



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Co-Creating Our Living Tradition”

Sermon Series Part 1 of 5

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Rev. Jen Raffensperger

Hands up, who really loves admitting when they're wrong? Not too many? Shocking! It sure isn't my favorite thing to do. However, as much as I do not relish the experience of admitting when I am wrong, I do very much admire when others are able to do so. And when I am able to model that kind of behavior - owning the thing I have been mistaken about, and not feeling shame but instead curiosity about how I might learn and grow and do better next time - well, as awkward and hard as it can be, when I admit I'm wrong, I might hate it in the moment but I feel better afterward.

That's the main reason I picked our reading this morning, Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen's "For When I Really Don't Want to Learn This." Let's take a moment to think about these lines in particular:

“Or I don't want to learn it 'cause it means letting go of something I hold dear.

Letting go of being someone who knows the answers.

Letting go of being someone who doesn't know.

Letting go of the way I see the world.

Letting go of how I might have to change.

Letting go of certainty, of logic, of facts, of control.

Of the myth that you can live on this earth and not harm.

Or the myth that I can't learn anything new."

Letting go of being the person who knows the answers, but also letting go of being the person who doesn't know. Just as painful as admitting we were wrong can be admitting that we knew better but made the wrong choice anyway. Growth, change, and learning new things are tremendously difficult - sometimes painful! - AND entirely vital. They can be joyous, exciting, and life-giving.

All this about what we know, what we don't know, and all the strange and mysterious lands that lie in-between, is a lens I want to bring to bear on our faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism.

Each week, when we light our chalice, we call it the "symbol of our living tradition." What does that mean, a living tradition? It means that ours is a faith tradition that is willing to learn, to grow, and to change, to engage in those life-giving - and yes, sometimes painful - practices.

Traditions need to be able to change to survive. That may seem to run counter to the idea of "tradition" as being handed down from generation to generation, but if the tradition didn't stay relevant and life-giving for those participating in it in each subsequent generation, it would quickly be forgotten. Already today we have honored two of the Sources of Unitarian Universalism, Judaism and earth-centered traditions. Although these faith traditions have endured for centuries, they have also changed time and again. Questioning the wisdom that already exists is, in fact, a key spiritual practice within Judaism. It is of vital importance for faithful Jews to return to the Torah with new information about Jewish life, to see how the ancient wisdom may be brought to bear on the 21st-century reality. There are so many and varied earth-centered traditions, shifting culturally and geographically, and so many do not have a single set of written texts or scriptures. Listening to the wisdom of the Earth must also, by definition, take into account the Earth as a living, changing

system or being in its own right. So while there is a comfort found within tradition in these faith communities, there is an acknowledgement also of the value of growth, change, and new learning.

So if Unitarian Universalism is a living tradition, open to sometimes painful, sometimes beautiful, often both, change and learning and growth... does that mean we don't have sacred traditions? Of course not! If you visit almost any UU congregation in the United States or elsewhere in the world, a chalice will be lit near the start of worship and extinguished near the end. What is contained between those bookends may vary wildly by community, but that wild variation to me is some of the beauty of the co-creation of Unitarian Universalism.

“Co-creation” invites us into considering our own faith communities and the practices within those communities, and it invites us to get curious about the things that might need to change as a result of new learning. Sometimes that means looking at things that we ourselves are quite comfortable with.

A few years ago I had an experience that illustrated this for me very well. Before I began seminary, and for the first few years of my study, I served as the Youth Director in my home congregation. We had a tradition of taking our Coming of Age class to Boston each year for a pilgrimage. Each year a group of youth and adults would travel north to the city, and do a deep dive on Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist history. We always made sure that we visited the current headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association in addition to all the historical landmarks, so that the group could gain a sense of that throughline of tradition from the past, up to the present, and into the future. One year, our tour of UUA headquarters took us up level by level from the lobby. Our tour guide that year gave a lot of particular attention to the chapel, where UUA staff and visitors would gather for worship and sometimes other large meetings. The guide pointed out the many design choices, large and small, on the theme of “seven,” to honor our seven principles. There were seven large, angled acoustic tiles making up the most striking feature of the ceiling. There were seven circles cut out of the

metalwork columns that broke up the front of the chancel space. There were seven beautifully crafted lights framing the front of the space. We took appreciative notice, and pictures, and then moved on with our tour.

That Sunday, our group attended worship at Arlington Street Church, at the southwest corner of Boston Common. We settled into two pews, youth in front, adult chaperones seated behind them. As we opened our orders of service, there were the principles printed - all eight of them. Arlington Street Church had been one of the first UU congregations to adopt the 8th Principle, which strives to make clear our dedication to addressing racism and other systems of oppression in ourselves and our institutions. I wasn't the only one who noticed. The youth had questions, and I tried the best I could to answer them. Then one of them asked, "Are they going to have to re-do that whole chapel, then? And poke an eighth hole in all those big pieces of metal?"

We laughed (too), but it was a bit of an aha moment for me. I'm thinking of that line from our reading, the one that says "Or I don't want to learn it 'cause it means letting go of something I hold dear." The seven principles are held dear by many. The discussion over adding another, over changing the principles by kind or number, can feel unsettling or strange especially if one has been Unitarian Universalist for a long time.

And yet that discussion is ongoing, currently. That act of co-creation, of maintaining our living tradition, is being undertaken by the Article II Study Commission. Article II of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations is where the language of our Principles and Sources exists. The charge to the Article II Study Commission, given by the UUA Board of Trustees, is to reexamine Article II of our bylaws, to bring to bear all the knowledge we have gained in the more than 30 years since the last time there was any revision of the language of Article II, to see what if any updates are needed, to reflect the changes we are called to.

You may not find bylaw updates exciting, but I think this is very exciting work indeed. For me, in my own context of having been raised in the Roman Catholic

Church, the idea of a faith tradition that regularly and routinely re-examines the values and principles at its base is entirely radical and amazing. It also feels empowering - we will have input on this process and on the final result.

Throughout the last year or so, there have been many meetings and gatherings of Unitarian Universalists from all over the country to support the work of the Article II Study commission and to talk about what they value most in Unitarian Universalism. Some of you who receive regular emails from the UUA may have learned about some of them. It was important to hear not just from ministers but from people of all ages, other religious professionals like Directors of Religious Education and administrators and musicians. People currently attending UU congregations and those who have left the faith were all listened to.

The main reason I have chosen to take time to focus on the work of this commission is two-fold. One, it will deeply affect all of those who identify as Unitarian Universalist, as well as those who may be newer to our communities and considering if this is the faith tradition for them. Two, the updated language proposed for Article II will face its first public vote in June of 2023 at the annual General Assembly of the UUA, to be held very close to us, in Pittsburgh.

Having General Assembly so nearby is a unique opportunity for us here in Pennsylvania. I know some of you have friends and loved ones involved in congregations in the Pittsburgh area, and already lots of work and planning is underway to make the gathering a success. I have planned a sermon series - this is part one, by the way! - so that we can revisit Article II and the sacred act of growing and changing our living tradition throughout this year leading up to General Assembly 2023. I hope that this series will invite you into a deeper curiosity about the UU faith, whether you have been UU for your entire life, just a few years, or anywhere in-between - and if you are very new to the faith tradition I hope this will make you interested in learning more.

The Article II Study Commission is hosting listening sessions THIS WEEK if you are interested in hearing some of the proposed language. I have posted the link in our Facebook group and will make sure it is in the Tuesday email - there is one session per day from today through Thursday. You do need to register, you can pick your sessions from the website. If you are interested in attending a session today or tomorrow, please email me at revjen@uucy.org and I'll send you the link to choose a time to register. After these September listening sessions, the Commission will do another round of revisions, and there will be more opportunities to be part of listening and feedback sessions in October and November.

But even if you are not interested in bylaws revisions or the inner workings of the Article II Study Commission, I hope that our periodic visits to this work throughout the year invite you into a deeper consideration of what it means to be a part of this faith community at UUCY and of Unitarian Universalism more broadly. It's all a part of letting go of the myth that any of us can't learn anything new. We can learn, we can grow, we can change. It's so vital. Thank you for joining me on this journey!