

As a young woman who was interested in learning about all kinds of religions, especially Buddhism and Taoism, I remember being told (more than once!) that I should learn from my own tradition. I should first go deep in my own tradition. I remember feeling quite puzzled by these remarks. What was “my own tradition?” It was clear that those who said that did not think that Buddhism or Taoism could be my traditions. Maybe they were right, but it seemed to me that Buddhism or Taoism had as much claim to be my own tradition as any other religion.

Growing up I was raised mostly unchurched. My mother’s family had a tradition; they were Roman Catholic. My mother had left that tradition. She had gone to a convent high school and was given a beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary as an award. Mary lived in the closet at our house. A couple of times when my mother was distressed, she went to mass and took me with her. I remember mystery (the mass was in Latin), beauty and a feeling of awe. Did that make Roman Catholicism my tradition? I don’t think so.

I never knew what religious tradition my father’s family had. As far as I knew when I was young, he never went to church. In elementary school in Pennsylvania in those days, the Protestant Lord’s Prayer was recited everyday in my classroom. I don’t know about the other kids, but I didn’t understand it. No one taught me anything about it, and it really did not make any sense to me. I did understand that all the other kids went to Sunday school. I wanted to be like those other kids so I asked my parents if I could go to Sunday school.

Every week for one full year, my father took me to a Presbyterian Sunday school. Then he went to his office. I know it was every week because I remember that at the end of that year, I was given a children’s pictorial atlas of the “Bible Lands” as a reward for perfect attendance. After that I never went again. I had been getting quite anxious and worried about what the Presbyterians told me. I was having nightmares, especially when they told me about the poor children in Africa who would go to hell because they didn’t know Jesus. That just didn’t seem right or fair. Why would God punish someone forever because of something that they didn’t know? Did that one year of Presbyterian Sunday school make Protestantism my tradition? I don’t think so. Because I lived in a pre-dominantly Christian culture, did that automatically make Christianity my tradition? What do you think? I don’t think so.

When I was a teenager, my parents found Unitarian Universalism and I went to church with them a few times. It became my father’s church. But I didn’t learn Unitarian Universalist history and heritage. I did not attend worship services regularly. I knew that if I ever belonged to a religious congregation it would likely be Unitarian Universalist. But none of that was enough to make Unitarian Universalism my tradition, my heritage then.

In college, I was an active seeker and I visited several different religious communities including a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I rejected all of them because at that time they all seemed to be preaching that they were superior to everyone else. The Unitarian Universalist communicated that they were superior because they were more liberal and smarter. Not a very appealing message!

I can tell you that with this religious background, I never envisioned myself becoming a minister and preaching about tradition! We each have our own histories. The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration has a long history. Unitarian Universalism has a fifty year history with much older roots in both Unitarianism and Universalism.

What about you? Did you grow up with a religious tradition? Do you claim a religious tradition now? Is it one that you grew up with? Have you rejected all that you learned about religion when you were a child? How do you claim a religious heritage? For that matter, does tradition really matter?

Now, I do claim Unitarian Universalism as my own tradition, my heritage. For me, this is a meaningful heritage that I am happy to share and to pass on. It became my tradition when I committed myself to a religious community, engaged regularly in worship, served the congregation and served with my congregation in the wider community. I could commit myself because the people were welcoming and because they were willing to share what they had found.

I claimed the tradition when I learned it, learned it in some depth. I could grow in spiritual depth and maturity with this tradition. And yes, now, I do think that knowing one's spiritual tradition and heritage is important. First, for many of us is to find that tradition! Then we can invest in it, learn from it and pass it on. Then we can improvise and innovate within our tradition. And we are better able to learn from all traditions when we know our own foundations.

Both jazz and Unitarian Universalism are living traditions. There is history and heritage with standards or principles. We just sang a jazz standard. "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." There is a call in that song for energy and movement and for commitment. You need to know the foundations in order to know how to improvise, or how to keep playing from mistakes. To know how to use our mistakes well. What is living and healthy grows and changes. If it is static or rigid, it becomes lifeless. It dies. If it is disconnected from its roots, a living tradition can be shallow or easily blown away. It loses depth and loses meaning.

Some folks cling to tradition and fear change. Others disregard heritage and are always ready for the new, disregarding the past. I think that many Unitarian Universalists have been in that second category. Many new to Unitarian Universalism are not really aware of our rich theological history, our history of spiritual practices or our history of social justice work. Others who have been around for longer get discouraged by our mistakes, disappointed that we are not already the ideal Beloved Community that we aspire to be.

In our personal lives, we may wish to forget the painful parts of our history. Yet it is our stories and our memories which create our sense of a continuing self. It is our stories, especially as they are shared, which allow us to connect to each other, to be in relationship. This is not only true for us as individuals but also true in our communities and true for our religious traditions.

In the late 20th century, many people came to Unitarian Universalism hurt by past religious experiences. They wanted to forget or deny all that came before. In those days, in many Unitarian Universalist communities, children's religious education taught about the wonders of science and nature, taught about other people's religious ideas. Parents who had felt damaged by religion said, "We want our children to feel free to choose their own religion when they grow up." Unitarian Universalist children were taught very little about the tradition that they were growing up in. Some of those parents found themselves confused and unhappy when their children chose to become fundamental Christians. Some of those young people who remained Unitarian Universalists complained that they were taught their own tradition. Now, we are teaching our children about being Unitarian Universalist.

What am I saying about history and tradition? Simply that we need to know it and accept it: successes and failures. We don't need to deny it; we cause ourselves pain and trouble when we try to forget it. And we don't need to punish ourselves or others for past mistakes. We can learn from our mistakes and limitations, and we can value and enhance our strengths. Supposedly, jazz "pianist Mary Lou Williams occasionally interrupted her performances to implore her audiences, 'Listen, this will heal you.'"ⁱ How is that? Let's hear another jazz quote. This is from writer Ralph Ellison:

Now I had learned from the jazz musicians I had known as a boy in Oklahoma City something of the discipline and devotion to his art required of the artists. . . . These jazzmen ... lived for and with music intensely. The driving motivation was ... the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments. . . and the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation. The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group ... was a marvel of social organization.

I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong as it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form.ⁱⁱ

Living traditions, like jazz and Unitarian Universalism, are changing, growing traditions. They are open to creativity, flexibility, innovation and improvisation. Just as we need not fear the past, we also need not fear change. Our own personalities, our own creativity are needed as we go forward into our futures as individuals, as families, as religious communities and yes, as a religious tradition. Another jazz quote:

Chico Freeman recalled, "I did an interview with Dizzie Gillespie once (. . .) and the guy asked one of those questions you've heard 275 times and it still doesn't make a lot of sense; he asks, 'What is jazz?' Well, Dizzie answered this question right away. He said jazz is the search for truth. And as soon as he said that, the light went on, and I added, 'And truth is what it is – not what was, or what will be. Truth is in the moment. To play who or what you are at that moment . . . And there's a certain serenity that comes from simply being who you really are.'ⁱⁱⁱ (Welch, p.24)

"There's a certain serenity that comes from simply being who you are." Can we do that? Can we be who are? Can we accept responsibility for our own actions? Can we accept it when our Unitarian Universalist leaders, communities disappoint us? Let me be clear, when I suggest that we accept what has happened, I am not saying that it's okay to continue making the same mistakes. Innovation means learning from the past and changing. As Bill Evans said, "*in jazz, a mistake can be – in fact, must be- justified by what follows it.*"^{iv}

Sharon Welch stated:

Our communities can have the power and fluidity of jazz. This happens as we focus not just on particular strategies . . . but also on what creates those policies and strategies – the values, connection and community . . . What is the chord progression for a cohesive community? Respect for every human being; commitment to justice; self-criticism; an awareness of our weaknesses and flaws; openness to conflict, critique and change; compassion; energy; creativity; delight in the surprise and unexpected gifts of life. (Welch, p.25)

Unitarian Universalist theologians, Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens wrote *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the 21st Century*. They affirm that religious progressives can create a liberal religious renaissance. For it to flourish, they say, we must rediscover the spiritual sustenance available in the theological house that our liberal forebears built, and embrace what our tradition truly holds sacred.^v That renaissance

is not limited by the past. As our hymn, “Spirit of Life,” says in a mixed metaphor that I love, “Roots hold me close, Wings set me free.” Parker writes:

Religious tradition can show a path and give some clues, but when a person or a community is up against a wall, tradition at best serves as a nudge to take the next step. Revelation comes to those who are radically hospitable to what they do not know. The choice to take the next step is an act of holy curiosity.^{vi}

Holy curiosity. Energy, creativity, commitment: swing? “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” What is “that swing?” Energy, life, creativity. “Just give that rhythm everything you got!” Give it you. Give yourself fully to that rhythm, using our history and tradition and including our mistakes. Taking the risks to be really you, to be really us and to try the new, be creative. Let us swing together!

Amen. Blessed Be.

ⁱ Quoted in Welch, Sharon. *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 18.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Welch, Sharon. *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Welch, Sharon. *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p.24.

^{iv} Welch, Sharon. *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p.23.

^v Buehrens, John and Rebecca Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the 21st Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010, book jacket flap.

^{vi} Parker, Rebecca. “The Rocks Will Cry Out” in Buehrens, John and Rebecca Parker. *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the 21st Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010, p. 102.