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“Of Cats and Dogs”

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As UUs we find inspiration from many sources of wisdom and scriptures. But out of that tradition of acceptance we find more than a little disagreement with Orthodox theology.

There is an old joke that gets to the heart of the matter. You may have heard it:

**Q:** What’s the difference between cats and dogs?

**A:** Dogs look at people and say, “They feed us. They give us shelter. They take care of our every need. They must be gods.”

Cats look at people and say, “They feed us. They give us shelter. They take care of our every need. We must be gods.”

As you can see, we have been blessed by a rich and varied legacy of belief and heresy. We question many understanding of theology, some dating back to Origin in the third century Christian Church concerning the nature of God, the personhood of Jesus and a rejection of the Trinity.

Until 1961 Unitarians and Universalists were two separate but similar denominations each with a different view of these matters. In the mid-1800’s when Thomas Starr King was asked to describe the differences between these two denominations, he replied,

“Universalists believe that God is too good to damn them to hell forever.

Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned.”

And so we might say that Unitarians are cat people and Universalists are dog people. Which are you? Get it?

Each denomination brought different practices to our union. Unitarianism, beginning in 16th century Transylvania, centered their faith on the rejection of the Trinity. They believe God and Jesus are one. Their worship is more individualist, less comfortable with structure and focused on the worth and dignity of every person and

tolerance for diversity. Unitarians have a stronger sense of individual rights and self reliance than do Universalists, sometimes outweighing the call to serve the common good.

Chris Boyce alludes to this dichotomy this way. "As the Sufi mystics teach, we all need times alone, 'for only when a glass of water is taken out of a raging ocean can it be still.' And we all need those moments of stillness and solitude. However, we also need to love and be loved, to express ourselves, to be demonstrative about how we feel." Over the century, Unitarians moved away from a core fear of eternal damnation and moved to adapt a Universalist belief in salvation through works.

Universalists rejected the dogma of Calvinism, where only an elect few are saved and the rest damned. Universalists put their faith in a "God that offers all people universal love and salvation" and placed their hopes for a better future on building a faith that honors both God and community. The focus of that practice is infinite compassion and love.

We are similar and complimentary, but with lasting differences. Now in this new age we are challenged to draw strength from all our forebears, to advance in our own time the UU vision of a world of freedom, peace and justice. One wonders if a mere 210,000 +/- of us can continue to matter, or will we decline into irrelevancy? This is our challenge... to chart our course for the next 50 years and decide if we are willing to change to survive. If as a faith we demand nothing, ask for nothing, offer nothing in the realm of the spirit, then we fail at our prime purpose and become meaningless. Our future as a viable, consequential faith for the 21st century is bleak if we do not take a long hard look at ourselves and finally become a faith that affirms the spiritual yes in me, in you and in all those we would attract.

We can start by affirming both strains of our united faith, of our humility and our pride; our times of solitude and our times of companionship. There is hope for us if we learn to accommodate each other and our differences and begin to share our yearning for a faith that offers meaning to our lives.

Living with ambiguities and questions, openness and acceptance, matters greatly. When I came out, I was lost, but was found and saved by a faith that cares for me and all who are sorely troubled. Unitarianism Universalism offers that support to all and a path to new beginnings.

It is now time, in fact it is overdue for us to give up our trivial

discord and focus our future on what unites, not divides. It is time to honor our traditions of acceptance and diversity in more than words. I often wonder why we can't safely use the "language of faith and reverence" you all grew up with, particularly when referring to Jesus, the Christ, Scriptures, without fear of ridicule and derision. What's with that? Frankly, we must learn to speak in the vernacular of the surrounding communities but with our own understandings. If we fail to do that, we can never hope to attract more than just a few.

We must finally come to know that at the heart of our faith, decisive action validates our words. Do we take unwarranted comfort in just talking about oppression, or only when we actually do something important? Too often we engage in internal conflicts that drain our institutional energy while our society crumbles. If we are to honor our past we must create a future where all of humanity is sustained by our faith and works.

The truth is our religion and indeed all mainline churches are shrinking, while the emerging churches such as the Mormons are growing and thriving. These churches have at least one thing in common. They make serious demands of their congregants, beginning with mission work and financial stewardship. We need to take our mission, our message of hope and our financial support just as seriously. We need to have realistic expectations of our members and offer our guests a faith that grows our spirit, within community.

Marilyn Sewell, Minister Emeritus in Portland, OR, outlines some real challenges we must face right now, if we are to survive as a meaningful religion.

Pay attention!

She writes, "All human beings contain a shadow side to the qualities which we admire the most, and so there is in Unitarian Universalism a shadow side to our most positive qualities.

"We need to acknowledge that shadow side, reflect on how it might be holding us back and decide what changes we need to make, if we are to flourish as a movement.

"The shadow side of our rich intellectual life is our distrust of the body and emotions. This fear may be a partial explanation of our lack of diversity, in terms of race and class.

"The shadow side of our strong tradition of the word is our reveling in word and never getting around to action.

"The shadow side of Humanism which is grounded in empiricism and the existential virtues of the human spirit is a fear of the sacred.

"The shadow side of our tolerance is our acceptance of inappropriate behavior by immature or destructive individuals. In the name of being "open" or "democratic" we have created a radical cult of the individual and a concomitant disregard for the health and welfare of the community.

"The shadow side of our theology of love and acceptance is that we are reluctant to acknowledge and confront evil in ourselves, in others, and the systemic evil in our society.

"The shadow side of our free faith, with its ultimate measure being the individual conscience, is seen when we interpret that freedom simply as 'freedom from' not freedom for'".

These are long held religious cultural challenges within Unitarian Universalism that we can solve together if we want to. Our task is to get real; in Sewell's words, to "advance within individuals and within the corporate body the consciousness of the divine. " We cannot survive as a religion if we treat our churches as just one more consumer product to purchase. Friends, this is about our life, our soul, our spirit, not our cars, houses or job. It is not just about individual needs and desires. It is about a religious community of like minded people seeking to find meaning in our lives, spiritually and institutionally. If all we care about is "what's in it for me", we will not survive, nor should we. If we focus only on the individual, we will forever be vulnerable to the least healthy among us. If we distrust and dis-empower our leadership out of fear of something that looks like structure, we set the table for failure.

On our 50th anniversary of our union, I wonder whatever happened to our Unitarian heroes of the Reformation, who marched into hell for a heavenly cause (La Mancha). Here are just a few. For his rejection of the Trinity, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by Calvin. Francis David was thrown into prison in 16th century for advocating religious freedom in Transylvania. He quickly sickened and died. Norbert Copek, originator of our flower communion, resisted the Nazis in Czechoslovakia and was sent to a concentration camp to die.

The question hangs in the air like a sword: would any of us hold true to our faith in the face of death? Fortunately, at this moment we do not have to make that choice. The important question before us is not what would we reject as a UU, but what will we choose...? Sewell: Will we choose to follow our conscience, and to choose love? This choice embraces a freedom to commit. It is "freedom with limits, constraints; freedom that is grounded in the spirit, freedom that is harnessed to holy purpose."

The ultimate purpose of our religion is to do well and love our neighbors as ourselves. Unitarian Universalism needs to teach and guide us to live a worthy life, and in so doing, bring us to the numinous, to God, to the holy; use whatever metaphor makes you comfortable. At the end of our days, we all want to know that we are worthy of love.

Let us continue to grow up, and not get hung up on words, or over meaning. Let's also make this institution worthy of our enlightened, evolving spirit. For then, both our spirit and this church will lead us to create a meaningful, loving, compassionate life.

May it be so.