

TRADITIONS AND TIME

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt

February 27, 2011

“She is a Texan with a smooth drawl and leisurely manner; like her speaking pace, she is never in a hurry—which places her squarely at odds with most Chicagoans.” That was the description of me in the seminary newsletter, when I first began my ministerial studies at Meadville/Lombard Theological School. Having lived in Texas all my life until that point, I apparently provided a striking example of the stereotypical southern style with my slow, broad speech patterns and my equally slow life rhythms.

But years have passed, years spent in northern urban areas, and while vestiges of my Texas speech patterns remain, my pace has picked up considerably. Now I move rapidly through the world, whether on foot or in a car, I push impatiently past people who walk more slowly than I, I whip around cars driving more slowly than I, I press forward in my life, ever faster, eager to get somewhere, and then somewhere else, and then somewhere after that, moving, moving on, moving.

My speed is matched now with my activity level. I have become a very busy person, my work and personal calendars filled, my to-do lists impressive in length and intricacy. My plans cover the next half hour, the next day, the next week, a month out, six months out, this time next year. A busy person, with a complex life, moving quickly—and bearing little resemblance to that unhurried Texan of my seminary years.

I will admit to you that I am not proud of this change in my life pace. Oh, I do not long to be that seminary girl with Texas manners anymore. But I am not convinced that my metamorphosis into a busy person represents an improvement, an evolutionary progression to be admired. For while busyness may look impressive, the hallmark of an individual with an enviably full life, and while busyness may also be necessary in order to accomplish much, I suspect that activity and speed are not, finally, desirable spiritual qualities. In fact, I cannot find any tradition that urges us to get a move on.

This sermon is the fourth installment in an ongoing series exploring fundamental characteristics of Unitarian Universalist identity. Thus far we have considered mystery as our starting point and a limiting factor in all efforts to define our path; ongoing revelation as the motivation for our questions that seek ever more wisdom; and our difficult commitment to

mutuality, to remaining open and willing to be affected, even altered, by those different from us.

Today we probe Unitarian Universalist attitudes toward time and change, an issue that has challenged people of all spiritual perspectives always.

While many traditions struggle to incorporate change into a relatively established perspective, for Unitarian Universalists the struggle comes with finding some possibility of constancy and continuity in a worldview that seems to prefer discontinuity.

As a first year seminary student, when I was still that leisurely Texas girl, my class included an exchange student from the Rissho Kosei-Kai tradition of Japan, a liberal, fairly secularized variety of Japanese Buddhism. The seminary had established a relationship with Rissho Kosei-Kai with the expectation that its perspective on traditional Japanese religious practice would parallel the Unitarian Universalist perspective on traditional Christian practice.

In a class that concluded our first year, we reviewed the major writings of UU theologians, looked at the evolution of the dominant theological perspectives in our tradition, and then prepared a presentation of each student's individual beliefs, recognizing that these would likely change through the course of our study and experience. Though years have passed

since I took that class, I still remember the final presentation by the exchange student—not for what he told us about Rissho Kosei-Kai, but for the critique he gave of Unitarian Universalism.

He suggested that we practice a kind of spiritual dilettantism which borders at times on superficiality and arrogance. The student found this unfortunate attitude present in the way we regard traditions other than our own very small, historically recent, UU tradition: we tend to begin with the assumption that we have the best of all possible worlds, and then we borrow bits and pieces from other traditions, all without making the effort to understand anything substantive about the traditions we are sampling. To illustrate his critique, the student gave examples from UU services he had experienced during the year of his residency in this country, where on any given Sunday morning a service might include a Native American chant, a choral work with references to Christian doctrine, a Buddhist meditation, and the words of a rabbi in closing. None of this spiritual smorgasbord, the student noted, gave evidence of having studied these traditions in order to understand the context in which our borrowed words and rituals originally appeared. If we truly valued the traditions, my classmate argued, we would spend time learning them deeply, rather than simply lifting out pretty words and music to use for our own purposes.

My classmate's criticism has stayed with me, keeping me cautious about borrowing from other spiritual traditions, leaving me less enamored of what I once regarded as creative ritual and eclectic theology and open-mindedness to alternative paths. More than discretion, however, the Japanese student's insight deepened my own insight into the contradictory ways Unitarian Universalists approach tradition within religion, both from elsewhere, from our own liberal tradition, and from our personal experiences.

From the time we first appeared, beginning as challenging questioners of received Christian dogma and then increasingly formulating our own unique perceptions and faith, we Unitarian Universalists have been the ones who stand apart from tradition. In contrast to the preference for sameness and continuity in many paths, we are skeptical of sameness that seems to deny individual differences. We distrust continuity that seems to dismiss original experience, fresh insight. We UUs kick against the traces of tradition, demand that it justify itself anew before we will ever accept it, demonstrate a definite preference for the new over and against the old, the latest over the longest-lasting.

And we push against tradition not just to be wayward or rebellious, nor because we aim to be the most progressive folks in town, but because our spirituality calls us to be always mindful of that which is evolving, creating,

reconfiguring. Unitarian Universalism is a path of emergence, attuned to what is breaking from the bud and blossoming about us every moment. We value growth, change, adaptation as the locus of the most profound truths; we regard meaning as a living thing, coming into being in us and through us. In contrast to those typical paths that insist on adherence to tradition because tradition mediates the sacred, we say that the sacred is not fixed nor set but ever-moving; in response to a standard view of divinity as timeless and unchanging we insist that any God worthy of the name must include change, must undergo process, must be a becoming God.

Not surprisingly, our embrace of emergence, of change and growth, from the smallest to the mightiest, does not endear us to the spiritual traditionalists. Power has a way of becoming entrenched and settling into the traditions of a path, and those who resist it tend not to be rewarded for their efforts. Many spiritual paths, especially those in the West, have struggled to embrace change and value the emergent. As a consequence, these paths have developed what historian of religions Mircea Eliade calls the “terror of history”: they fear time, thwart change, prefer one-time salvation experiences over growth, and cling to traditions even when those traditions have long since lost their meaning simply because they are

traditions. The terror of history is the result of placing meaning outside or beyond time, and insisting that it must not ever be altered in any way.

We value emergence, and in so doing commit ourselves to growth and change: it sounds like the sort of perspective that could save us much of the heartache and struggle that come when only the traditional and the unchanging can be deemed meaningful or sacred. Unfortunately, embracing emergence has not made our way easier, just different. We have our own issues with regard to tradition and change. As my seminary colleague illustrated, Unitarian Universalists have sometimes failed to recognize the meaning that a tradition can carry. Our preference for adaptation can risk leading us into shallowness, being new and different just for the sake of being new and different. Many of us hold some rather well-developed phobias about traditional religious language and practice that we refuse to examine or attempt to grow past. At the same time, we can paradoxically cling just as stubbornly to our own traditions as those traditional paths we criticize. Suggest to any UU congregation that you are planning to change the format of the Sunday service or the committee structure, and watch the commitment to emergence and change evaporate before your eyes. As a colleague of mine once remarked, “Churches are extremely conservative institutions, and *liberal* churches may be the most conservative of all.” We

value emergence; we find it hard to live that value when the emergent looks different from what we are familiar with and have grown comfortable with.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton once suggested that the most frequently voiced prayer in the whole wide world was not the Lord's Prayer, nor some words created by any single tradition, but rather the simple request for more time: "God, give me time, I need more time, time to do what I want to do, time with the people I love, time simply to enjoy life, to keep breathing, to see another sunrise." All our struggles with time ultimately bring us to face the end of our time, our inevitable death. Whenever someone we love dies, it can feel like an intrusion into the usual flow of time and routine. The truth is, however, that death is with us always that we are always saying goodbye, always facing a loss. Our embrace of the principle of emergence includes this recognition: to acknowledge change and creativity necessarily requires the acknowledgment of the loss that is part of every change, of the destruction that accompanies each creation, of the passing away that occurs alongside each emergence.

Yet this perception sometimes narrows, as we fool ourselves into believing that somehow we can avoid the sorrowful side of change. It is tempting to take an ascendant or progressive view of time, forgetting that time's movement carries us just as surely into that good night as it does into

new heights of growth and fulfillment. I sometimes wonder if my own willingness to become ever busier, to load my life and my calendar and my mind with activity, is a not-so-subtle attempt to hide the losing dimension of time, to convince myself that I will experience only growth and gain and, by staying busy, somehow run away from inevitable loss.

But staying close to the fuller understanding of the principle of emergence can break through any possible delusion. As Unitarian Universalists, we commit ourselves to fostering the emergent, and in so doing place meaning squarely within—not outside, in some special and exclusive realm, but *within*—the passage of time. We value growth and creativity as meaningful, as sacred, *and* we also regard loss and change as meaningful, as strangely sacred. Some spiritual paths may fear time, try to deny its force, suggest that certain beliefs or particular practices can enable one to elude time, even ultimately defeat it; like poet William Blake, who urged us to “kiss the joy as it flies,” Unitarian Universalists face time, acknowledge its force plant a kiss squarely on its lips in the very moment it passes by us, bearing those we love and ourselves away.

No matter what arguments spiritual traditions have mounted, no matter the beguiling images of eternity they may have offered, the reality remains—a reality we never forget—that we are time bound creatures. Our

lives unfold through time, not outside or beyond it. Unitarian Universalism recognizes this reality of lives in time and celebrates it by calling us to note and nurture the emergent, time's leading edge, where creativity blossoms every moment. As we live more in accordance with this value, heeding the present unfolding, we discover a secret: that hidden away in the stream of time, not outside it is that very freedom from time we longed for. No longer fighting against time's passage nor running from it, but living in the moment, present here, and the next moment, and the moment after that, immersed in time, we enter eternity. We live forever by living fully right now. German poet Rainer Maria Rilke says it powerfully:

But because truly being here is so much; because everything here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been once, can it ever be cancelled?