

“The Trade Off of Freedom”
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February 1, 2015

A kindergarten teacher was walking around and observing her classroom of children while they were drawing pictures. She got to one little girl who was working very diligently, and she asked what the drawing was.

The little girl replied, “I’m drawing God.”

The teacher paused for a moment and then she said, “But no one knows what God looks like.”

Without looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, “They will in a minute.”

Ah, to be blessed with such absolute confidence! This child isn’t troubled by doubts. She doesn’t question the validity of her perceptions or fantasies. She understands what she understands, she knows what she knows.

This is also the way in which some people approach their religious faith. They just know. I’m happy with the path I have chosen, but sometimes I find their absolute certainty intriguing. I was raised Unitarian Universalist and that approach is very different for me.

A number of months ago I had a conversation with a member of this congregation. I don’t remember how it started, but she (Jean) mentioned that there seems to be a kind of comfort in a religious tradition in which a person is given all the answers.

I was reminded of a fellow classmate in a seminary course I took on the book of John. I think his name was Bill. I learned very early on that he and I were on the opposite ends of the spectrum as far as biblical interpretation was concerned. The professor paired up everyone in the class to exchange reflection papers each week; in these papers we would process the previous week’s assignment. Then we’d trade papers and comment on what our partner had written. And I am quite sure that the differences in Bill’s and my outlooks is the reason my professor

couldn't resist putting us together. At the time, I was annoyed, but later I appreciated what Professor Crouch had done, because I gained some insight into a very different paradigm of religious faith.

Bill believed in "no creed but the Bible." While I was learning to interpret the Gospel writings metaphorically, his understanding of the book of John was absolutely literal. Whatever Jesus says in the Bible is word-for-word accurate. He took strong exception to the idea (which we were being taught in class) that the author of John took literary license and used his "own modes of thought and language in reporting...the teaching[s] of Jesus." (The New Oxford Annotated Bible) Bill left no doubt in my mind that his was a faith that was very clear and very certain. The word "unmovable" comes to mind. Actually, in a way like the unmovable, immutable love of the mother in The Runaway Bunny (Margaret Wise Brown).

Who doesn't long sometimes for "the firm grasp of someone else's arms, to be protected...to be cared for, to be encircled, to sleep secure," as Elizabeth Tarbox writes? I think a belief system that can provide security, that can provide answers, that can eliminate doubt, I think a system like this can be very comforting for some people, especially if they are surrounded by like-minded people in a congregational setting.

There are two types of what we might call "closed religious systems." The first is a system that is bound by a creed, a statement of faith that is created by religious authorities. A creed is considered to be a summary of the religion's sacred texts, a sort of shorthand.

So, for creedal Christian denominations, the statement of faith includes a description of "how to address God; the virgin birth; ...the death, burial and resurrection; Christ's role as judge; the role of the Trinity; the role of the church; the forgiveness of sins; and eternal life." (Johanna Reardon, author) It's all there, pretty neatly tied up. It can be comforting to be reminded each week: "Yes, this is what I believe."

So that's one type. The scriptural, non-creedal is the other type of closed system. Bill's religious outlook was one in which the Bible was the only source of authority, "no creed but the Bible." It's a typical stance of fundamentalist and

evangelical Christians. Again, it can be very comforting to know that there, inside this one book, are all the answers.

The lack of a creed is a position that bothers many mainstream Christians. Presbyterian theologian Robert L. Dabney commented a century ago that since professed Christians would otherwise “differ from each other notoriously” in their understanding of the Scriptures, “some platform for union and cooperation must be adopted, by which those who...are truly agreed may stand and work together.”

Another Presbyterian, minister and seminary professor Kenneth L. Gentry writes on the usefulness of creeds in a paper in which he decries the proliferation of non-creedal Christian fundamentalists. He believes that “creeds help to preserve the orthodox Christian faith.” A “no creed but the bible” stance opens up the possibility of all kinds of interpretations of Scripture, with some of them presenting “novel deviations from historic Christendom,” as Gentry puts it, or worse, forming the bases for cults. “Christian” cults, he says, are a particularly dangerous phenomenon in that they proselytize by making Biblical claims.

In describing another function of a creed, Gentry states, “It is absolutely essential that churches provide a formal, public affirmation of their faith, so that their members and prospective members may know exactly where they stand.” In this way, a creed provides clarity. It makes sure there aren’t murky waters where people can get lost in wrong beliefs.

Christian creeds also help to provide continuity with the historic Christian faith, which is meant to stay essentially unchanging. Jesus Christ has been revealed as the Savior. The story has been told; revelation is sealed. There is nothing new to be added. However, a faithful Christian, creedal or non-creedal, can spend a lifetime gaining deeper and deeper understandings of the existing Christian teachings.

On the other hand we, as Unitarian Universalists, as people who have chosen freedom of belief over a fixed doctrine, we have made a number of trade-offs. We have given up certainty; we’ve given up the comfort of knowing the answers; we’ve given up the sense of security that living in a known universe can provide. We’ve given up knowing the whole story, and knowing that revelation is sealed.

We who have chosen a free faith have chosen to live with some measure of ambiguity. We have traded certainty for possibility. It's human nature to want to have answers and explanations. Yet whether we're looking at finding creative solutions to problems or discussing matters of free faith, we need to have a certain amount of tolerance for ambiguity.

We need to be able to stay in the uncertainty, to stay with the questions, despite not having the answer or sometimes not even knowing where we're headed. Sometimes we have to be willing to stay in the fog to make room for new connections which crystalize into a clear direction, or a clear understanding. It's in the fog where our creativity can really flourish.

In James Fowler's Stages of Faith, he describes the "Universalizing Faith" stage as the one in which we become part of the creative force of the universe –because as we open to possibility, we begin to realize our potential as creative beings. He says that for people in this stage, "their center becomes a participation in God or ultimate reality." For Fowler, it is the rare individual who truly lives in the "Universalizing Faith" stage, but I think it's possible for a person to experience at least glimpses of that creative participation, if we can tolerate ambiguity.

Those of us who choose a free faith trade security for vulnerability. Children need security. They need to know that their caregiver would climb high mountains or walk dangerous tightropes to bring them back into their loving arms. Even adults need some security. But, like little shells stuck inside a bigger shell, as long as we stay as we are, we will not grow. We have to take risks; we have to make ourselves vulnerable in order to be open to new revelations, new understandings, new insights.

We who choose a free faith trade sealed revelation for an understanding that revelation is ongoing. We are part of what we call a "Living Tradition." And we trade a single source of written truth for an understanding that truth and wisdom can come from many sources. (See our Principles and Purposes for a list of those sources.)

As Unitarian Universalists, we have traded untested faith for one which embraces and encourages the exploration of our doubts. The Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg explains how doubt is essential to deepening our faith. She says, "We

have to be able to try things out, to wonder...Faith is strengthened...when doubt is a sincere...questioning combined with...trust in our own right and ability to discern the truth.”

In a faith without questioning, any inconsistencies are either ignored or explained away. Those who choose a free faith trade the comfort of not dealing with conflicting ideas with the challenge of holding paradox in tension. For example, we may recognize that humans have free will, and believe that everything happens the way it’s meant to happen. Or, we may suddenly have the insight that, deep down, we’re really shallow. (An example of a humorous paradox.)

We may have given up the comfort and security of knowing all the answers. But instead we find warmth, comfort, caring and security here –not in doctrines, but in our community of faith –in each other. For those of us who have chosen a free faith, we have traded off many, many qualities which traditional traditions embrace. But, to throw out another paradox, I guess you could say, our loss is our gain.

May we recognize the choices we have made, the choices we make over and over again, as we celebrate the free religious faith of Unitarian Universalism. May it be so.