

Many Windows, One Light

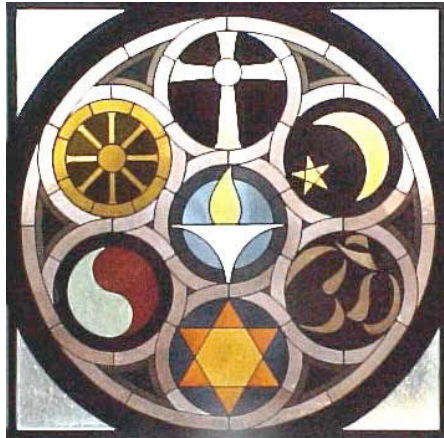
The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Dot Everhart¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*I look out of this window and I think this is a cosmos,
this is a huge creation, this is one small corner of it.*

— Morris West

Invitation to Worship Dot Everhart

When I was a young teen in catechism classes in preparation to joining the then Methodist Church in York, PA, we went to the Roman Catholic Church across the street for Mass. Later, we went to the Jewish synagogue to attend Friday evening services there. In both instances, we were clearly warned that we were going on a field trip to see what these others faiths believed and to learn a bit about their worship. We were not expected to join them any more than we would be expected to move to a far-off land we visited on vacation. We were reminded that the Catholics didn't have a direct experience with God, but only as mediated through the Pope in Rome and their priest. And, of course, the Jewish folks weren't even Christian, so they couldn't get into heaven—well, at least not *our* heaven. So much for engendering ecumenical sensitivities or respect for other's faiths!



When I arrived at
Lycoming College in
Williamsport, PA as a pre-

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ministerial student and attended Old Testament class taught by Bill Urbrock, who looked remarkably like an Old Testament prophet in blue jeans, I was horrified to have him suggest—even demand—that we write notes in our Bibles. That felt like defamation to me. And, when he introduced us to the methods of literary criticism, teaching us how the biblical texts came to be written, well, I was, at first, fairly certain, that HE was going to go to hell for blasphemy.

But, by the time I got to seminary at Boston University, I was more than comfortable with exegesis and hermeneutics; owned several translations of the Bible and knew for a fact that the King James Bible did not fall “out of heaven in 1611.” By the time I survived my Hebrew studies and understood the diacritical marks of “jots and tittles”—I was really quite amazed that this scripture had survived both accidental mistranslations and intentional editing for political purposes.

Later came introductions to the Bhagavad-Gita, the Qur’an, the Gilgamesh Epic, the Tao, the books of the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Book of Mormon, the Gnostic Gospels, the various Sutras of Buddhism, the Upanishads and Vedic texts of Hinduism, the list goes on and on. Every faith has its sacred texts and sources of divine inspiration.

And now, as a Unitarian Universalist, I might find as much inspiration in the poetry of Mary Oliver as I do in the Psalms of David. The exhortations of Emerson and Thoreau might move me to rethink the way I am living as much as the prophetic words of Amos or Hosea. A well-written article in the *New Yorker* or *The New York Times* might challenge me to understand something important about living globally while acting locally in a way that I might miss altogether while reading a passage in the Elizabethan English of the King James version of the Bible.

So today, as we worship, we will consider the third source of our Unitarian Universalist tradition: “wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life” and expect to be moved to behavior that is inspired by the Spirit of Life we hear in the words we speak or sing today. Come, let us worship together.

Reading
"Moses and the Shepherd"
by Rumi, tr. by Coleman Barks

Moses heard a shepherd on the road praying,

"God,
where are you? I want to help you, to fix your shoes
and comb your hair. I want to wash your clothes
and pick the lice off. I want to bring you milk
to kiss your little hands and feet when it's time
for you to go to bed. I want to sweep your room
and keep it neat. God, my sheep and goats
are yours. All I can say, remembering you,
is *ayyyy* and *ahhhhhhhhhh*."

Moses could stand it no longer.

"Who are you talking to?"

"The one who made us,
and made the earth and made the sky."

"Don't talk about shoes
and socks with God! And what's this with *your little hands*
and feet? Such blasphemous familiarity sounds like
you're chatting with your uncles.

Only something that grows
needs milk. Only someone with feet needs shoes. Not God!
Even if you meant God's human representatives,
as when God said, 'I was sick, and you did not visit me,'
even then this tone would be foolish and irreverent.

Use appropriate terms. *Fatima* is a fine name
for a woman, but if you call a man *Fatima*,
it's an insult. Body-and-birth language
are right for us on this side of the river,
but not for addressing the origin,
not for Allah."

The shepherd repented and tore his clothes and sighed
and wandered out into the desert.

A sudden revelation
came then to Moses. God's voice:

*You have separated me
from one of my own. Did you come as a Prophet to unite,
or to sever?*

*I have given each being a separate and unique way
of seeing and knowing and saying that knowledge.*

*What seems wrong to you is right for him.
What is poison to one is honey to someone else.*

*Purity and impurity, sloth and diligence in worship,
these mean nothing to me.*

*I am apart from all that.
Ways of worshiping are not to be ranked as better
or worse than one another.*

*Hindus do Hindu things.
The Dravidian Muslims in India do what they do.
It's all praise, and it's all right.*

*It's not me that's glorified in acts of worship.
It's the worshipers! I don't hear the words
they say. I look inside at the humility.*

*That broken-open lowliness is the reality,
not the language! Forget phraseology.
I want burning, burning.*

*Be friends
with your burning. Burn up your thinking
and your forms of expression!*

*Moses,
those who pay attention to ways of behaving
and speaking are one sort.*

*Lovers who burn
are another.*

*Don't impose a property tax
on a burned-out village. Don't scold the Lover.
The "wrong" way he talks is better than a hundred
"right" ways of others.*

*Inside the Kaaba
it doesn't matter which direction you point
your prayer rug!*

The ocean diver doesn't need snowshoes!
The love-religion has no code or doctrine.
Only God.

So the ruby has nothing engraved on it!
It doesn't need markings.

God began speaking
deeper mysteries to Moses. Vision and words,
which cannot be recorded here, poured into
and through him. He left himself and came back.
He went to eternity and came back here.
Many times this happened.

It's foolish of me
to try and say this. If I did say it,
it would uproot our human intelligences.
It would shatter all writing pens.

Moses ran after the shepherd.
He followed the bewildered footprints,
in one place moving straight like a castle
across a chessboard. In another, sideways,
like a bishop.

Now surging like a wave cresting,
now sliding down like a fish,
with always his feet
making geomancy symbols in the sand,
recording
his wandering state.

Moses finally caught up
with him.

"I was wrong. God has revealed to me
that there are no rules for worship.

Say whatever
and however your loving tells you to. Your sweet blasphemy
is the truest devotion. Through you a whole world
is freed.

Loosen your tongue and don't worry what comes out.
It's all the light of the spirit."

The shepherd replied,

“Moses, Moses,
I’ve gone beyond even that.

You applied the whip and my horse shied and jumped
out of itself. The divine nature and my human nature
came together.

Bless your scolding hand and your arm.
I can’t say what has happened.

What I’m saying now
is not my real condition. It can’t be said.”

The shepherd grew quiet.

When you look in a mirror,
you see yourself, not the state of the mirror.
The flute player puts breath into a flute,
and who makes the music? Not the flute.
The flute player!

Whenever you speak praise
or thanksgiving to God, it’s always like
this dear shepherd’s simplicity.

When you eventually see
through the veils to how things really are,
you will keep saying again
and again,

“This is certainly not like
we thought it was!”

Sermon

Duane H. Fickeisen

Many windows, one light. The image comes from writings of
the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, who is Minister of Public Theology at
All Souls Church, Unitarian in Manhattan. It is his way of describ-
ing one of the sources we Unitarian Universalists turn to in our
quest for truth and meaning.

Isn’t that a great job title? Minister of Public Theology. It rec-
ognizes the work Forrest has done and continues to do both for
Unitarian Universalism and for the much wider public in examin-
ing our faith and its roots and in exploring the intersections be-
tween religion and American history and culture.

Forrest and his then colleague in the ministry at All Souls Church, the Rev. John Buehrens, who later served as President of our denomination, wrote alternating chapters for the book *A Chosen Faith*, which is the text for the adult Sunday morning class that Judy and I have been teaching. Each pair of chapters focuses on one of the sources we explicitly acknowledge as foundations of our free faith. In addition to the class, we've planned worship services on each of the six sources, and today we take up the third one — "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life."

It's Forrest's image of the cathedral of the world that I want us to consider this morning.² He invites you to imagine awakening well rested from deep sleep and finding yourself in the nave of a huge cathedral. The place is stunning in its magnificence and complexity. It is filled with light streaming in from many windows. This is the cathedral of the world.

Forrest writes,

"...there are windows without number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way beautiful. Some are abstract, other representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death."

He goes on for several pages to describe these many windows that the shimmering light streams through. The light is coming through the windows, and it is coming from within you and from within every other person.

There are fundamentalists around who claim that all the light comes exclusively through their windows. They make their claims from both the right and the left. They have learned to worship at only one window and to throw rocks at the other windows.

In response to the battles of conflicting creeds, skeptics reject all the windows and conclude that there is no light at all.

² Forrest Church. "The Cathedral of the World," Ch. 5 in *A Chosen Faith*, by John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church (Boston: Beacon Press, rev. ed. 1998) pp. 82 ff.

The cathedral of the world is so vast that in an entire lifetime one couldn't possibly explore all the niches and altars, nor even gaze for more than a moment at each of the many windows. And yet to gain an understanding of the light coming through any one of them requires significant effort and practice.

You may notice, however, that the light shining through the many windows falls on the floor in patterns that invite us to seek meaning in them.

The windows represent the world's religions. The light is the Truth — with a capital "T" — wisdom that is filtered and refracted through the windows. It falls on the floor in patterns that inform our spirituality and from which we seek guidance in shaping ethical behavior.

Forrest suggests that the affirmation of a single source, one light, is the essence of Unitarianism. And recognition that there are many windows, each leading to different understandings of the nature of the light, and that each has part of the Truth, is the essence of Universalism. It seems natural that we would have found our way to combining both religious views in one powerful faith. Many windows, one light.

In our exploration of the cathedral of the world, several challenges arise. Many of us want it all — we want to make sure we've seen as many of the windows as possible — and we tend to rush around, barely pausing at each window to take it in before rushing off to the next one.

We're like tourists who come to the rim of the Grand Canyon, pause long enough to take a couple of snapshots, and rush to get back on the bus so we can see the view from another point, but fail to notice the sound of the air rushing past the wings of the hawks soaring below, the movement of shadows and changing hues as the sun crosses the sky, or the burros slowly climbing the trail more than a thousand feet below. We declare that it's the most fantastic view we have ever witnessed. But we have not really seen it at all.

I want to cry "Wait! Take a deep breath. And another. Listen. Look. Smell the air. Pause here a while. Stay long enough to sweat in the sun. Imagine how this place was created. Imagine the winter wind howling and rains beating down. The floods. The ice. Imagine the blistering heat of summer sun. The expansion and

contraction of the rocks. How the shock waves of thunder might split the rock. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving inspired by the awe and wonder you're feeling."

When we approach our religious quest as an attempt to check it all out, but don't really go deeply into any set of practices, we miss some of the ways that a strong faith can provide a foundation for response to the inevitable challenges of life. We substitute "church lite" for the real thing. We miss the deeper wisdom that can illumine our spiritual and our ethical lives. Many windows, one light.

Or we want to get the essence — the best part of all of it — and so we look for common themes among the windows. We've discovered that the Golden Rule or an injunction to aid the poor or a call to generosity is common to many of the windows, which is true, but when we stop there, we miss the rich differences and nuances among them. We wrongly claim that they are all basically the same. Like the mythical cultural melting pot, we've attempted to assimilate it all into one big window and in the process we've lost meaning.

I recall the many times when I was much younger that I tried to "fit in" and make myself like others so I wouldn't be noticed by the bullies on the playground. Or how I have benefited from the privilege of being a well-educated, middle-class, straight, white male and the particular aspects of our identity that my ancestors and I have set aside in exchange for the benefits of privilege.

When we do that, we miss a richness that arises from appreciation of differences. Perhaps we become tolerant of difference, partly by glossing over it, but we don't really embrace it for the many ways it can enrich our lives and point to the paradoxes and complexities that are so much a part of our life experience. The complexity is so crucial to building resilience to unexpected events and to accepting the necessary risks that lead to personal and cultural transformation. Many windows, one light.

Some of us have come recently from having stayed at one window until something about it no longer made sense to us or its designated guides wounded us in some spiritual way. And now we have joined the rock-throwing skeptics, taking aim at the source of our injuries and rejecting all the light coming through that window. Our rocks have not seriously damaged the window

they've been thrown toward, but we've cut off some rich sources of light and understanding in the process of rejection.

So we welcome Native American, pagan, Jewish, and Buddhist practices into our worship life and religious education classes. We turn to Islamic poets for their wisdom. But some of us are much less inclined to study Jesus or welcome Christian practices in worship or in our children's classes.

And thus we miss many of the myths and stories that are common in our culture. When we throw out the pre-Easter Jesus along with the resurrected one, we lose access to one of our most important mentors and teachers. We impoverish our spiritual lives and deny one of the most important sources of the ethics of social justice and care for the oppressed. Many windows, one light.

Others are stunned by the chaos in the cathedral. So many people moving about, with so much going on. We're in sensory overload. We may feel adrift and have lost all sense of our bearings. The sheer vastness of it all is overwhelming. And so we have shut down in self-defense, declaring it meaningless. We've been stuck in the midst of the chaos so long that we've forgotten how to see past the crowds to notice the light.

I recently took the train from Harrisburg to Penn Station in New York City. I'm not exactly a city guy, and I have only been in New York two or maybe three other times. I get claustrophobic in crowds. I hate not being able to see the ground. So when we got off the train, I was almost frozen in the midst of the chaos and constant movement of crowds. I was wary because I had no bearings, couldn't find an exit or see the sky, didn't have any sense of direction, and needed simply to pause long enough to be grounded before we went off in search of lunch. In any new situation I need time to discover some bearings and get the 'lay of the land' before pressing on. Waking up in the great cathedral would be frightening without that opportunity for grounding. And without it, I might find myself unable to check out any of the windows.

If we either fail to pause to get our bearings or allow ourselves to be paralyzed by the chaos for too long, we lose the opportunity to appreciate the splendor of the great cathedral of the world and to bask in the grand light. Many windows, one light.

So friends, here we are in the midst of the cathedral of the world. Take a moment to get your bearings, then notice the light and the patterns it makes. Seek wisdom in it. Wisdom that points toward the Truth, even though it is never the whole Truth. Take a deep breath. And another. Set your rocks down gently. Look around. Take plenty of time to notice both the details and the overall picture. Don't be afraid of paradox and complexity. Invite the light into your heart. Embrace it. Enter into relationship with it.

In Rumi's poem Moses provoked God's anger by scolding the shepherd for his worship practices. God was upset that a sharp rebuke from Moses had separated the shepherd from him. It was the relationship that mattered most, not the practices or the interpretation of the nature of God.

As you make your way through the cathedral of the world, notice the quality of the relationships between the worshipers and the light. Is that not more important than their individual practices? Than the shape or color of the window before them? Our relationships with God, with Truth, with Love are the pattern of meaning that the light produces when it shines from every heart and through every window, refracted and rejoined, illuminating the dust and casting shadows, shimmering and reflecting, lighting up the face of every worshipper.

For as Rumi wrote,

“...When you eventually see
through the veils to how things really are,
you will keep saying again
and again,

““This is certainly not like
we thought it was!””

As we explore the cathedral of the world and the meaning of the light — as we seek its wisdom to inform our lives — we will surely discover that it is certainly not like we thought it was.

If you are alive, you are in the great cathedral of the world. Right here, right now. There is one light and many windows. It is the light of Love, streaming through every heart and eye, through every window. The light illuminating wisdom in each of the many windows.

It waits for you to invite it in, so that it might quiet your fears, heal your broken heart, sing and dance and play as it inspires you to new life.

In the silence now, listen for Love, make space to welcome it, and invite it into your heart. May it evoke in you a full spiritual and ethical life.

This is certainly not what we thought it was, is it?

Amen.

Benediction

“Why do you go to the forest...?”
by Tegh Bahadur

Why do you go to the forest in search of the Divine?
God lives in all, and abides with you too.

As fragrance dwells in a flower, or reflection in a mirror,
so the Divine dwells inside everything;
seek therefore in your own heart.

Image: Rehnberg Memorial Window, Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockford, IL. The symbols, going clockwise from the top, represent Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, and Buddhism with the UU Flaming Chalice in the center. Image from the UU Church of Rockford website.