

“Family Systems – Question Box Sermon”
Rev. Greg Ward
Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North
November 23rd, 2003

Call to Worship (Barbara Rohde)

Scientists studying the growth and uniqueness of snowflakes have found two things: the laws of pattern formation are universal and the final flake records the history of all the changing weather conditions it has experienced. Perhaps this represents a religious truth as well as a scientific one. In solitude, we intuit the intended pattern of human growth (what was once called ‘the voice of God’). In experiencing the turbulent weather of life and responding to it, we become our own unique selves.

Come, let us worship together.

Meditation (Chris Buice)

“Where is the toilet paper?!” This is what my friend used to holler at the top of his lungs from inside the bathroom when he was a child. The reason was that his sister used to hide the toilet paper. This was her idea of humor. She did have some compassion; After my friend had begged for a reasonable length of time, she would slide the toilet paper underneath the door, one square at a time.

Saint John once gave some difficult advice about sisters and brothers: “those who say ‘I love Gode’ and hate their brothers and sisters are dishonest; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” Religious liberals have many different ideas about God. However, most of us would agree that God would never stoop so low as to hide the toilet paper from us. For this reason, an unseen God may seem infinitely more loveable than a sister or brother (who actually shows up, sometimes more than we’d like). Loving our brothers and sisters is not always easy. And yet, if Saint John is to be believed, it is an essential part of our religious living.

I don’t believe in the doctrine of original sin, but I do believe in “original sibling rivalry,” the story of Cain and Abel for example. Yet I don’t need a Biblical text to prove my point. My experience as the youngest of five children has more than confirmed my belief. Still, underneath the storms and struggles of sibling rivalry, there are often deep feelings of tenderness. Through discord, conflict and reconciliation, I have discovered the divine and the human are intimately interconnected. I have come to understand the words of the anonymous poet:

I sought God; but God I could not see,
I sought my soul, but my soul eluded me,
I sought my brother and found all three.

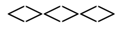
Sermon:

For this morning’s sermon, I asked for people in the congregation to submit questions that they would like to have me answer. Questions regarding life. And religion. Brashly, perhaps foolishly, I said I would try to answer them. But as they began to come in I realized, as St. Paul said before being thrown to the lions, that “I was in deep spiritual do-do.” They rank among the most perplexing questions ever asked. Questions theologians have wrestled with for centuries. Let me list some of them (and I am paraphrasing):

Dear Greg,

What is prayer and what does it do for you?

What is your definition of God?



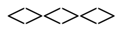
Dear Greg:

Isn't it impossible to ask the question: "How would a UU respond"? Shouldn't we disregard the common answer in our efforts to be (unique) individuals? Isn't it more important that we agree to disagree?



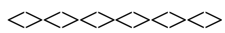
Dear Greg,

Having not been raised UU, and having attended my religious classes during times other than during worship, I want to know why as UU's we feel the need to keep our young adults in religious programs during the service hour. Do you think we are doing our senior youth a disservice by keeping them apart?



Dear Greg,

What is the purpose of the church? Are we a family church or are we a church family?



These are good questions. To tell you the truth, too good. So before I get around to answering them, I'm going to tell a long story. And then I want to say a word about going home for Thanksgiving. Then I suppose, if there's time left, I could take a stab at these. I know I promised that I would answer them. I didn't promise they would be good answers. Or Complete.

The story I want to tell first is a fable. It was written by Edwin Friedman. The Rabbi Dr. Friedman is the author of the renowned book, 'Generation to Generation,' and the father of a branch of psychology known as 'family systems.' Family systems, for those of you who aren't familiar, is the theory that every family of origin (the families we grew up in) – whether wonderfully healthy or completely dysfunctional – is organized into a system. A system that seeks stability where each member of the family has a role to play. The purpose of each role being to keep the system in place.

The interesting thing is that it is hard to break out of that role we occupy in our family. And, even more interesting, it often says a lot about the role we continue to play in other systems for the rest of our lives.

The problem is that most of us are not satisfied with the limitations of these roles. If we grew up as the caregiver in our family, the responsible one, or mediator of problems we will want to find a place in life where we have a chance to take care of our own needs and be seen as having a life of our own. If we grew up as the black sheep, we will want to be seen as capable.

But, for most, this is hard. These roles are hard to break free of. Partly because they are comfortable for us. And partly because they make the rest of our family comfortable. Yet if our goal is to know 'wholeness,' to become a complete person, we probably left home years ago with idea of learning how to break out of some of these roles. Only to return, years later, to our families for Thanksgiving, and in very short time, be expected to fit back into the slot we always occupied. The role that stabilizes the dynamics of our family system.

This can be frustrating. Even exasperating. Because although we had learned to grow and expand beyond the limitations on our original roles – or are still in the process of trying– returning home can mean returning to the original system. And that system will try to push us back into where we used to be. And because it feels hauntingly familiar, we will often comply. A process known as regression.

So even though we are often told to feel a warm nostalgia on hearing the Thanksgiving song, “Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go,” it can strike fear into the hearts of many prodigal sons and daughters.

Friedman’s story talks about a man who had heard a voice. It was a voice that told him what he wanted from life. What he could be. Some may call it intuition. A voice of growing self-awareness. Asking for change. Asking for growth. Maturity.

He tried to listen. He tried hard to follow the call. Sometimes coming close, only to be denied by circumstance or willpower. But he did not give up. Until one day it happened. His path became clear. He realized what he must do. And he set out knowing the opportunity would not wait.

Once on his path, his commitment grew. With each step, he walked faster. With each thought of his goal, his heart beat quicker; with each vision of what lay ahead, he found renewed vigor. Clarity reawakened. He knew he was on the right path.

Shortly after he began, he came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring.

He started across. About a quarter of the way he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. Almost at the half way point, it seemed as though the other was coming to greet him. He could clearly see that he did not know this other, who was dressed similarly except for something tied around his waist.

As they came into hailing distance, he could see that what the other had about his waist was a rope. It was wrapped around him many times and probably, if extended, would reach a length of 30 feet.

As they approached, the other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they met, the stranger said, "Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end of this rope for a moment?"

Surprised by this polite request, but wanting to be receptive, he agreed without hesitation. He reached out, and took it.

"Thank you," said the other, who then added, "two hands now, and remember, hold tight." Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge.

Quickly, the free-falling body hurtled the distance of the rope’s length, and from the bridge, the man abruptly felt the pull. Instinctively, he held tight and was almost dragged over the side. He managed to brace himself against the edge, however, and after having caught his breath looked down at the other dangling, close to oblivion.

"What are you trying to do?" he yelled. **"Just hold tight," said the other** "This is ridiculous," the man thought and began trying to haul the other in. He could not get the leverage, however. It was as though the weight of the other person and the length of the rope had been carefully calculated in advance so that together they created a counterweight just beyond his strength to bring the other back to safety.

"Why did you do this?" the man called out. **"Remember," said the other, "if you let go, I will be lost."** "But I cannot pull you up," the man cried. **"I am your responsibility," said the other.** "Well, I did not ask for it," the man said. **"If you let go, I am lost," repeated the other.**

He began to look around for help. But there was no one. How long would he have to wait? Why did this happen to befall him now, just as he was on the verge of true success? He examined the side, searching for a place to tie the rope. Some protrusion, perhaps, or maybe a hole in the boards. Nothing. There was no way to get rid of this newfound burden, even temporarily.

What do you want?" he asked the other hanging below. **"Just your help," the other answered.** "How can I help? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I can go and find someone to help me help you." **"I know that. Just hang on; that will be enough. Tie the rope around your waist; it will be easier."**

Fearing that his arms could not hold out much longer, he tied the rope around his waist. "Why did you do this?" he asked again. "Don't you see what you have done? What possible purpose could you have in mind?" **"Just remember," said the other, "my life is in your hands."**

"What should I do?" the man on the journey wondered "If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way, this will haunt me forever." With ironic humor he thought to die himself, instantly, to jump off the bridge while he was still holding on. "That would teach this fool." But he wanted to live and live fully. "What a choice I have to make; How shall I ever decide?"

The man knew he could not hang on forever. Nor could he let go. To show his commitment to his own goals, or his commitment to his journey? What a terrible choice to have to make!

A new thought occurred to him. While he could not pull this other up solely by his own efforts, if the other would shorten the rope from his end by curling it around his waist again and again, together, they could do it together! Actually, the other could do it by himself, so long as he, standing on the bridge, kept it still and steady.

"Now listen," he shouted down. "I think I know how to save you." And he explained his plan. But the other wasn't interested. "You mean you won't help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don't think I can hang on much longer either." **"You must try," the other shouted back in tears. "If you fail, I die!"**

The point of decision had arrived. What should he do? "My life or this other's?" And then a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact, it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking.

"I want you to listen carefully," he said, "because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life I hereby give back to you."

"What do you mean?" the other asked, afraid. "I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here." He began unwinding the rope from around his waist and braced himself anew against the side.

"You cannot mean what you say!" the other shrieked. "You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me!"

The man on the bridge waited a moment. The hanging man did nothing. Just kept dangling.

"I accept your choice then," came the words from the bridge, at last, and he let go of the rope.



This evening I board a plane that takes me back to Los Angeles. To my mother's house. Home. "Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go." I go with a fondness. Some nostalgia. A good deal of love. And more than a little trepidation. I know that as soon as I see my family walking towards me, they will hand me a rope. And I will take it. It is what we do.

I will go back and sit down at the table for Thanksgiving, all the while with vivid memories of the old folding card table that was once set up in the kitchen where the children sat. And even if I have the good china, the fine silver, the napkins and placemats in front of me, someone will say something as though I was still sitting at that old card table. And part of me will feel just the way I used to feel.

Perhaps some of you find yourself in the same position. And you go with the same trepidation. Then you probably know that it doesn't matter whether you play the victim or the rescuer. Neither role carries more virtue than the other. They are both necessary to keep the other in place.

So, let me address some of these questions. I will not offer definitive answers, mind you. But, hopefully offer something which allows you to wrestle, yourself, with these questions in a new way.

Q: What is prayer? And what does it do for me?

A: Prayer is what I will be doing as soon as I step on the plane this evening. It helps me to reflect on who I am. Who I am at my core. Who I am inherently and ideally. It helps me to reach beyond who I have settled for. Beyond the roles and categories that I have been seen as playing, and become the person I am capable of being. The person I am called to be.

Q: What is God?

A: God is two things: Our own best selves revealed to us through intuition and experience AND that undeniable bond which connects us to everything else in the world. In the fable I just retold, God is both the voice that the man hears at the beginning of his journey, urging him on to what he could be, AND the rope that connects him to all he has been. That is why God is so frustratingly indescribable and complex. We cannot understand God by simply following our own path or by devoting ourselves completely to other's needs. God, whether we choose to entertain such a concept in terms of a transcendent being or an innate understanding, or nothing at all, is that call which asks us to integrate all that we are – and could be - with all that is. And although God, as Chris would tell us, would never stoop so low as to slip toilet paper one square at a time under the door, it can seem at times as though that is, the only way we have to get to know Her: through frustration, patience and grace.

Q: Isn't it impossible to ask the question: "How would a UU respond"? Shouldn't we disregard the common answer in our efforts to be (unique) individuals? Isn't it more important that we agree to disagree?

A: This is a fascinating question! First, I would say that Unitarian Universalism is a free faith that puts the onus of responsibility on each individual to interpret the truth as it is revealed to them. So it is true there is no answer 'common' to all of us. However, we are a principled religion based on covenant to do, among

other things, affirm our own and other's inherent worth, and see ourselves as part of an interdependent web. In a sense, respect that we each have a call to follow and that we are each, in part, responsible to one another.

If UUs were simply devoted to our own autonomy and being 'unique' individuals, none of us would ever take hold of another's rope. None of us would likely ever go home for Thanksgiving – we would simply agree to disagree and skip the holiday hoopla and go out for Chinese food and a movie. Now this might help us to avoid the problems with family systems, but it would not give us much of the love, care, loyalty or spiritual growth we get there either. I, for one, consider going home to my family to be a spiritual discipline. Truth written large on little squares of toilet paper, offered one sheet at a time.

Saying that we will agree to disagree is fine. As long as we have taken enough time to look deeply at what another is saying and asking. As long as we have felt the tension in the rope between us. But too often our own autonomy and independence is exercised before we have really taken hold of another's rope. Then our relationships are reduced to shallow acquaintances and the world's needs go unmet by the very people who could offer help.

Q: Do you think we are doing our senior youth a disservice by keeping them apart from our Sunday worship?

A: I think the senior youth would gain an awful lot from being in our worship. I also think that we would gain an awful lot from being in their RE program. It is important that we recognize there are two separate "Thanksgivings" being served here every Sunday at UUMAN. We might sometimes slip into the mindset that we are having the real dinner here and they are sitting at the card table with the plastic forks. But I guarantee you that they could say the same thing about us. How many of us really understand what is being served at their table? And who is to say which building offers the finer spiritual dining experience?

I do agree that it would do both groups well to have a conversation about who is getting fed at what table and why? And to share with them the indisputable truth that this is their church as much as it is ours. They are welcome – even invited – to consider which table to sit at. But choosing tables is simply a matter of their realizing, for themselves, when it is time to let go of the rope they are holding and move on to something else. But we must be aware that our telling them what to do is just handing them a rope attached to our needs.

Q: Finally, are we a family church, or a church family?

For a long time "family" has been used as a metaphor for what the church is trying to create. And I can see the connotation of love and care and loyalty within that connection. But the church is not a family and we should be glad it's not for all of the reasons I have tried to outline this morning. Only the rarest of families escape the dysfunction of relegating individuals into certain roles to maintain stability and keep the peace. The church is a place, and needs to be a place, where people are never subjugated to one role, one way of being. The purpose of the church is growth and transformation. To be more than we thought we could be. Families often sacrifice, or undermine, real growth in order to maintain stability of the system.

The church is a place where we are each encouraged to grab hold of a new rope. A rope that, hopefully, will pull us in a direction that teaches us something about ourselves and offers help to someone else. Of course, we must be careful to examine where the other end is tied to. The trick is to make sure we never anchor ourselves to someone or something that is bound and determined to drown. But at the same time, that we don't go through our whole lives never being anchored to anything. It is our call as human beings to realize that we are woven in an interdependent web, each bound to all by rope or by fate or by common destiny or by love or even by the intuitive call that some may call God. To live in this world is to be constantly handed ropes. It is by these we find meaning. Some will tie us to fruitless bondage. Some will be our life line. It is for us to decide which ones to release and which ones to follow.

To the Glory of Life.