

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland
The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister
January 15, 2006**

Wanted: Wisdom

This year we are drawing the themes of our worship services from the six sources of Unitarian Universalism (which you can find in the front of your hymnal, or on little cards like this at the greeters' table in the lobby.) Although we had a bit of break from it during the holiday season. We are doing this partly because it tracks the curriculum that the Kindergarten through 5th graders are doing . . . they, too are exploring these sources over the course of the year, using various stories and activities. But it's also helpful to take a look at them from time to time anyway.

This morning we take up the third of these sources: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life. [Repeat]

As we are learning as we go through each of these sources, they are much more complicated than they at first appear. And, as I've discovered as I've prepared these sermons, it is helpful for the first one in each series to fall on the side of "lecture" than on the side of "sermon" in order to offer some concepts and definitions. So that's what we'll do today – begin to develop a shared vocabulary around wisdom.

So, for starters: what is wisdom, theologically?

Well, usually it has to do with those teachings that contain practical instructions for living life. In Hebrew and Christian heritage, the so-called "wisdom literature" of the Bible contains stories and fables, instructions and teachings for living life in accord with the will of God . . . as God was understood.

In other traditions, it is practical instructions, stories and fables for living life in accordance with whatever that particular culture has decided provides the authority – a particular teacher from the past, or a common understanding developed over time within that culture that may or may not be written down. Those things that are written down become part of that tradition's "scripture" -- authoritative writings. The wisdom may include particular spiritual practices – rituals and behaviors that are expected of those within the tradition or culture. But the common theme is "how to live life." It is, in other words, about ethics.

So when we – Unitarian Universalists – claim "wisdom from the world's religions that inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life" we are saying that we are open to engaging with, thinking deeply about, and making life choices from a

range of possible authorities. What we are doing is “piggy-backing” on to the sacred teachings of other world religions to make ethical choices.

Last week in the book discussion group an important question came up: What is the difference between religion and ethics? They are, of course closely related, but are they the same thing? Are they different but overlapping? Let me share with you how I go about thinking about each of them. For me they are related and overlapping, and the reasoning is circular.

We’ll start with religion: I define this fairly regularly here, and the definition I use is this: Religion is that which binds a particular community together. “Re” meaning again or afresh, and “ligare” which means to bind. To be bound together in new ways, over and over again. What it is that binds a given “religious” community together differs from that of another.

Those who study such things usually recognize four sources of religious “authority” – authority being that power that you engage with to make your ethical judgments and decisions. Those of you who have come to the New to UU classes and some of the other courses have done some work with this. Different religions usually include all four . . . but stress very different ones. Here they are:

One of the four is “scripture.” Scripture is those writings in a given religion that are considered authoritative. The Bible, Sutras, Vedas, -- different religions collect their authoritative writings into books. How those writings get used and interpreted is different within each religion, and even different within different sub-groups within each broad religion. Like: do you interpret the Bible literally? Metaphorically? Allegorically? In Unitarian Universalism we have an “open canon” – what is considered “scripture” is always being revised. That is why when I auction off a sermon topic each year, I ask that you provide some writing that you consider to be “scriptural” for you. Something that has meaning, for you.

The second source of religious authority is: tradition. This is how things are done, because that is how they have “always” been done. Sometimes it is an oral tradition, or passed along from generation to generation. Forms of prayer. Forms of worship. Forms of giving alms, or charity. How the community uses scripture. Who in the community gets to interpret scripture. Who moves into whose household when a marriage happens. What holidays get celebrated and exactly how: who lights the candles, in what order, and so on. Even how the community goes about thinking about things – is a tradition.

The third source of religious authority is experience – direct experience or relationship with the divine. That one landed in our UU sources using that precise language: direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder We covered that in some detail when we explored it in September and October. In our “tradition” – see the wording – the vocabulary that is used is transcendentalism. The rituals of many religions are designed to facilitate a

particular kind of *experience* with the divine: Communion; prayers; dances; hymns – rituals performed in community, that help to bind that community together.

And the fourth source of religious authority is reason. The intellect. The ability of humans to think for themselves. Individually and together.

So, different religions bind their members together using some mix of those four sources of authority. Some lead with one, some lead with another. For the most part, Unitarian Universalists today would probably agree (to the extent that we agree about anything) that we lead with : [all together now] Reason.

OK, so a religion is a group of folks bound together by some uniting thing/authority. Let's go on to a definition of ethics.

What is ethics? I would say that ethics is a system of thinking about right and wrong that grows out of that which binds a community together. It is about how we *ought* to live. It makes some judgments about how the community shapes its life together. When those preliminary judgments are decided upon – through *experiences* that the community has with one another, they might first become *tradition*, then they might be written down and become *scripture*.

It was interesting in the group last week when I asked where each of them drew their “ethical” authority from the answers fell into the categories of religious authority. One person actually used the word “scripture” – he drew his authority from certain Bible teachings. Two people did not use the term scripture but quoted it: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” or “love your neighbor as yourself.”

When I pushed a little about where that came from, one person added that she had gotten it from her mother. Mom may have gotten it from scripture and passed it along as “Truth” because it was in fact “reasonable.” Or it may have been passed along to Mom from her parents – either through tradition or directly from scripture. So she was putting into use an admonition that is directly drawn from scripture: honor thy father and thy mother.

Another person spoke of a sense of the divine right and wrong that came directly through a sense of the interdependent web of all existence: *experience*. That would be transcendentalist in the group.

And one person, although struggling to find the word “reason” – spoke of humans being able to think this up for themselves. But then, he proceeded to quote the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self evident”

American Scripture. Recognized as such perhaps more by some of our fundamentalist enemies who define the United States itself as a religion than by

us. It is a shift in definition that causes some serious cognitive dissonance for many of us! (But *that's* a different sermon!)

The book that the book group is reading – *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* – is written by Jim Wallis, who grounds his ethics directly in Christian scripture – specifically the Hebrew Prophets, including Jesus -- *and* American Scripture. His primary model for pulling those two things together is Dr. Martin Luther King who preached and persuaded, as Wallis says: “with the Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other.”¹

That phrase, of course, is resonant of the theologian Karl Barth's famous phrase that preachers should preach with “the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”

And here is my oh-so-Unitarian Universalist response to both of those, since here each of you must claim your religious and spiritual authority. Between those two hands . . . whatever is in them . . . is . . . what? . . . the heart and the brain. Experience and Reason. Divine Love and Wisdom.

[Pause]

Most wisdom – in whatever culture -- is not at all easily come by: it likely took many generations to distill each pearl. We receive the conclusion in the form of a story, or a saying, but much life experience went into forming that conclusion. And even if we pick it up as a “truth” – we still have to figure out exactly what it means in our particular lives, in particular contexts, in particular situations.

One image that comes to mind for me is that of an egg timer: A huge amount of experience and thought takes place to distill what appears to be a nugget of wisdom, and then that nugget must be taken and run through our experience and reason in order to figure out its meaning and use it in our ethical and spiritual life.

That is not easy! In the special exhibit of Medieval Art from Novgorod that is now showing at the Walters Art Museum, Saint Sophia is depicted as fiery red. “Sophia” is the Greek word for wisdom – in the New Testament it is the word that was used to translate the Hebrew word “Hokma” in Hebrew Scripture. Hokma was depicted as a woman – woman wisdom. Red is NOT normally a color of peace and tranquility – in many cultures it depicts vitality, life (blood), aggression and strength.

Symbolically, red is not an “easy” color – so the depiction of Saint Sophia as red may be trying to hint at something! Think of the last time you had a major ethical dilemma facing you: a time when you really were trying to put some

¹ Wallis, Jim. *God's Politics*. Harper: San Francisco, 2005, p. xiv.

ethical principle to work in your everyday life, perhaps at great personal cost. Did you feel pale pastel blue, or did you feel red?

What happens with a religion like ours, where *individual* reason is front and center and we value our varied experiences, is that a very different set of questions gets raised: where does our *collective* wisdom come from? What really binds *us* together?

[Pause]

We . . . walk together in the spirit of mutual love. *Walking* together in this case is a metaphor for *reasoning* together. That is the central ethic of this kind of religious community. I believe that reasoning together gives birth to new wisdom – the kind that helps us make use of those pearls and nuggets in our own lives.

But how? *How* does this wisdom inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life?

Well, it is a form of learning, a form of reason and understanding that differs from the academic form. To use wisdom, we bring our lives to the nugget of wisdom, and place the teaching and our life in creative tension with one another, and see what happens. Perhaps it is a saying . . . a proverb like “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Perhaps it is a story, such as the fable that Jim told this morning.

The wisdom is found – mined, really – only in the engagement of our life with it. It can only “inspire” when we allow it to – when we breathe it in and through our lives.

It is a different way of learning, and I actually think it happens best in conversation. It is the sort of thing we do in Contemplative Conversations. Each person brings their present life to the wisdom tale. Instead of forming a group around a common issue – as so often happens in our culture, with support groups about this or that -- we come together around a nugget of wisdom. And each person, out of their vast differences, wherever life is taking them on that day, at that moment, brings their life to the circle.

When you engage with wisdom in this way, you never know where it will lead. Any element in the story may spark a thought or an insight. In the story this morning the boar, the lion and the vultures are not the only characters, you know. When you try that story on, there are several others.

The dry, sunny day: Are you going through a “dry” time in your life? Are competing demands vying for your attention? Are you the water, with everyone wanting a piece of you? Is there a difficult friendship, or marriage or partnership that must be reevaluated?

See how it works? And the best part, as I have watched these conversations unfold in the several years I have been offering them in several churches, is that the participants begin to open into the wisdom in new and fascinating ways. It happens because they are listening to one another's stories. People come, at first, focused only on their *own* lives, their *own* needs. But as they listen . . . as we listen . . . to others' stories, to others' lives . . . each participant begins to gain insight. To hear in new ways.

These nuggets of wisdom, which have been refined and passed along for generations, have stood the test of time *because* they reflect human life in myriad ways. The stories aren't about the stories, they are about you. They are about all of us. And as lives are shared around the stories, lives are transformed.

This is what it means to "walk together in the spirit of mutual love." This is what it means to be inspired in our ethical and spiritual life . . . our life as a community . . . by wisdom from around the world. . . To share our life journeys. To figure out, together, how to live, and how to live our collective life, together.

Let us walk forward, together.