of truth and ultimate reality and that direct experience is the only basis on which we can claim to know what we know. Authority or

truth cannot be grasped second hand. It cannot be handed down from one person to another or one generation to another like a set of suitcases. It is our job to sort out what is worthy of our life's energies and what is not, what is real, authentic or true and what is not by directly experiencing life. It is our job to sort out what has authority for us and what does not.

Truth can only be authenticated by each of us when our direct experiences of life resonate deeply within us. As far as I am concerned whether you say that this is the essence of divinity within or the essence of being most human it matters not.

This first source is what sets Unitarians and Universalists apart from most other religious traditions. I would say that this characterizes the uniqueness of our way of being in community. In many churches, temples or mosques truth, reality, God is embodied in a book or sacred tradition, as I have said. In these systems, when our personal experiences contradict or come in conflict with the norms of the tradition, as authoritatively interpreted, then the believer is told to deny his or her personal experience or to bring it into conformity with the tradition. As Unitarians our direct and personal experience is the source of our own authority and wisdom and is honoured. We say that no gods or sacred texts or holy traditions can take away our responsibility to discern and then trust our deepest, most inner, holy self.

Perhaps this is another part of the answer to the question of why our Unitarian/Universalist movement is so small. Who wants to be told to take responsibility for their lives?

In the current CUC Sharing Our Faith (2009) materials we find this statement. "As a religious movement without a creed that everyone must adhere to, individuals are free to search for truth and meaning within a caring and supportive community." We may ask ourselves "Are we taking full advantage of that freedom to search or simply depending on others?"

Honouring our individual direct experience is the vital source of religious knowledge within our Unitarian Universalist tradition, yet the source does not end here. Our individual experiences can be mistaken. We can fool ourselves and delude ourselves. We can be blinded. That is why the answer to the question of religious authority has two parts. I am the source of my own authority yes, however, my authority must be informed through my participation in a caring and supportive community. In this beloved community of seekers, where we can feel safe, our existential direct experiences of truth and reality can be shared, tested, sometimes modified but always enriched.

Together through the door of our direct experiences we are awakened to that "transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures." Together in community we are moved to "a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

Our first source is a wellspring. It nourishes our souls and our communities. Let us not keep it a secret. Let us let others know of this precious source of our living tradition.