

“Lost in Translation”

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Meditation:

[I used a quote from my “Rough Guide to Greece” travel manual which talked about ‘travelers’ who are willing to try speaking the language are generally greeted with more hospitality and generosity. Instead of being considered a ‘stupid tourist’ they are considered a ‘xenos’ – a term which means, traveler, student, teacher and guest all in one.

From there, I talked about how we are often seen as travelers in our local religious landscape. And how we might consider ‘speaking the language of the locals’ to be invited into a more engaging relationship. Our elevator speeches are one way to do this.]

This is one version of my elevator speech:

I’m a UU because it gives me a way to love children more. I’m a UU because it offers me motivation and opportunity to love people more. I’m a UU because it helps me love my neighbor more, even – and especially – when my neighbor is not like me. I’m a UU because it helps me see beyond differences and allows me to see the inherent worth in everyone. I’m a UU because it helps me to love the world – not just in a theoretical words-on-paper way, but in a real-life, stand-in-the-trenches-for-justice way. I’m a UU because I believe it is making me a better person and it is making the world a better place.

Sermon:

Two things crossed my mind as I stood at the counter of that bakery, ten thousand miles from home. The first was a wish for an old fashioned Pentecost. You remember... in the New Testament... when the disciples were afraid to speak because they feared no one would understand and they would be stoned. So the holy spirit came down upon them and infused them with the power to speak in tongues – of whatever language – so all would understand.

The other thing that crossed my mind was the line from the movie “Buckaroo Banzai Across the Eighth Dimension: “No matter where you go, there you are.”

I was hungry on a drizzly morning in the small Greek village of Kastraki, near the ancient monasteries of Mt. Athos. I had been in the country for nearly a month but still only knew a few words. I was tired of being misunderstood when ordering food and thought about Pentecost – and how handy it would be to suddenly have the power to speak in tongues and order whatever I wanted and be understood. And even though I was pretty sure the holy spirit had not visited me, I was determined to try to speak the language of the people whose food I was buying. So I smiled at the elderly woman behind the counter and asked confidently – without even consulting my guide book – if I could have her two mothers who had milked the hot goat. Her eyes got very wide.

It was the look she gave me which made me certain that the holy spirit had definitely not visited me, and sent me scrambling for my dictionary. But, before I could get to it, and before her hand could reach her mouth to stifle what she was trying so hard to contain, she – and I assume inadvertently – spit on me as the laughter came bursting forth. After a brief moment of

clarification, we realized that she didn't mean to spit on me. And I didn't mean to insult her mother – or her goat. I just wanted feta cheese pastries and to be able to speak the language. She seemed appreciative that I would attempt to speak her language, rather than just pointing or insisting that she speak mine.

But what I noticed more than anything, even in that moment, was the uncanny familiarity of that situation.

I am a minister. A Unitarian Universalist minister, no less. I have never spoken in tongues. Which means I am used to being misunderstood. And laughed at. On rare occasion, spit on. And somewhat more frequently, I've found the need to explain myself to someone who feels slighted by my remarks. It happens enough that it doesn't surprise me so much anymore. But I guess I didn't expect it on sabbatical. In a place where no one came expecting I would offend them. The unexpected familiarity made me think, "no matter where you go, there you are."

No matter where you go, there is always the possibility of being misunderstood. No matter where you go, you will see people who want to fit in, but fear that they won't. And no matter where you go, there are those who appreciate, even yearn for, the company of those willing to speak their language. Whoever said, 'It's all Greek to me,' probably never had their mother accused of milking hot goats.

One thing that my experiences traveling – and my experiences as a UU minister – have in common is the penchant for being misunderstood. I've discovered that misunderstandings happen not only while traveling in foreign lands speaking different languages. But they happen among people just trying to get along in their homeland; among people who speak the same language. Misunderstandings happen even among those who share much in common. Like people who share their same religion. Or who go to the same church. What I'd like to talk about today are the conflicts and misunderstandings in Unitarian Universalism around language. And particularly those we have experienced around an issue known as the 'language of reverence,' debate.

Just like all misunderstandings, there are two sides to the language of reverence debate. Let me start by saying that it is a debate where there is no clear right or wrong answer. At the end of this debate, if there is ever an end, there will be no winner declared. Let me also say that both sides are equally loyal to the denomination and both feel this denomination's presence is crucial within the larger religious spectrum. Both would argue that the denomination speaks to them, but that it also has an obligation to speak for them in the larger religious conversations with other mainline denominations. Both consider it important that the world understand the UU perspective on issues such as the ordination of women, gays and lesbians, separation of church and state, equal rights, education, the plight of the poor and other justice issues. Both sides agree on the greater UU ideal of seeking unity amidst diversity; advocating for freedom of exploration as a way of uncovering a broader spectrum of truth. Both sides would encourage individuals to recognize the inherent worth of every person and point out that it is our common call to do good - not to earn our place in heaven - but to do what's necessary to build a heaven here on earth – a heaven based on inclusion rather exclusion. A building up rather than a weeding out of those who aren't like us.

But the problem is that both sides are too often misunderstood. When one side speaks, the other side can't always understand. Neither side possesses great abilities to speak in tongues. It's as though both are asking as plainly as they can for a place within our movement – a place that is open and welcoming to them - and the other side hears them asking for mothers milking hot goats. Something gets lost in the translation.

The language of reverence debate is, of course, about theists – or those within our movement who prefer – or, are more comfortable using – spiritual language - words such as ‘God,’ ‘holy,’ ‘salvation,’ ‘redemption,’ ‘communion’ – churchy talk... And the humanists – who get a little uncomfortable when the wording in services gets too celestial and leaves the secure bounds of terra firma. And especially when the wording becomes more reverential than reasonable.

It should be obvious to everyone that both humanists and theists come to church for many of the same reasons everyone comes to church - for a sense of welcoming community, some engagement on how to make sense of the world around them and an idea of how to be part of it’s future. Or, if I can use the words of theologian, Paul Tillich – without sounding too churchy – we come to church for a sense of ‘intimacy and ultimacy.’

It should also not surprise anyone here that, compared to the average church going public, UUs – and this includes both sides of this debate – are WAY over on the cerebral side of the spectrum. Our demographic shows us to be among the most highly educated of any religion. And as such, language – and words - are incredibly important to us.

For UUs, words are how we identify ‘our people.’ We use them as a litmus test, listening to see if we are in a place that will understand us, welcome us, appreciate us, engage us and support us. We look for and listen very carefully for these words. That is why it is said that Unitarians can’t sing hymns, because we are too busy reading ahead to see if we agree with the words. When we don’t hear enough of ‘the right words,’ or when we hear too many of ‘the wrong words’ we get uncomfortable.

It is a discomfort whose expression seems balanced on a fine tuned equilibrium. Too much churchy talk seems to invite one side to express discomfort. To little, the other side. It is the kind of thing that has led many a minister to wish for a pentacost – the gift to be able to speak in tongues so that everyone can understand. On any given Sunday UU ministers in most every church are routinely accused of using religious language that offends —either by the sin of specificity or the sin of vagueness.

And I hope we all realize, this is far from a new issue in our movement.

Issues about language emerged for forebears of Unitarianism way back when we were still part of the Congregational Church. Conservatives accused the liberals of being too rational – in their theology and their language. A split occurred and the liberal faction eventually became Unitarianism. But the debate didn’t end. It spread to Universalism, until, by the beginning of last century humanism (as we now know it) began emerging from within both sides of our denomination as a prominent new voice of the liberal tradition. It was a voice that no longer seemed to trace the motivation or ethic for people doing good works to God or the Jewish tradition or the role of Jesus or the words of Paul or any of the other religions for that matter. And as humanism grew, it’s rational approach gained momentum and the equilibrium in language shifted even further.

It was the great hope of an emerging generation of ministers in the 1940’s who believed that humanism would spur the Universalist Church, and other liberal religions to revitalize all religion. To seek a new language articulating a poetic mystical humanism. In the words of the Rev. Kathleen Rolenz,

‘These ministers believed that if we could only find the common religious language that underlay all religious experience – a language that did not carry with it the baggage of the past – that we could become a truly ‘Universalist’ faith – a new world religion, where all could be inside the circle of beloved community.

‘It didn’t happen. Why? During the decades of the late fifties and sixties it seemed there was a ban on using traditional religious words in a Unitarian Universalist Church because they were deemed as exclusive. Our great liberal experiment, to come up with new words to express old ideas, had some successes but probably more failures. Why? I think it’s because we got stuck on arguing about the best way (to reduce conversations to the lowest common denominator of agreement – afraid we would offend or exclude someone by using religious wording). So, instead of exploring and re-interpreting, in a human experiential way what words like ‘God,’ ‘sin,’ ‘salvation,’ ‘redemption,’ mean, we instead, engaged in argument about whether such words should even be spoken. We substituted argument and debate for deeper theological reflection and respectful listening. And soon we realized another folly, that arguing with a Unitarian Universalist is like mud wrestling a pig. Pretty soon you realize the pig likes it.’

Although I don’t know for sure, I believe this is the origin of the old joke about which direction UUs choose to go when they come to the fork in the road. When they read the sign pointing to the right saying ‘this way to heaven’ leading to clouds and harps and angel’s singing, and a sign to the left saying, ‘this way to a debate about heaven’ leading to metal folding chairs and the smell of day old stale coffee, we go to the left.

The language debate has been part of our movement for centuries. And, interestingly, where one might think it would become old news and die down, it has actually become a little more intensified in the last few years.

One of the reasons you might know about. It has to do with the recent remarks by UUA president, Bill Sinkford. After a sermon he preached in Fort Worth, Texas, called “The Language of Faith,” Sinkford gave an interview to a local reporter. The first line of the article appearing in the following day’s Star-Telegram read, “A former atheist who is now president of the UUA will push to put the word ‘God’ into a new statement of principles.”

People were astonished – some horrified – that the president and the UUA would do this. It turned out to be a misquote. But the reaction everywhere – especially among humanists - in the denomination was much like the reaction I witnessed in that Greek bakery. Eyes opened very wide. Except no one burst into laughter.

No one, that is, except all the people who have ever attended a UUA General Assembly plenary session. To imagine this event – which is where any change to the principles and purposes would have to take place - think ‘congregational meeting’ on a galactic scale. Think bylaw revision X 10 to the 23rd, and you might have an idea of the mind-numbing bureaucracy required to amend a syntax error much less the amendment of our principles and purposes. Let me be quite candid and assure everyone here that not even God, Herself – in all her Old Testament wrath wielding, fire-reigning, city-smoting power – could get Her name into the UUA’s principles and purposes without the world coming to a screeching halt. And even if by some miracle – which UUs aren’t all that inclined to live for – such an amendment came to pass, let me see a show of hands of all the humanists here who would suddenly start believing in God just because the name got written into

our principles and purposes. I'd guess it's exactly the same number of UU theists who stopped believing in God when the principles were first published omitting the name.

We all know that no piece of paper, nor anyone's authority can get UUs to believe something that goes against what we, individually, believe in our hearts. I know because it's always been true for me. But I also know it because of what I heard many humanists saying as the story of Sinkford's remarks continued to unfold. Even after Sinkford said he was misquoted, even after the newspaper ran an article retracting the statement as a misquote, even after Sinkford published several articles clarifying what he did actually say, I heard many humanists continuing to believe he really did intend to change the bylaws and write God's name in.

The reason is because it makes sense of what it feels like to be a humanist in the UUA – and in the world – today. Which is why I think this language of reverence debate is raging now as loud as ever.

It's important to know that it's very hard to be a humanist these days. In the last 25 years, the cultural demographic of people attending UU churches has been sliding toward the spiritual side. The increase reflects the growth of spirituality within the general public. Not only is the percentage of humanists in UU churches dropping, but their relative percentage in the overall population is dropping as well. Add to this, living in the south, with the rampant use of religious language and its easy to see why some humanists feel outnumbered and pushed to the margins. They feel like they have no place in society. And they also feel like they are losing their place in our movement. No matter where you go, there you are.

And, as I mentioned earlier, many judge whether they are welcome in our churches based the language they encounter while inside. Which is why hearing Sinkford calling for 'more God' in the very place they consider as their last haven, and you can understand their concern.

I want you to know that I struggle mightily in this debate. I hold strong convictions - as both a Christian and a humanist. I have seen many people I love – whose views I identify with – on both sides – hurt, even walk away from our movement – because they couldn't feel welcomed by our language. And yet I continue to use religious language.

I do so for three reasons. First, Unitarian Universalism is an inclusive faith. Every brand of theology that promotes love and works for justice has a place to be expressed in our movement. But no theology has a right to censor or restrict the language of another perspective. When a humanist feels their perspective is honored only when a spiritual perspective is omitted, that breaks the boundary of inclusivity and ceases to be a Unitarian Universalist perspective.

Second, Unitarian Universalist is a prophetic faith. The religious issues being decided in the world today need a UU perspective. Our voice is important. But our voice isn't taken seriously in the larger religious conversation because all too often we are stuck in language that speaks about what we don't believe instead of what we do believe. We need to acknowledge that when we try to enter into these conversations, we are like travelers in a foreign land. If the people in holding the conversation – and deciding the future of religion – hear us trying to use their words and speak their language, they may laugh at the misunderstandings that arise but they are more likely to be open to what we are asking for. But when they experience us as insisting that THEY speak OUR language, they will think of us as arrogant and want little to do with us. We must learn to speak in tongues – so that others understand – because our message is too important to be ignored.

Which brings me to the third reason – Unitarian Universalism is a positive, creative faith. It doesn't require us to say anything that feels inauthentic. It doesn't require us to use 'God-talk' if that is not authentic to us. But it does require us to find a creative, positive approach to expressing ourselves. This is what Sinkford was really trying to say when he brought up the issue.

'I'm not suggesting that Unitarian Universalism return to traditional Christian language. (We don't have to use 'God-talk') But I do feel that we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms - the ability of humans to shape and frame our world guided by what we find to be of ultimate importance.

'I urge each (us) to work on (how to express this). Put a name to what calls you, and ask yourself what it is to which you find yourself called. Practice telling others. It's an exercise that can only help deepen our faith; and with a firmer grounding in (our authentic convictions), I believe we will be better able to reach out to others. We have (the power to help heal) a world that badly needs it. But we may need to expand our vocabularies if we are to be able to develop our faith fully in our own lives, and if we are to be able to share it with others.'

I wish I were part of a pentacost – I wish we all were – not that we all speak one language but that we each spoke our own, unique, language – and could still be understood by all. But sadly, we are not always there.

I know I cannot include words like 'miracle' and be understood by everyone here. But I will continue to say it, appreciating those of a spiritual ilk who force me to stretch my mind beyond what has been happening - to what can happen. And I will say it appreciating those of a humanist ilk who help me ground my imagination in the realistic forces of sweat and conviction – which are the only things that have the power to make miracles real. Because I believe in the day when all humanists and all theists will sit down at a common table and listen, and appreciate, and understand and honor everything that is spoken. And I believe that such a day is the kind of miracle all of us can understand and celebrate on our journey.

To the Glory of Life.

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