

This I Believe:
The Gifts of Religion
July 31, 2011

I arrived at UUMAN suspicious. I came in looking for community and a place to be of service, but I was leery about finding pushy, preachy, church-y people. Marty and I were warmly received. It didn't matter that we were a same-sex couple. It didn't matter that I was an atheist. We quickly became enfolded in UUMAN's family. I stopped worrying about whether anything in the service would offend me. Most of the time, I liked what I heard. When I didn't, there was no pressure to agree with the message. I liked that.

One of the earliest things Marty and I got involved in was a Covenant Group, a small group of people that would meet every other week or so and share feelings and ideas about a topic of the evening. Several groups were forming, and Marty and I were trying to decide between a Covenant Group for couples and a Covenant Group for women. We decided to talk to each facilitator, and decide from there.

Stan and Julie Wooley were facilitating the Couple's group. I approached Stan in the kitchen. I explained that I was trying to decide between his Covenant Group and another, and he said that the Groups were there to foster spiritual growth, but, he said, "I don't care about that. I just like them because they're fun and it's good to get to know people."

Bingo. I didn't care about spiritual growth either; if this guy could not care and lead a group, that was the group for me. I didn't even talk to the other facilitator.

My early ride through UUMAN was much like that. I got involved with the youth group, and although Toniann spoke of how connected the kids were to faith and worship, I wasn't there for the spiritual aspect. I was just having fun and meeting people. Things were much the same when I served on committees... Participated in social justice activities... Took adult education classes. I wasn't looking for spiritual development. Spiritual, Schmir-ritual.

But. Unbeknownst to me, things were percolating. Spiritual development was happening. Kind of sneaky-like. Sunday services became the hinge point of my week. A time to enjoy sacred space... to listen to moving and uplifting music... to hear sermons that felt personally applicable to my circumstances. With each new group I joined, I had the opportunity for introspection and intimacy... I found a deeper and deeper connection to myself and to the relationships that give my life meaning.

At some point I began questioning what I was doing with my life. I really enjoyed my job as a Corporate Trainer for an environmental consulting firm, but I just didn't feel like I was doing anything very impactful with my time on the planet. A mid-life crisis? Perhaps. Or perhaps the hand of UUMAN on the small of my back ... guiding my spirit forward into a life of greater depth and meaning.

Then my mother got cancer. I spent a lot of time with her during her last two years, and took a leave of absence when the cancer spread to her brain and she entered a nursing home for her last few months. I spent the nights at my brother's house, and spent the days with my mother in the nursing home. It was a small place - - only 11 residents, all women. I got to know all the ladies, and all the staff. I stayed with Mom until her death. It was my time with her at the nursing home that illuminated my call to ministry. I discovered that I want to be a chaplain...to spend my time serving the sick and dying.

Wait a minute. A call to ministry?? Just who sent this call? I don't believe in God, remember. I can't really explain it, but it does sort of feel like a calling.

I applied to Candler School of Theology, which is part of Emory University. The day I got my acceptance letter, I gave my eight-month notice at work. "You're going into the ministry?!?" they all said. "Well, that's kind of weird. But it's also kind of perfect."

I already had an academic interest in Biblical History and interpretation, so I wanted to go to a Christian seminary. In my application, I told them I didn't believe in God. They let me in

anyway. My friends said, “Isn’t it going to be full of really devout Christians?” Well - - Yeah - - I guess I’ll just see how that goes. Now I’m about to enter my second year.

Despite my early trepidation, I found that I was warmly accepted by my classmates. I have developed a large circle of friends... I find these Christians to be open, loving, accepting, and affirming. They are non-judgmental, and not pushy. They’re interested in dialogue, across denominations and across the theist – non-theist divide. One of the first things I learned at school was that my classmates and professors are people of good character.

I got to see close-up how important their faith is to them. How much they trust in God. Most have a personal relationship with Jesus, and a very active prayer life. I can see the value it has for them. I can see the meaning they draw from their religion. It’s kind of a beautiful thing.

In my first year, I had a class on the Interpretation of the Old Testament. Okay, I thought at the beginning of the class, let’s see what the professor has to say. I viewed the Old Testament as an ancient, dusty book written by a tribal people in a far-away land, long ago. I thought it would be interesting to learn about it academically - - who wrote it, when was it written, what was going on in the culture at the time, and so on. But I didn’t expect it to have any bearing on my life.

What I found, was that the Bible has a depth and a richness that is delightful to explore. That the stories and lessons have a timelessness about them... an applicability, even to my life. Even as a non-believer. It is a book of great poetry and wisdom. Finding this out was an unexpected gift.

Let me give you an example. We started, of course, “in the beginning.” The first things we hit in Genesis were the two stories of Creation. You probably know them both, although in our culture we tend to conflate them. In the first, God makes everything in six days, and on the seventh day he rests. In this story, God is a transcendent God. He speaks things into existence, first light, then sky and land from the watery chaos, then plants, the sun and moon, then fish, birds and animals and finally humans – both male and female, created at the same time and both in the image of God. The people are instructed to be fruitful and multiply, and to have dominion over the earth.

In the second story, God is an immanent God. He formed the land, and sent streams up to water the surface of the ground, producing plants. Then God formed a man, with his own hands, from the dust of the earth, and breathed life into his nostrils. He made the Garden of Eden and put the man there, to work it and care for it. Then, not wanting the man to be lonely, God created the animals and birds, and finally a woman from the man's rib to be his helpmeet.

So here we have two stories, with different emphases. In one, man and woman are created together, the very culmination of the creation process. They are to have dominion over the earth. In the other, man is created after plants but before animals. Woman is created last. They are to work and care for the Garden.

Why, our professor said, would these two stories be different? Why would both be in the Bible, back-to-back? Are humans to have dominion over the earth, or to care for the earth? Well first, God and Creation may be too complex to talk about in only one way. We might need different stories to capture the meaning. We might need multiple ways to view God, or to view people's place in Creation, to get the full picture.

In the Bible, human dominion over the earth is coupled with a responsibility to protect and care for it. Having dominion doesn't mean you are allowed to clear-cut a forest, or level a mountain to strip-mine coal. It means you must also be a good steward of God's Creation. The two Creation stories give a fuller picture of humanity's place on earth than either one could alone. Not only that, but these myths convey a message that aligns with my own, non-theistic theology. That people are *part of* Creation, and must be good stewards of the planet. Our seventh UU principle describes this as respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

When we moved on to the story of Cain and Abel, I found more wisdom buried in the pages of the Bible. Adam and Eve have children, the brothers Cain and Abel, who each form families. Where, our professor asked us, did Cain and Abel get their wives? The most common speculation was that they must have married their sisters. Our professor fixed us with a penetrating eye. "The point is," he said, "The text doesn't say. What does it mean, that the text doesn't say? It means that where they got their wives is not important to the story." We went on,

reviewing the scripture. Cain and Abel each bring an offering to God. Cain is a farmer, and he brings the fruits of the field. Remember, in the Creation story about the Garden of Eden, humans are instructed to work and care for the land. Cain is carrying out God's mandate. Abel is a herdsman... as our professor said, "he's doing something funny with sheep." He's stepped away from God's instruction and invented a whole new vocation. Abel brings his sacrifice to God, a firstling of his flock.

God likes Abel's sacrifice, but doesn't like Cain's. Why? Well, the text doesn't say. What does it mean, that the text doesn't say? It means that part isn't what the story is about. So what IS the story about? It's about Cain. The story is about Cain feeling like God favors his brother over him. For no apparent reason, his brother is favored over him. And THAT is a universal feeling. "Here I am, driving this crappy 10-year-old Honda, and my brother drives a brand-new Mercedes."

So what do we do with these feelings, when it seems like God has favored our brother over us? Well, what did Cain do? He killed his brother. He lured him out to his fields, and killed him there. Did God think that was okay? Yeah, not so much. God heard Abel's blood gurgling into the soil. Abel's blood cried out to God. That is the first prayer recorded in the Bible... a protest against injustice. Seems quite UU.

This class discussion was a revelation for me. The story of Cain and Abel is not just a story about the first mythical family on earth. It's a story about human feelings of jealousy and envy. It's relevant to my life. How SHOULD we deal with our feelings, when it seems like someone else is getting all the good stuff, or having an easy ride, while we are struggling or getting less? Well, it's not by lashing out at the one who sparks our envy.

I've described for you what I learned on my first day of class. We spent the *entire year* going over the Old Testament. I found wisdom and value in story after story. This was, truly, an unexpected gift.

Another place I encountered great learning was in my Contextual Education experience. Every student had to select a site at which to engage in the practice of ministry through the first two semesters, either a clinical site, like a hospital; or a social site, like a homeless shelter. I picked a clinical site: Emory University Hospital. I worked there four hours per week, as a chaplain.

One of my early challenges was learning how to pray with people. Prayer is not part of my religious tradition. I had been exposed to prayer in devotionals at the beginning of my classes, and among my classmates who prayed before and after group study sessions. But I never had to pray for others, certainly not out loud. But if I were going to be a chaplain, and help people connect to their own source of comfort and strength, I felt that I would need to be prepared for requests for prayer.

I wrote out a few sample prayers. For the first several weeks, I practiced them as I walked across campus to the hospital. Merciful and Loving God. We come before you, thankful for our lives. I ask that you hold [insert patient's name here] in your loving care. Give [him or her] strength and comfort. Let [patient's name] feel your presence, as you are with them on their journey. These things I ask in... let's see, whose name? I guess if it's a Baptist or Methodist or something, I'll say in Jesus' name. If I'm not sure of the denomination, I'll say "in your Holy name." Yeah. That's good. Amen.

My first few prayer requests went smoothly. I usually remembered to ask what someone wanted me to pray for. It wasn't always the obvious. Sometimes they would want me to pray for health or healing, but sometimes it would be for something like patience through the ordeal. Or for their children, left in a relative's care. Or for financial help in finding a way to pay their rent. Unfortunately, at least half the time I forgot to ask what name the patient went by, and I would often be so nervous I would forget the last name that was posted outside the door. So the prayer would go kind of like this.

Merciful and Loving God. Oh crap, I didn't get the person's name! I ask that you hold ... uh... this gentle soul... in your loving care.

Mostly I felt like I was doing okay. I even prayed for a Minister and his wife. They said I had given the best prayer of any of the chaplains who had been in to visit. Oh. But then I hit a doozy. I'd only been at this for a couple of weeks, and still felt like I was getting my sea legs.

I popped into a patient's room and identified myself as the chaplain. She wanted me to pray with her. She was sitting in her chair, beside the bed. I asked what she wanted me to pray for, and I got her name. So far, so good. I reached out to take her hands, and she gripped my hands with surprising strength and intensity. "Uh-oh..." sounded a little worry in the back of my brain. We bowed our heads. I began.

"Merciful and Loving God," I said. "OHHHH, Lord Jesus!" she said, startling me. My wits scattered. I tried to gather them back. "We come before you, thankful for our lives," I said. "THAAANK You, Jesus!" she said. My wits scattered again. I managed to lurch my way through this prayer, with her emphatic call and response style keeping me continually unnerved. She bucked and twitched in the chair. She gripped my hands even harder. Finally, I got to "Amen." "AMEN," she said, "OH, JESUS, AMEN!" I dropped her hands, like hot potatoes. "Um, God be with you," I said, and I ran out the door. I had to lean against the wall in the corridor to calm down. It occurred to me that I should have checked in after the prayer, to see if she wanted me to stay and talk. But I'd been too freaked out. I hoped she couldn't tell.

I learned a lot from that encounter. "Be prepared for anything," I told myself. I actually saw this same patient the following week. The charge nurse asked me to stop in to visit her, because her condition had deteriorated and she had reverted to very childlike behavior and was driving the nurses on the floor nutty.

I stopped in and reminded her that we had met and prayed together the previous week. She was lying in the bed this time, with frightened eyes. In a child's voice, she told me she was scared. She wanted to go home to heaven, but she was scared. I asked if she wanted me to pray with her. She did. I prayed for peace in her heart. I prayed for her to be able to release her worries up to God and to trust in his steadfast and abiding love. I prayed for her to be protected and safe. She kept her eyes open. I was leaning over her, holding her hands, looking right into her eyes. I

prayed vigorously, remembering her previous style, but she did not call anything back. As I prayed, I watched the worry release from her face and body. “Amen,” I finished. She had fallen asleep under my touch.

I have a lot more experience now. I’ve prayed with Muslims and Buddhists... with all kinds of Christians... with people who are “spiritual but not religious.” I’ve prayed with numerous ministers. I don’t need a formula anymore. I pray on the fly, according to the circumstance. I have seen first-hand the power of prayer. How it can comfort someone. How it can help people release tension and fear. How it can give people strength to turn and face whatever comes. I often tell people I’ll pray for them, and then I do. I pray in the hospital chapel. I pray walking down the corridors.

When I’m with a patient, I pray to their God, as closely as I can to their tradition. When I’m by myself, I pray to the spirit of life, or the power of love, or to the Universe. While I’m praying, I often pray for my friends at seminary. For them to be safe, and happy, and healthy. When our dog Wheatley was dying, I prayed for her. I prayed for her to be free from pain, and comforted by my presence. I prayed for the wisdom to know how to care for her in her last days, and for when to euthanize her if that became necessary.

I find prayer to be worthwhile. For me, it’s a way to be intentional about what I want, or the goodwill I feel toward the people I care about. It’s a way to hold up for my own consideration the love that binds me to others, and my best wishes for them. I don’t think prayer needs to be directed at a deity. I don’t even think it needs to be called prayer. Perhaps one might call it directed meditation, or simply an intentional expression of caring. Regardless, it is something I have incorporated into my own spiritual practice. Another unexpected gift from religion.

My journey through seminary and my chaplaincy work at the hospital have helped me clarify and articulate my own theology. As I became more comfortable speaking about my theology, I was met with puzzlement by those who had never considered that an atheist might be drawn into the ministry. One conversation about this occurred in the Chaplain’s office. One of the interns said, “You can’t *imagine* what some people believe. I’ve talked to people who don’t believe in

hell. That's like saying the Bible is a *LIE!*" She went on to tell me about a retreat she went on, where there was a labyrinth marked out on the floor... but she wouldn't walk it because she didn't know whether it had pagan origins. She said, "You know, they can put just a little bit of Jesus in something, and it just opens the door for the devil."

She continued, "I had a class once on Alternative Religions... Oh, you wouldn't BELIEVE what some of those people believe. There's all kinds of crazy stuff out there."

I thought it was time to come clean. "In the interest of full disclosure," I said, "I belong to what you would probably consider one of those alternative religions." "You do?" she said. "What religion are you?" "I'm a Unitarian Universalist," I said. "Yeaaah," she said. "That's one of the ones that we talked about."

I spent the next hour talking to her about my beliefs. How I didn't believe in God, or the afterlife. How I believed that our relationships with each other are what make meaning in life. How I found awe in the natural world, and felt like it was our responsibility to be good stewards of it. How I felt love was a fundamental and healing force that provides a connection among people, and led us to live lives of contribution and service. She said she was really glad we had talked, and planned to go back to her class notes to look up Unitarian Universalism.

The chaplaincy internship program I've been in all summer has also provided an environment of inquisitiveness, dialogue, and exploration. I regularly discuss my theology with my peers, and think about how my theology drives my approach to ministry.

I thought this chaplaincy internship would just be about visiting patients and learning techniques to visit patients. Instead, the program has been an important part of my ministerial formation. It helped me to form, identify and articulate my own theology. I have found my voice in this religious environment, and am able to more readily share my perspective. This not only helps me interact with people of other faith traditions, it helps root me within my own.

These gifts - - finding connection and meaning to sacred texts including the Bible, learning both the technique and value of prayer, solidifying my own theology, and finding my voice and pastoral authority - - have been great gifts indeed from religion.

May we each find our place in our faith, and be open to what we can learn from the wider human religious community. Blessed Be.