

“Tradition Through the Tangles”

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13 May 2007

Communication of Cosmic Truth, Sacred Truth, Truth with a capital ‘T’ is difficult and dangerous. The risk of misinterpretation is enormous and the limits of language are substantial. Yet we continue to attempt this endeavor regardless of its inevitable pitfalls and mishaps.

“Objective knowledge...ha(s) to be transmitted...and transmitted with the adequate completeness and exactitude” Writes P.D. Ouspensky in his article ‘The Transparent Veil of Symbolism’. “To do this [fundamental principles] had to be put into such forms as would insure its proper perception...and avoid in its transmission the possibility of distortion...There remains,” he continues, “the insurmountable difficulty of language.”

Language is an inexact process. We may choose our words carefully, we may earnestly mean what we say, but there is often the chance that what we say is not what others hear. Like the game of telephone; Melanie whispers in the ear of Bruce a simple phrase, like ‘I like chocolate ice cream,’ then Bruce whispers it to Becky and Becky to Ben and so on until 14 people later Pat repeats aloud what the phrase was supposed to have started as...‘I’m covered in icky mean.’ Which, of course, is not what was said and doesn’t even make any sense. So the truth and meaning of what is being passed on gets lost in our individual abilities to listen and to understand. It is not only in fun childhood games that our meanings and truths get confused and distorted but also in our adult attempts at communicating our most central beliefs and ideas of the universe and the sacred and the objective knowledge of existence.

When Ouspensky speaks of objective knowledge, he is speaking of those truths known to be incontrovertible, those ideas that all religious thinkers and philosophers essentially agree upon; those things we recognize as ultimate truths when we hear them or experience them. The unity of all things, unity in diversity, is one such idea that Ouspensky speaks of as central to what he calls fundamental principles “from which everything else was derived.” He argues that humanity has, from the beginning of history, attempted to transmit objective knowledge, to bring the subjective minds of people to the higher planes of objective consciousness in which we share in the knowledge and experience of these fundamental principles. It is the work of those people who have understood the principle of unity in diversity to repeatedly attempt to pass on that truth to those who do not yet understand. It is the hope through the transmission of this knowledge that a person could have first hand the experience of being connected to all of creation and beyond.

“And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts;” writes William Wordsworth, “a sense sublime of something far more deeply infused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things.”

Ouspensky points out that there are always those, usually religious leaders, who attempt to connect our subjective experience of the world being “split up into millions of separate and unconnected phenomena into some sort of system...” The trouble is that the systems themselves become subject to distortions as well, and, as D.M. Dooling, editorial

director for *Parabola* magazine in 1989 writes, "...what gets transmitted becomes 'tradition,'" losing the original objective knowledge it once contained.

For example, a central tradition of Unitarian Universalism is the freedom of belief, which has been transmitted to mean that Unitarian Universalists can believe whatever they want or nothing at all. Neither of the last two statements is true. What was a fundamental shift in theological practice, the freedom to determine for oneself the manner in which one understands and worships the nature and existence of God, the Holy, the Sacred became a boundary-less wilderness where anything goes and there are no limits or restrictions upon ideas or beliefs. The result of which has been that no one can speak to ultimate truth because the tradition has been misinterpreted to be that there is no objective knowledge. Our difficulties here are the limits of language and vocabulary, especially around the word 'freedom.'

"Transmission is a passing on, a sending across, from source to receiver." Writes Rob Baker; "It may take place in a wholly mechanical manner (between two pieces of equipment) or as a much higher process (divine revelation, or spiritual transmission between teacher and pupil), as well as in various subtle ways on levels in between; through gesture, sound, image, architecture, ceremony, craft, sacred text, or work of art." "Realizing the imperfection and weakness of ordinary language," Ouspensky states, "the people who have possessed objective knowledge have tried to express the idea in 'myths,' in 'symbols' and in particular 'verbal formulas' which, having been transmitted without alteration, have carried on the idea...The aim of myths and symbols was to reach [humanity's] higher centers, to transmit ideas inaccessible to the intellect and to transmit them in such forms as would exclude the possibility of false interpretations." It is through

symbol and myth that teachers of tradition and objective knowledge strive to get around the inevitable distortions ordinary language creates.

Take the biblical creation story. “The Lord God formed a human being from the dust of the ground and breathed life into his nostrils the breath of Life, so that he became a living creature,” reads Genesis 2: 7. We know the rest of the story; God took a rib from the man and created woman and then offered to them a beautiful and bounteous garden in which to live for eternity. But eternity didn’t last very long because both man and woman ate of the tree thereby gaining God’s objective knowledge. God, not very pleased by this, curses man and woman to toil for their nourishment, gives pain to the woman in childbirth and to top it all off, sentences them to death “dust you are, to dust you shall return,” reads Genesis 3: 19.

Now most of us look to this tale as a precautionary one. Do not go against God’s will or you shall be punished. What gets distorted and misrepresented and outright ignored is the objective knowledge that within us flows the breath of the Divine. No matter what the first people’s actions were, the truth that lies underneath is that we are of the stuff of the universe...we are unified in our essence.

Myths are meant to circumvent the distortions of language. Regrettably though, they too, succumb to it. It seems as though there is no way to ensure that ultimate truths and knowledge can be passed on with clarity and the exactitude Ouspensky spoke of. Where does this leave us? How is it we educate each other and generations to come in fundamental principles that govern and guide our understanding and experience of living?

Where we are left is right with Mamadi, unable to speak clearly, intelligibly, or actually say anything at all. So reluctant have we Unitarian Universalists been to declare ultimate truths and objective knowledge; so cautious are we to avoid the perpetuating of distortions that we may or may not believe anything or something. We can, possibly, though not completely, stand up for one of several ideas if circumstances are favorable to permit it. We get seen as so religiously and theologically pliable that there is nothing holding us up or together. There has been more than one occasion I have witnessed, in which one person has told another that what they believe and how they express said belief is oppressive to the listener. We get so caught up in the perceived truths and the way they are expressed that often we miss the ultimate truth attempting to be shared.

D.M. Dooling asks, “Can the source be refound – the intact, unchangeable essence...not let itself be swallowed by what conveys it?”

Because of our mistrust of naming ultimate truth that might exclude someone or even ourselves, Unitarian Universalists have a difficult time defining, even within our own communities, the objective knowledge of our tradition. Are we humanist or theist; Christian or Jewish; Pagan or Atheist? In our mangled and inaccurate attempts to resolve what our tradition is and the greater truths that lie behind the particularities of our unique tradition, we struggle greatly in our ability to pass on to our children the meanings and purposes behind our myths and symbols. We have grasped onto the diversity end of ‘unity in diversity’ so tightly that sometimes we see only what divides us, what separates us, that we miss our Unity. And in the rare moments we discuss our unity it is so distorted that we believe we are unified because of our differences rather than diverse in our unity. As our hymnal reads, “We would be one,” hymn #318 (*Singing the Living Tradition*).

This is precisely the reason the First Milestones of Faith Program was established. It is our attempt in this congregation to transmit the deep and ultimate truths of Unitarian Universalism to our children uniformly with constancy and continuity. Our diversity of theology is often so closely focused on throughout the denomination that there are many Unitarian Universalists who cannot concisely define our religious beliefs and traditions. We answer the questions “Do you believe in a God/Goddess?” Some do, some don’t. “Do you read the Bible or other sacred text?” Some do, some don’t. “Do you believe in Heaven/Hell?” Some do, some don’t. This is confusing to our kids and to many of our adults.

Our tradition of freedom of thought, belief and practice has been distorted, I believe, to be so all encompassing that it would seem we lack the greater memory, as William Anderson puts it, “which is the repository of all the experience of the past and which restores themes, ideas, myths and styles to those who need and are open to them.” Through lessons and rites of passage, the Milestones of Faith program is our attempt to correct the distortions of truth that have been the result of our religious transmissions in recent years within the greater Unitarian Universalist community.

Aldous Huxley writes, “The greatest, the most important of the arts is living.” This is one of the strengths of Unitarian Universalism and where we can find hope in the attempts to transmit our tradition, for we passionately and whole-heartedly believe that living, living in the tangle that is our tradition, is the only way to find what truth lies within. It is our tenacious capacity to wrestle with the ambiguity of tradition, to question, to break with and reinterpret truth that demands we prevent the distortions from becoming tradition. We are a living faith, one we transmit to our children and who, in

return, shape and reshape it, culling objective knowledge to pass on to others. Our freedom is our handicap but it is also one of our greatest tools. We can take the greater memory of our history and use it, being committed to the interpretation of truth as we find it rather than only as we found it. We can be invested in our free faith without giving over to total subjectivity. We must attempt to reach beyond the distortions of our own tradition to discover its foundational principles and live them. “One can say that any group or tradition,” says Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, “that is willing and able to invest considerable effort in maintaining its existence is that much more able to withstand the process of decay from within and the destruction from without.”

Milestones of Faith are not our children’s alone. It is a truth of our living tradition that we strive for what lies beyond the first glance. “When [a] tradition is vital and active within the community, it carries on almost without words, without saying anything.” Says Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. “It is transmitted because the...tradition is not only a verbal deposit, it is a very inclusive message that relates to the whole of life and not only to religion or the historic past. Therefore it is passed on via almost all the channels of daily life.”

The symbols and stories of our daily lives and the stories of our history are what will help us cross the boundary from distortion to objective knowledge. They speak to the deeper places where ordinary language fails us. With the sharing of stories and the search for truth beyond the distortion of its transmission, we find the knowledge and experience of the divine that resides within, and somehow, through the tangles, truth emerges.