

# Theme Talk 3

## Composing Our Unitarian Universalist Future: What's Next?

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This afternoon I want to begin the conversation around “What’s Next?” from my own perspective. Then, we have the pleasure of hearing from Rob Hardies and Ken Beldon who will offer some of their perspectives, and then we will move toward some conversations.

I am going to try to be as grounded as I can as we talk about “What’s Next.” But I can’t help to feel some inebriation from the spirit of our conversations that have occurred up to this moment. So as we explore some images and convictions that have come about already in our conversation about “What’s Possible” for Unitarian Universalism’s future, I want to continually ask as we consider any proposal for what should be part of our future is to also ask ourselves the question: “For the sake of what?”

“For the sake of what?” should be the resounding note for any proposal for Unitarian Universalism’s future. Otherwise, any action would do. Otherwise, we would then just have a list of actions that are not grounded in some deep conviction about “Why?”

There is a wonderful consultant, Peter Block, who has written a book, *The Answer to How is Yes*. He says that oftentimes we rush into the “hows” and think that if we just add more “hows,” more things to do, that that would take care of the future. But at the starting point, as some of us have been indicating, it is important to be clear about what we are saying “yes” to— it is this “yes” that fuels and empowers the actions that we would take as a religious movement.

I will provide some different images, some provocations, some of my hopes for the future of Unitarian Universalism. Just as a way to till the ground a little bit. Just as a way for us to begin to imagine that future together. I am going to use the structure of “What would it be like if...”

**What would it be like if** we imagined that our task is to create narratives of the future that will evoke in us and provoke us to develop the capacities, feeling, and meaning to be *significant contributors* —along with other religious communities—to helping humanity find new relationships to tradition, to the ailing Earth, to our humanity, to our global community, to God, to what’s Holy.

**What would be like if** we stepped up at this 50<sup>th</sup> year point and asked ourselves to become significant contributors?

For the sake of what?

- For the sake of not hiding our light under a bushel.
- For the sake of living into our potential.
- For the sake of giving our gift and not holding it back.
- For the sake of being influenced by what others have to offer and allow ourselves to not hide but to come out of the shadows and offer distinctively and forthrightly our religious voice and our perspective.

**What would it be like if** we decided to show up more fully on the religious landscape as a living tradition of faith—with greater capacities for interreligious dialogue? We can make more connections with others who we have thought have excluded us—or whom we’ve excluded first with our pretense of being “open.” We all draw from “one river,” from our “many wells”<sup>1</sup>—to block off some of those wells in a wholesale way because of our religious baggage from the past is to limit some of the deep resource that we would find there in the world’s religious traditions. Not that we would take it all or “drink” it all, but that we can find what is of living water there, to quench our own thirst.

For the sake of what would we do this? So that we hold into fuller “view every insight and every vision—no matter from what tradition or culture it comes—that might throw light on how to move forward.”

**What would it be like if** we continue our tradition of accepting insights from science as we recompose our religious thought in some new ways? Rebecca Parker tells this story of her visit to a Unitarian Church in Transylvania:

In typical Transylvanian style, the church has a wooden ceiling crisscrossed with beams, creating a latticework of deep squares that are painted with folk-art depictions of flowers and plants. But one square was different: it depicted a golden sun surrounded by circling plants in a star-spangled indigo sky—a diagram of the Copernican solar system.<sup>2</sup>

This is not just nice folk art, but something that gave testimony and witness to those who during the time of the Reformation were excluded and even threatened for trying to come to terms with some understanding of how science and religion could speak to each other. So they

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Fox, *One River, Many Wells* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 39.

fled and they became part of a religious tradition that began to bring together a marriage between science and religion (so many centuries ago).

For the sake of what? It is time to find our deeper connection with those across religious traditions and human disciplines, who do not need to shed religion in order to embrace science or to eschew science for the sake of religion.

Ken Wilber points out in his book, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, that in our modern world religion and science are locked in “a strange and grotesque coexistence, with value-free science and value laden religion, deeply distrustful of each other, aggressively attempting to colonize the same small planet.”<sup>3</sup>

We live in a time in which this division between truth and meaning can no longer sustain the planet that sustains us, [this division] that can no longer allow us to live lives that are whole.

If we are truly to construct “a religion for our time”—we must shed some common patterns and tendencies—and imagine ourselves opening up to new conversations, new rituals, and new songs and stories that feed our mind’s search for truth, our heart’s desire for meaning, and our soul’s desire for what is Holy.

**What would it be like if** we extended the *vestibule* of our congregations into a virtual world more forthrightly? What would it be like for those who feel alone to also know the transforming power of gathering in community with others who are dedicated not just to their *own* spiritual development but to the spiritual development of others as well? What would it be like for us to develop multiple ways of gathering: in congregations, for sure, but in virtual rooms online, through a UU internet radio, in physical and virtual “neighborhoods” in order to make broader connections? What would it be like for us to not be limited by the barriers of space and time or to allow those barriers to stand in our way of connecting with the spirits and souls of others?

**What would it be like if** our theology and our religious practices as Unitarian Universalists included the body? What if we included the body more in our worship, in our spiritual practices, in our religious exploration so that we bring more wholeness to our experience of the self?

For the sake of what would we do this? If the future world is one in which health insecurity will be more prevalent, in which extreme climate variability is more certain—then our liberal religious faith must move into a deeper relationship with our soma—our bodies as a whole part

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Wilbur, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (New York: Random House), 1998.

of us—not just that vehicle for carrying our liberal thoughts and reason around efficiently from one place to another.<sup>4</sup>

**What would it be like if** we focused as much on our practices as on our ideas? Practices are the signposts of a vital congregation. What would it be like if we developed capacities for prayer, contemplative inquiry,<sup>5</sup> meditation, healing work—with as much passion, and in conjunction with our work for justice and liberation? What would it be like?

For the sake of what would we become more practice-focused within our congregations? For lots of reasons, but I will turn to Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron who offers this helpful perspective:

If spiritual practice is relaxing, if it gives us some peace of mind, that's great—but is this personal satisfaction helping us to address what's happening in the world? The main question is, are we living in a way that adds further aggression and self-centeredness to the mix, or are we adding some much needed sanity?<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, practices are not just for calming us down in a frantic, heated world. Practices focus us on our living, our actions in the world, and practices encourage us to cultivate those ways of being and doing that make our faith principles incarnate. Practices are as essential to the future of our Unitarian Universalist faith—as our thoughts.

**What would it be like if** we were intentional about knowing and joining with those who are the next generation within and outside of our congregations?

**What would it be like if** we were intentional about becoming theologically literate as Unitarian Universalists and dedicated ourselves to being the theological school for our members and our neighborhoods? I am so impressed by some of the new resources that are being developed by the UUA in adult education and by other sources. Some of the resources are already there. I am unimpressed about how few of us, it seems, find the time, the initiative, the dedication to actively engage in these programs or in the process of studying religious texts, in engaging with each other theologically, with updating our outmoded views of Christianity...the list could go on.

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<sup>4</sup> In Paul Rasor, *Faith without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Boston: Skinner Books, 2005), 133. Rasor quotes theologian Sallie MacFague: "Whatever else experience means, it includes bodily experience as a primordial reality, uniting us in ever widening concentric circles with the entire planet and in all its diverse rich forms of embodiment."

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (New York: Lindisfarne Books, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Pema Chodron, *Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 2009).

Finally, **what would it be like if** we imagined that Unitarian Universalism does not yet exist? What would it be like if we imagined that it only comes into being when we do the practices and live the values that we aspire towards, when we hold each other accountable to a radical incarnation—James Luther Adams called it a “social incarnation”—that happens only when we embody our faith in tangible ways to “nurture the spirit, to heal the world.”

For the sake of what...would we do this?

So I have been using this image of the house, home improvement, renovations. So we are building a house, a “house for hope,” we are the builders of that house, it is ours to build together. The beauty of that is that we already have some living examples and living experiments of this. We will hear about some of those experiments, more of those experiments as we move into our afternoon.

It is happening already, this future. We just have to pay attention to where it is happening and say to ourselves, “More of that please.” So in conclusion, I would offer these two verses:

First from Rumi:

“This being human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival.”

Can we become a guest house for the Spirit and for the new experiments that are already arriving, already happening among us?

And finally from Isaiah, “Behold I am doing a new thing. Now, it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth.