

Beginning Anew: The Challenge of Change

by Rev. Sofía Craethnenn

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We have entered the season of promise... and we, the keepers of this liberal religious dream, have found ourselves challenged by the rigors of an authentic Unitarian Universalism. That authenticity requires much of us - the ability to welcome a diversity of opinion and religious belief, the openness to be on a continual quest for truth and meaning, the faith to build communities that sustain us without insisting on the acceptance of a set doctrine or creed.

I fear that we have not yet lived up to the promise of our liberal religious tradition.

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It is my practice, at the start of each church year, to align my heart with the values of the Jewish Days of Awe...the time spanning Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The days between the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement are laced with introspection, making amends, and the sacrament of forgiveness.

Each year rests differently upon me during my frank evaluation of the months preceding this time of reflection and renewal. This year, to my surprise, it was my colleagues who weighed on my heart, and the challenge of this religious tradition to which they have dedicated their life's work. Since Rosh Hashanah, or September 15 in this calendar year, I have participated in the ordination of one colleague at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Oak Cliff, TX; I have supported one who went before our Ministerial Fellowship Committee; I have led prayer at a rally of support for another who received frightening hate mail; I have listened to our denomination's President share his understanding of the likely issues we will be facing in the near future; and have I assisted with the 100 year convocation celebration of Starr King School for the Ministry, which has formed and shaped many of our religious leaders over the last century.

In truth it was the paradox of statements made during the Days of Awe by two Unitarian Universalist ministers who have given decades of service to our movement which forced me to really look at the religious tensions in our denomination today.

Their stories are similar. They are both elders in their communities - respected, honored, celebrated, and relied upon. They have both given over forty years of service. They have both lived the radical change that has swept our movement since its consolidation in 1961, and they both share the same fear. The fear that there is no longer enough room in Unitarian Universalism for their personal beliefs and expressions of faith.

You may have already guessed that there is one radical difference between these two ministers. One believes deeply in a single God: a God who is ineffable, forgiving, and kind. One is a proud Humanist, dedicating their work to freedom from enforced supernaturalism, insisting that the sacred is lodged most firmly in humanity's goodness.

Both have said in recent weeks, "There is not enough room for me here, but if I leave... where will I go?"

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Our Purposes and Principles, the religious covenant that binds together the congregations of our free faith, contain the following celebratory language: "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support."

Herein lies the challenge and the rigor of Unitarian Universalism.

We have made the bold statement that we will learn to build spiritual communities that embody religious pluralism. That somehow we will find the faith - and take the required risks - to make all welcome, to insist that intellect and reason need not be checked at our doors, to ensure that the inner truths brought by each and every one of us will be treated with value, reverence, and respect.

The Rev. John Buehrens, recent past president of our denomination, writes in *Our Chosen Faith*, "Over the years I have become convinced, as Jung was, that the problems in the world are not caused by faith; they are caused by the lack of authenticity and openness in faith, and by the pseudofaiths that substitute for a healthy spirituality of mutual respect and dialogue."

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Frederick J. Strong, a Unitarian Universalist professor of World Religions, writes, "A dialogue by members of the world community which promotes peace requires risk. The risk includes the possibility of arousing anger and hostility in the expression of strongly held conflicting views. Perhaps an even greater risk is the surprise in receiving new insights that require changing your own perspective. It is possible that you could discover unexplored horizons of meaning and truth. In real engagement with another person, you cannot fully foresee what will happen. At the same time, risk must be matched by trust. To expose yourself to the analysis and challenge of another person requires trust. Dialogue depends on trust that the other person is also caring, is secure enough in his or her view to allow for differences, and is open to learning new dimensions of his or her orientation that may be evoked in dialogue."

~pause~

What would it take for us to honestly engage with this process of risk? To trust and believe that the member or friend of our church who speaks passionately for the cause of justice and human virtue as the grounding of their faith is not subtly implying that those with a prayer practice to a personal God have lost all intellectual credibility? How might we come to understand that the one among us who speaks with emotion of the support they have felt from a Divine presence larger than themselves is not speaking of an old white man with a long beard peering down on us from above - or that even if that is their understanding of God, they are not waiting for the correct moment to pounce upon us with acts of conversion?

When this pluralism and sharing of belief is at its most complex, when we are focusing on those practices, words, traditions, and songs which bring us together on Sunday mornings how can we also remember that this is not an "either or" picture? That there are Buddhists and Jews, Pagans and Atheists, Christians and Agnostics, Humanists and those who venerate the Divine Feminine living and breathing among us... and that in the next moment someone may come through our doors bringing an understanding that is broader, wider, or richer than we have known?

How long must we wait as a movement before we realize that those who are drawn to our communities are searching for those highest ideals so eloquently expressed in our covenant?

This is not a religion for the fainthearted.

Why must we act as if someone can come along and threaten the freedom that is our most precious gift? The willingness to sacrifice, and fight, and demand truth in religion has been embodied by our forebears for hundreds and hundreds of years. More and more people are demanding that selfsame respect so why on earth would we back down now?

This church is your home. It is yours... shaped by your yearnings, your beliefs, your struggles, and your goals. And you hold the embodiment of our larger movement in a sacred trust.

It is time that we, locally and nationally, embrace the challenge of this dialogue.

~pause~

As Rev. Buehrens reminds us, "The secret to dialogue is passing over and then returning. We pass over into an appreciative attempt to understand the experience and insight of another person or tradition. When we return to ourselves, as we inevitably do in one way or another, we are no longer precisely the same person we were before. We are changed by the experience, in some way transformed and enlarged. This pattern may be a paradigm for spiritual growth in our pluralistic world."

I believe that we have the potential to serve the broader world as a model of successful, pluralistic engagement - one that includes a radical hospitality and an ever bearing freedom.

Our tradition teaches us that revelation is not sealed. It teaches us that in every moment there is the opportunity for engaging with the fundamental questions of life. And it teaches the possibility, even the necessity, of doing so in ways that embrace diversity. How else can we expect to respond to the needs of a complex and ailing world? How else might we prepare ourselves to be ambassadors for Justice when issues of freedom are more complex than any one mind can hold? Where else might we find the ontological truths, those unarguable realities of life that unite us as people engaged in acts of human living?

As the Rev. Dr. Davidson Loerh, minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, has noted, "This is the essence of honest religion. I call it liberal religion. Maybe you would rather call it metaphorical, psychological, pragmatic, existential, or think of it as a wisdom tradition. It isn't about what we believe or what a group says on our behalf as a condition of membership - whether creeds or principles. It's about what we think we can argue is really true about the human condition, and the commands those truths make on us."

~pause~

As our church year progresses I hope each of you will take advantage of the opportunities for religious dialogue. I know the impetus is alive and well here. In the last year alone we have seen the creation of several groups whose purpose is to allow our coming together in smaller gatherings to allow for meaningful conversation and growth.

I am inviting you to take a risk with your church this year.

Consider joining the Men's Group or the Go Goddess Group. Become more active in the Alliance. Keep an eye out for Adult Religious Education Classes, additional Worship Services, and Covenant Groups as the year progresses. Get involved with Long Range Planning Processes which will guide our future as a congregation.

Make this a time of deepening your connection with this community.

~pause~

One of the real blessings of the Jewish traditions which start the New Year is the sense of beginning anew that returns and returns with the coming of each cycle. After a time of introspection, after a time of asking and granting forgiveness for those moments when we did not quite live up to our own expectations of how to live a fruitful life, we move out into the body of the year with hope and expectation. This is how we enter the season of promise... renewed in our understanding of ourselves and what each of us has to give for the betterment of our communities.

I am in complete agreement with Denise Levertov and her hopes "For the New Year."

*I have a small grain of hope-
one small crystal that gleams
clear colors out of transparency.
I need more.
I break off a fragment*

*to send you.
Please take
this grain of a grain of hope
so that mine won't shrink.
Please share your fragment
so that yours will grow.
Only so, by division,
will hope increase,
like a clump of irises, which will cease to flower
unless you distribute
the clustered roots.... unlikely source-
clumsy and earth-covered-
of grace.*

May it be so.
Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.

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