

Meditation: Still You Enter In

By Tess Baumberger

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Still you enter in
through my very pores
creeping down my follicles,
you penetrate my skin.

You ride the tiny particles of air
of each silken breath I draw.
You merge with the blood
pulsing through me.
supplying true oxygen
to every tiny cell.

You insinuate yourself into
the ionic surfaces of every object,
so that as my fingertips
glaze them I touch you –
the handshake of the stranger,
the embrace of a true friend.

You wrap yourself into
the intoxicating fragrance
of each infant' sleeping sighs,
made of you and mother's milk.

You enter my eyes dancing
on the rays of the spectacular sun
reflected off this replete creation,
riding sound waves to my ears
you speak with a million voices
in a message that navigates the theme
of love, of hope, of transformation.

Always your enter in
and always you move out again

through my breath on
the night of the moon,
reflecting from my skin,
reaching through my hands
to touch all of your beloved.
I utter you in song and speech.

You flow around and through me
as the river seeking the ocean,
as the ocean seeking the shore,
the rain seeking the dark womb
of the verdant soil.

You move through me like
the sudden hurricane,
the thunder storm that roars glory,
the warm breeze that mentions spring.

An Evolutionary Faith

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
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This weekend is evolution weekend. Religious communities around the country are celebrating the good relationship that can exist between religion and science. We have special cause to celebrate the contributions of the sometimes Unitarian Charles Darwin. This year we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth this great and prophetic man, who proposed an early, cohesive theory of evolution.

Now I could easily give you a sermon today about how religion and science can complement and reinforce one another. However, as we move towards the service where we state our promises to one another at the beginning of our shared ministry – five weeks from today - I'd like to do something more personal. So please indulge me as I “riff” on the theme of evolution by taking one of its central ideas and relating it to my religious journey as well as the history of our faith tradition.

One of the central ideas of the theory of evolution is that small changes over long periods of time can make a big difference. With enough time, you hardly recognize the ancestors of some of today's animals as being “the same” animal.

Witness the case of the horse. Scientists know that it started off as a little cat-sized creature, with soft padded feet. Over time, it adapted to changes in its environment by growing much larger, and its soft feet became hard hooves. If you compare artists' rendering of the ancient horse with images of modern horses, you'd hardly think they were the same creature.

And yet there are enough similarities for scientists to know it is the same animal. They can trace the changes in the fossil record, which shows all the small adaptations that brought the horse from that shape to this. In addition, you can look at the very DNA, and discern the genetic links through the ages.

Today I will explore how we might apply this basic idea of evolution to our faith. Over time, through small changes, we as individuals, as congregations, and as a movement have “evolved.” We can evolve in our beliefs and still be Unitarian Universalists because we have the freedom to change our beliefs and practices over time. Our faith has always valued both individual conscience and the virtue of open-mindedness. It has rejected any creed that would limit that right or that virtue. This has made it possible for our beliefs to evolve when other religions have remained the same for centuries.

This capacity for our religion to adapt to changes in the world, and in belief and practice is true for us on all those levels I just mentioned – as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination. In exploring the idea that ours is an evolutionary faith, I’d like to look at two of those levels, the level of the individual and the level of our movement as a whole.

The individual I know best is myself, so I will use my spiritual journey to show how personal history and denominational history can intertwine, like strands of DNA, as we grow on our faith journeys. The story of my evolution as a Unitarian Universalist is the story of a gradual conversion and it’s also a love story.

One of the most dramatic conversion stories in the Christian tradition is that of Saul. While riding a horse, the story goes, he is struck by lightning, struck blind, in fact, and he hears a voice. This voice says to go

the city and pray for further guidance.

This guidance comes through a man named Ananias, who tells Saul that Jesus wants him to become of his followers. When Saul hears this, something like scales fall from his eyes, and he can see again. But now he sees the world in a different light. He assumes a new identity, and takes a new name - Paul. You may have heard of him. His letters are kind of famous, maybe infamous to some of us.

Science would suggest this story didn't really happen. Even if it didn't, it can still ring true to our own experiences of conversion, experiences that change us, and our ways of being. This story might remind us of dramatic, life-changing events where scales seemed to fall from our eyes and we began to see the world in a different way.

My own conversion story starts about thirteen years ago, when I first set foot in a Unitarian Universalist church. Though I never persecuted Christians, as Saul had, I spent many years criticizing the Christian church in particular, and organized religions in general, for doing more harm than good in the world.

I was angry about how religions harmed and oppressed women as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. I hated religions that propped up slavery, racism, and caste systems. I hated religions that worked to wipe out others, and despised how religions had repeatedly generated war and violence.

But thirteen years ago a series of events began, which landed me in this pulpit today. I had a baby and was living in a place where I knew no one. I wanted some friends for myself, and especially wanted a community for my son. For me, as a kid, community had always meant church.

So I began to look for a religion worth having. A couple of people

told me they thought that Unitarian Universalism might be a good fit for me. They told me Unitarians were pretty cool and had coffee and cookies after their services. Sounded good to me.

One day, when my son was a few months old, I took a deep breath and opened the yellow pages to the religion section. This was before the days of “Google.” I discovered a Unitarian Universalist fellowship in my town. One Sunday morning I took another big breath, packed up my baby, and headed to church.

There’s a joke that Unitarian Universalists are atheists with children. That pretty much described me the first time I entered the doors of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sunnyvale, CA. That was the start of my conversion, but there was no blinding light, no disembodied voice telling me to change.

My conversion experience began, instead, with a feeling of being home, in a church, for the first time. I liked how lay people stood in the pulpit to make announcements. I liked how they shared their lives during joys and sorrows.

Over time, I discovered other things that appealed to me about this faith. I liked the coffee and cookies, when I finally worked up the courage to stay for coffee hour. I liked the people I met there, especially the feisty older women that nobody could possibly oppress.

I liked how these grandmotherly women would grab my baby and carry him around, as proud as if he were their own, introducing him to everyone. I liked the feel of the place. I began to sense that I had found the community for which I had longed, a good place to raise my son, and a religion worth having.

I learned that they welcomed my doubts and questions, as the

Catholicism of my childhood never had. I liked that this was a tradition that celebrated other religions. I loved the fact that many Unitarian Universalists have worked to end racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, slavery, and oppression.

In many ways, it seemed to be the opposite of everything I had found wrong with organized religion. Its democratic structure was so different from the Catholic church's top-down system that I used to joke that ours was a "disorganized religion."

After a few months, I signed up for an adult religious education class about Goddess traditions around the world. This class helped me to reconnect with the divine in the profound ways I had experienced as a girl. In my anger at the god and the religion of my childhood, in my immersion in my life as a scientist, I had come to deny those experiences of the Sacred, seeing them as unreal or unimportant.

Reclaiming my religious experiences felt more like finding a limb I had not used in a long time than like having scales fall from my eyes. It was awkward at first, but using that limb eventually gave me the range of emotion needed to dance a freedom of the spirit I had never imagined. I became more whole.

So I decided to sign the membership book, to become an official Unitarian Universalist. This is not the end of my conversion story, however, it is just another step. As my spiritual life reawakened, my childhood sense of calling to the ministry came back, more and more strongly. Though my work as a scientist was interesting (I studied language and cognitive development in children), I wanted to do work that made more of a difference in the world. That desire led me to apply to seminary ten years ago, in order to become a minister.

In seminary I learned things about our history that disturbed and upset me. For instance, I discovered that there were those in our own tradition who said that slavery was a god-sanctioned institution. There were some, even among our most ardent abolitionists, who were terribly racist.

I learned that even though ours was the first tradition to ordain women as ministers in the mid 1800s, some powerful men were pretty successful in running these women out of their pulpits. I learned that a group of black Unitarian Universalists walked out of a General Assembly in the 1960's in protest of institutional racism.

So I learned that our tradition has had some of the pitfalls of organized religion, after all. This shook my faith, but that is typical of any conversion story. After the initial blush, we learn that all is not as perfect as we had hoped. We must struggle with the tough stuff in order to come to a more grounded faith.

What saved Unitarian Universalism for me is that we do not try to hide that bad history, or to deny the pain that it caused. We continue to hold ourselves accountable for our actions and we try to make amends for them.

We have made progress. Small changes over a long time have led to big differences. Our president, Bill Sinkford, is African American. For decades, we have ordained gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered ministers. We have a department working on anti-racism and anti-oppression. We are working to heal the wrongs of the past in ways that are open and honest. Our faith is evolving, into an intentionally anti-racist, anti-oppression institution.

This truth helped me as I came to cope with heavy elements of our past. But that is just part of the story of my evolution as a Unitarian Universalist. The big picture is that the more I learned about our history,

beliefs, people and traditions, the more I fell in love. I came to appreciate our faith as spiritually deep and moral broad.

I entered seminary identifying myself as a pagan Unitarian Universalist. As I studied the history of our beliefs, I realized we are strongly rooted, historically and theologically, in liberal Christianity. I learned how different a kettle of fish our tradition has always been from the fundamentalist face of Christianity, that embodies so much of what I have always found wrong about organized religion.

The Christianity of our religious ancestors had a very different theology. Instead of acting like they had a corner on heaven, our Universalist ancestors said it was open to everyone, of every faith. This idea of universal salvation has changed over time, little by little, into the notion of a universal religion, drawing wisdom from all of the world's major religious traditions.

Instead of claiming they knew everything there was to know about God and the bible, our Unitarian ancestors said that these were open questions, which everyone was free to explore in his or her own way. The early Unitarians and Universalists were liberal Christians who left the door open for our religious tradition to evolve.

Our religion has changed greatly since its beginnings. Looking at the beliefs of our ancestors, we might think they were a different religious animal altogether. However, like scientists tracing the evolution of the horse, as we look at our history we can see all the little changes that led to who we are today.

If we look at our "religious DNA" we can recognize the lives and work of people like that sometimes Unitarian Charles Darwin and the Universalist Olympia Brown as being like our own, sharing much in

common with who we are as a religious people.

Since graduating from seminary, preaching about our tradition these past six years, my respect and awe for our faith has deepened even further. You see, my conversion story is not as dramatic as Paul's. There was never any blinding light, never any disembodied voice, no scales falling from my eyes.

And yet, when I look back, I hardly recognize the impoverished, starving spiritual self that walked through the doors of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sunnyvale 13 years ago. My life, and I, have changed so much, have been changed so much, by this faith that I have grown to love. My love for our tradition at times fills me so much that my heart hurts just a little.

This especially happens when I consider what a difference our faith could make in other's lives. A couple years ago I was at a hearing on civil marriage for same gender couples at the statehouse up in New Hampshire, where I used to live. There were many fundamentalist Christians there to testify against the bill. Unlike our ancestors, they claimed to know God's mind well enough to speak it. They put in God's mouth words hurtful to me and to people I love.

But underneath their hurtful words I detected a strong current of fear and even pain. One man stood up and talked about his four daughters, who he clearly loved. He said one had chosen to live what he called a "homosexual lifestyle" that he saw as sinful. His voice was filled with pain at the thought that he would not see his beloved daughter in heaven. If only he had heard about Universalism!

I turned to the man next to me and said, "It's so sad that theology can cause such pain." That's the problem, you see. It's not organized

religion per se, it's bad theology. Bad theology caused that father and many others a great deal of fear and pain, and caused them to spread that fear and pain around to others.

There are those within and outside Unitarian Universalism who do not see our faith as a real religion. There are those who think our beliefs are not relevant or important in this world. This experience of mine, and that related by Rev. Braestrup in the reading, both show just how important and relevant our religion is and should be – how vital our religious perspective is in our world.

If we were to show people like this man at the statehouse, or the man Rev. Braestrup consoled in Maine, that there is a loving alternative to this sort of damned and damning theology, we could alleviate so much fear and pain. We can offer a better theology, a more evolved theology that embraces and includes, that affirms and celebrates differences, that sees humanity as basically good.

By offering this theology, the result of our imperfect but evolving faith, we can help people to love who they should love, without judging, without hating, without hurting.

What could be more powerful than that? What could be more relevant and important to our world? What could be more powerful than to pour the healing balm of our faith out into a world so wounded by fundamentalism, by religious intolerance, by nationalism, racism, homophobia, sexism, war and violence?

Our religious ancestors did so much to create and to pass on to us the sacred trust of a better theology, that affirmed in the goodness and mercy of the Divine, that suggested we do not know everything, but can always learn more, that preached the potential for goodness in all of humanity.

By building on their beliefs, by shaping and adapting them to our current circumstances, we can offer a hopeful, healing, loving message to our world. For the world, including the world inright here around us, dearly needs us and dearly needs this powerful tradition we are privileged to call our own.

I am Unitarian Universalist minister because of how much, how deeply, how broadly I love our faith. I believe that it has a saving and healing message to offer to our world, and that this is the best reason to stand by it, to sacrifice for it, and above all, to share it with others, to give it away so that others may live in it with us, further enriching our experience by their presence among us.

We, all of us, are stewards of this evolutionary faith that allows us to evolve as individuals and as congregations, that allows its self to change and to grow over time. It is able do so because our ancestors affirmed the value of individual conscience and the virtue of open-mindedness. This value and this virtue have remained a constant part of our evolving identity, woven into our religious DNA.

May we hold the sacred trust of our part in the evolution of this faith carefully, reverently, in our grateful hands and hearts. May we sing its glad tidings with joyful voices. May we use its evolved and evolving theology to build a new land, a land of promise, wholeness, creativity, and adventure. So may it be.