

THE MORE DIFFICULT WAY

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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You may have seen the piece by comedian Stephen Colbert in which he interviewed an average Unitarian Universalist about God. Colbert simply asked the man whether UUs believed in God, and the man responded (correctly, I believe) that, “some do, some don’t, it just depends.” For Colbert, a noncommittal answer about such a significant subject as God was inconceivable, and he pressed: “What do you mean, *it depends*? Either you believe, or you don’t believe.” Like many of us who have been similarly cornered by someone who insisted on a factual or literal answer to a question that could not be answered in such terms, the interview subject tried to clarify, explaining that belief in God might depend on how the word was being used, but Colbert would have nothing of it: “*How the word is being used*? You think *God* is a *word* that can be used in more than one way? What is it about the word *God* that you don’t understand?”

And so it went, another one of those unfortunate and all-too-typical moments when a well-meaning Unitarian Universalist gets trapped in the wide open spaces of this undefined spiritual path of ours and comes away looking inarticulate and foolish. For a group that tends to be known by our

high levels of education and professionalism, by our sophistication in terms of religious matters, we can become surprisingly tongue-tied when asked to give a clear definition of ourselves.

Some have wondered whether the problem stems from our spurious membership in the category of religion: perhaps Unitarian Universalism does not qualify as a religion, perhaps we are not truly a church because we do not meet the usual criteria. If one scrutinizes Unitarian Universalism from a traditional theological perspective that differentiates religions as being based on “a feeling of absolute dependence,” as Schleiermacher described it, or from a contemporary theological perspective that regards certain fundamental features of human existence like impermanence or assumptions of a basic order and value as unique preoccupations of most religions, we do not appear religious because we show little evidence for such concerns. If one adopts the perspective of the social sciences, again we fail to measure up as a religion because we lack certain religious essentials like “symbol systems” and “conceptions of a general order of existence [that are] clothed with . . . an aura of factuality (Geertz). Small wonder that Colbert grew so exasperated with his UU interviewee that he could only gaze into the camera with an expression of incredulity; small wonder that we regularly get described as a cult, or that some of our congregations,

including one I served in California, have to convince the IRS that we are truly a church.

I billed this sermon as the first in a series on Unitarian Universalist identity, on major themes of our spiritual way, yet I begin by saying what we are *not*. Such a maneuver will be familiar to many of you: how often, when asked a question about Unitarian Universalism, do you start your answer with “We’re not” or “We don’t believe” or some other negative expression? And if you typically respond in this fashion, do you also typically wish you could find a more affirmative response? Is it possible for us to say who we are and what we are about as a spiritual tradition without either resorting to negative statements or falling into the vagueness that Colbert found so maddening?

After a long time of fretting over our tendency to define ourselves negatively, by what we are *not*, I can say that I have come to appreciate this tendency. I see it as having nothing to do with being inarticulate or theologically confused or in any way ill-equipped to provide a definition of Unitarian Universalism. Rather, I begin definitions of our spiritual way with a negative, and I believe you begin with a negative, because that is precisely how Unitarian Universalism does begin, how it must begin because of its essential vision. In this sermon series that starts today and will continue

monthly, I plan to sketch out eight themes or characteristics of our tradition. When these characteristics are put together, a definition of Unitarian Universalism emerges. The definition is not simple because this path we have chosen and helped create is not simple, but it is a definition that can be articulated, even drawn as an octagon (which is the form I first saw it in a workshop given by a colleague). And the first term of these eight themes, the most fundamental of them and the first term of a definition of Unitarian Universalism, is a profound negative.

Though I have been ordained for more than 25 years, my journey in ministry has sometimes led me away from working with congregations and into other sorts of service, and one such side road involved my teaching in a branch of the St. Paul, Minnesota school system that was housed in the county juvenile detention center. My students were children between the ages of 10 and 18 who had been arrested for crimes ranging from disorderly conduct and graffiti-writing to petty theft to drug dealing to rape and murder. Once arrested, these children were confined in the detention center while awaiting their court appearances; and while in the detention center, they attended school.

When I began my tenure in the detention center school, I was instructed in the importance of maintaining control of my students at all times.

Regardless of how compliant or benign they might appear, I heard, my students had the potential to spin out of control, become violent, attempt takeovers of the guards stationed throughout the building. I learned not to turn my back to my class; I learned to count the pencils I distributed and to keep my scissors locked in my desk; I carried a “panic button,” a miniature alarm, in my pocket; I was required to complete a training in physical restraint techniques.

Such a rigid, tightly structured style of interacting with children did not come readily to me. My son and his friends would tell you that I tend towards an easygoing and democratic method of engaging with children for whom I am responsible. Besides suiting my temperament, such a way of being with children seems the most loving way to be. Yet my detention center supervisor insisted that the tightly structured and controlling style was also loving, for it offered my delinquent students the security, even protection, of boundaries, an experience that was unknown to the many of them who lived in chaotic households. Our detention center controls would be a form of “tough love,” stern measures that were rooted in a genuine care for these wayward children.

I learned in time to incorporate this new way of being into my personal repertoire by drawing from my experiences in traditional churches, the sort

of churches that meet all the criteria of theologians and social scientists and Stephen Colbert. Like the detention center, traditional paths are committed to the practice of “tough love,” providing unambiguous guidelines for belief and action, removing most opportunities for choice, exercising careful control of the membership. And this strict, structured approach, so these paths claim, gives the individual a unique experience of love, of being cared for.

Well, maybe. I came to understand the detention center argument for tough love as an expression of caring—though it also provided the justification for enforcing control at all costs. And I understand that parents at times need to practice a kind of tough love in setting boundaries for children until those children have the maturity to set the boundaries themselves. But I do not understand any argument for spiritual tough love except as a means of control. Establishing spiritual rules—not covenants, which are mutually determined, but rules, determined by an authority—makes no sense whatsoever unless the intent of the tradition is to maintain control of its members.

And the practitioners of spiritual tough love do not stop at drawing boundaries around the lives of the membership. Those same rules of behavior, unambiguous definitions of good and bad, right and wrong, extend

from the individual and his/her private life all the way into society, classifying elements of our common life into acceptable and unacceptable categories, acceptable and unacceptable people, and even further, across the cosmos and beyond, to the most fundamental levels of reality, to the sacred, to the known and unknown. Even God Almighty, as conceived by these tough love spiritualities, is not immune from codes of conduct and definitions and boundaries. From this perspective, everything is evident, everything Colbert asks can be answered precisely—and everything, ultimately, is subject to control.

There is another way in religion, an alternative to the path of tough love, though it is far less common. Its practitioners are fewer in number, perhaps because humans, for all our stubborn independence, do carry a deep desire for clarity and certainty that draws so many to the path of control. This other way can be hard to grasp initially, for it begins by saying what it is not. In the Christian tradition, this alternative to the control approach is called the *via negativa*, the way of negation; in Buddhism it is discerned in a meditative exercise that involves saying, *neti, neti*, or *not that, not that*, bypassing specific explanations and obvious answers. Taoism points this direction by referring to an unnameable, warning that “the Tao that can be named is not the Tao.” Hindu scriptures present the alternative to tough love

spirituality as “the Silence before which words turn back, not having attained.” And Unitarian Universalism moves in this direction with our initial negative statements, as we define ourselves by saying what we are not.

The *via negativa*, *neti, neti*, the Tao that cannot be named, the Silence beyond words, statements of what we do not believe: all these negative approaches are our limited human efforts to make a profoundly positive statement: that we dwell in the midst of, and are ourselves, mystery. So great and rich and vast is the nature of the reality in which our lives are set that no statement will ever be able to encompass its fullness. Boundaries and definitions, creeds and codes of belief and practice have no place in a perspective that recognizes the depths of mystery in our lives. All such statements represent efforts to master the mystery, to assert finality, a certainty that is not only unrealistic, but impossible. In contrast to the controlling stance of tough love, this alternative approach suggests humility, a recognition that life is more than the sum of human knowledge, that my ego is not in charge of my experience, that no matter how much I understand there will always be a need for more understanding.

Thus here at BUC we have no creed or belief system to offer, no well-crafted definitions of how life must be lived or how the world must be

understood or how human beings must behave. We are not a spiritual path of tough love, concerned with control.

We are instead a kind of difficult spirituality, perhaps the most difficult around, for we do not pave the way to certainty of any kind. We join our hands in community, we commit ourselves to searching for truth (all the while humbly recognizing that any truth we find will never be the end), we adopt a mission statement and develop goals for what we hope to accomplish by our organizational existence in the world, we recognize that control is useless and growth is always possible—and that is all. The rest is mystery, the unnamed, a silence beyond words.

Being a minister in a tradition that is grounded in mystery presents some real challenges. When those inevitable dark times come where certainty would be reassuring, when the broken heart longs for clarity, I have little to offer beyond my limited human presence. We can hope for healing, but we cannot insist on it as inevitable. This difficult path of ours does come at a price.

An episode of *The Simpsons* once featured the character Lisa running a refreshment stand that specialized in religious ice cream. A customer ordered the Unitarian Universalist flavor, and Lisa handed him an empty bowl. When the customer questioned the emptiness, Lisa replied, “Well,

that's the point, isn't it?" Our spiritual bowl may appear empty at first glance—but look deeper, with eyes appreciative of mystery, and it will be revealed as quite full indeed. Whenever someone asks, "What is Unitarian Universalism?", my reply (and I hope yours also) will still begin with a negative, stating what we are not. If the questioner looks puzzled when we finish, holding his or her empty bowl, so much the better. We leave those who scrutinize us with a mystery, unsatisfied, needing to know more—which is forever the way of our more difficult path.