

“One Way”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona
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Not too long ago, I saw someone wearing a simple T-shirt. It had an arrow pointed up and the words “One Way” printed below the arrow. It could have been a statement about any number of beliefs, any number of “one ways,” I suppose. But I assumed it was a statement of Christian belief as to how to be saved, how to get to heaven.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 14, Jesus says, “You know the way to the place . . . I am going. Thomas said, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ Jesus said: ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me.’” I have a terrible time with that Bible passage. It is reportedly a statement by Jesus; a statement of his own authority to declare God’s will of salvation for every person on Earth. Jesus is the only way to salvation because he says he is.

In the law, we call that “self-authentication.” It usually says that something is what it purports to be without reference to any other verifying source. It’s like telling people that you are an expert in some field. Even if you really are, without a diploma, or training, or experience attested to by someone else, or evidence of more than general knowledge about something, not many will believe you’re an expert just because you said so. At least not in matters outside religion. In fairness, many Christians would also cite other evidence of Jesus’ authority beyond his own statement, the fulfillment of prophecies, his miracles, attestation by those who knew him, etc.

So, back to the T-shirt. If my assumption about the wearer was right, he was comfortable asserting that there was one way to heaven and eternal joy. And presumably that he knew that one way and was on it. And that he could tell others how to find that path and live it, so they would get to heaven, too.

The arrow looked like a traffic sign and reminded me of one, too. A sign that says you can’t go any other way without

disastrous consequences. An order from society that you can travel in only one direction; an order that prohibits any other ways.

The idea that there is only one way to live, to think, to believe is so common that I'm tempted to call it a human tendency. The idea that we know the one way to do anything seems to have wide appeal for many, maybe all of us. It goes along with our desire to be right, to be assured that we are right. We want to discover THE answer to living, to solve the Mystery of the Universe. We want to come up with the equivalent of the Grand Unified Theory in particle physics, the one-size-fits-all solution. My observation is that we all have a tendency to tell each other what to do and how to live. And by "we," I mean me, and maybe you.

I heard this past week that one of our prominent politicians who is running for office this year said it was possible, and obviously he or she thought desirable, to "pray gay away." That showed me two things. First, how ready we are to be certain about things we do not know, perhaps especially if we don't have

much firsthand experience. And second, the widespread willingness (some might say arrogance) to tell others what is good for them and how they should live. I hold a very strong opinion about being gay, and it is not that it can or should be “prayed away.” I would find the idea that being gay is something bad to be “prayed away” silly, if it were not taken seriously by too many people. As it is, I find it offensive, disrespectful, and pernicious. If you believe in the efficacy of prayer, I suggest praying instead that everyone will someday be allowed to be attracted to, love, and marry whoever adds meaning to her or his life.

I was on a trip recently with someone I did not know well. He was a fundamentalist Christian. He asked me simply what UU’s believe. Always a simple question to ask, but a challenging one to answer meaningfully and concisely. Especially to those who do not know us already. This man knew nothing about Unitarian Universalism or UU’s. It was clear to me that he did not share my preconceptions, assumptions, or my prior theological questioning. But he really, honestly wanted to know.

So I launched into my standard speech about how diverse our theologies are. He listened patiently and then asked, “but if you don’t all necessarily believe the same way, what makes your movement cohesive? If you don’t have a system of beliefs to unite you, how are you more than just a club, a collection of people? What keeps you together?” What, indeed?

I wish I had thought then of the billboard next to I-10 that I drive by every day on my way to both my law office and the church. The billboard is an advertisement for the Scion car company. It shows a bright red car. Above the car are printed the words “United by Individuality.”

When I first saw that billboard, I thought it was a clever oxymoron. The idea of being united by individuality! It’s like saying people are brought together by what keeps them apart; that people join together because they are separate. Hmmm. Many of us think of being united by conformity, by doing the same thing or believing the same way. But is that the only way to be united? What about being united by commitment to an ideal, like

the ideal of individuality? What about being united by dedication to a principle rather than the form in which that principle is expressed? This is the genius of constitutional government. The constitution declares principles we believe in, like fundamental rights, allowing the actual, messy details of government to operate within a very broad sphere. As diverse as we citizens of the United States are, I hope there is some dedication to principle we still share.

So are we UU's united by our individuality, like the billboard suggests Scion owners are? What are we about here? How can we be a religion if not everyone believes the same things? Can we hold together when we disagree? I don't think we're united just by being different from each other. But I think there is something to being together because we are committed to the ideal of diversity, to individuality.

Is that enough to make us a real, identifiable, religious movement? Is it enough to distinguish us from a random collection of people with different beliefs? Not to the man who

asked me what UU's believe. But as I explained to him, our understanding is that even if you believe what millions of other people believe, it is the individual commitment that makes it real and personal for you anyway. Even religious movements that have a creedal test are united not so much by the creed as by the fact that every adherent has made his or her individual commitment to the same set of beliefs.

Unitarian Universalism has an expectation that the only true religion is found in the heart of the practitioner . . . or not. We have an expectation that, if there is to be any meaning in life for each individual person, she or he must work out that meaning for herself or himself. Which is not at all the same thing as working meaning out by yourself. Our UU understanding is that this work cannot be done by others for you. Dedication to an ideal. Not simple, not easy. But maybe all the more meaningful for that.

Well, I think that sounds pretty good. The liberal approach to religion says that there is more than one way to the mountaintop. But I wonder, do we have our own "one-way" mentality? How

different are we really? My experience is that liberals are hardly free of believing that there is only one right or good or best way, in religion as well as in politics. Dare I say that as a group, UU's are among the most opinionated people I know? Oh, it's comparatively easy to grant people the right to believe as they find best when we don't think we have the answer, or we aren't overly concerned about the question in the first place. Most theological questions fall in one of those two categories for us. Either we admit we don't know for sure about the existence of God and an afterlife, or those questions have become less important for some of us.

But what about our own one-way thinking? What about the questions we do care about and to which we do think we have THE answer? Opinions. I have heard people say that everyone has one. I often don't, at least not until I learn more. I sometimes really don't know what I think until I have more information.

But I'm often surprised at how quick I am to form a judgment or opinion, especially about the ordinary questions of life. When I

step back to consider my certainty about those questions, I often find that my opinion is based on scanty information; or more often simply my prejudices, likes and dislikes, regardless of how reasonable I try to make my justification sound. With elections coming up, I myself hold pretty strong opinions about what policies should be put in place and who the best candidate is for various political offices.

UU minister Nancy Dean wrote recently that “diversity is not a singularity.” I think what she meant was that accepting differences does not mean we should make an idol out of individuality. We should recognize that there are costs to being so diverse. I would not trade our liberal approach to religion, accepting that there might be many valid ways to believe. But I am sometimes frustrated by our inability to speak with one voice the way some other religions seem to do. Sometimes I think it would be nice to be able to take a stand on a social justice issue more often as a religious movement because we all agreed on what was true and right.

Frankly, I think our vaunted diversity, in which we are justly proud, limits our movement's effectiveness in the world we care about. I'm not willing to give up our diversity, because it's a principle that trumps others for me, like speaking with one voice. But we do give up a lot to honor each person's free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

The other thing I read into the Rev. Dean's comment that "diversity is not a singularity" is that no one person is the center of the universe. Are we serious about our religious approach of more than one way? How do we act on that belief in our day-to-day lives? How do we act on that belief with each other in this church? That's the test that always gets me in trouble. How do I put my faith into action?

I sometimes get the feeling that we UU's think we are our opinions – that they matter so much as to make us who we are. I think of committee and Board meetings I have attended in this church. Even more so, I think of private conversations I have had with some of you. In both situations, I and other people have

made strong statements about the one right or best way to do something. We seem pretty sure of ourselves sometimes; pretty inflexible. Every once in a while, we seem to assert such strongly held opinions with limited information and before considering other possibilities. I know I've surprised myself that way. Isn't that just another way of saying there is only one way, and it's mine? How much room do we make for others to share their opinions before we dismiss those opinions?

We seem to admire people who hold strong opinions, and even assert them quickly. I am frequently surprised that people actually believe so strongly that they know what would be best. I often long for someone just to say he or she doesn't know, which in many cases would, I think, be the simple truth.

As we come closer to another presidential election, I worry that we in the United States think having strong opinions, perhaps unwavering opinions, about the one right way to do anything, makes someone a leader. I don't think it does.

The quality I look for in those who would assume the responsibility of leadership is the same quality I look for in people whatever their role in society. Are they quick to judge and to speak, or do they withhold judgment until they have gathered information from various sources? Are they able to hear other views without being dismissive, or defensive, or derisive? Are they willing to rethink their position based on new information after forming an opinion? Can they change their minds because they have continued to think about a problem and their understanding of it has changed? Are they willing to say they don't know before they act? Are they willing to say they made a mistake afterwards?

I suppose no one wants a leader who's a will-o'-the-wisp, swayed by every breeze of changing circumstance. But I don't want one that won't or can't use new information and developments to constantly re-evaluate policy. That's someone I am not able to place much trust in as a human being, much less a leader of humankind.

Still at the beginning of this church year, I hope we really believe that there is more than one way, more than our way, to believe and do anything. We are facing some exciting challenges in our church this year and into the future as we continue to grow. Certainly we must make decisions. But we must make them together; really together. Some of them may be difficult. I hope we will resist the urge to speak to the world and to ourselves as if our way is the only way. Trust is hard to come by, especially when we disagree very much. Living in community is not easy. It requires constant vigilance to protect our principles when disagreements arise in the process of living with each other, as they inevitably do.

But we all need other's perspectives, information, beliefs. I hope we will not speak so quickly and so forcefully this year that we discourage others from expressing their opinions. I hope we will not be so sure of ourselves that we forget to treat the views of others with respect. Just from knowing myself, I know that is all

too easy to do. In our conversations and interactions with each other this year, I hope we will often ask ourselves “Just my way?”

This feeling that there is only one way, and that I know it, has to do with faith in ourselves and in each other, doesn't it? Doesn't the attitude that there can be only one way, my way, come from our inability to trust each other, and trusting ourselves too much? Can we really trust others at least to find their own best path? I sometimes think having faith in God is easy compared to having faith in each other. I find that is especially true as the election nears.

What do we mean if we say we are united by individuality? I believe it, but what do I mean by it? It means, I think, that we stand in unity for an ideal that is deeper and more fundamental than agreement on creed or doctrine or politics. It means we really promise to respect each other no matter how great our disagreements are. That I will honor the beliefs that have meaning for you, even if they make no sense to me. That is so

hard to do. I mean that it's so hard to do inwardly and in actuality, not just to pretend to do so outwardly and politely.

The theme of this sermon is "one way." As indispensable as our honoring of many ways is to our movement, there is one sense in which there is only one way for all of us. It is the way from birth to death. No one has ever escaped that path. As some wag has said, "No one gets out of here alive." The one way of life is from beginning to end. And to find some way to give it meaning. So the question, the ultimate one, is the same for all of us. The questions of existence and the struggle to construct meaning from it; that is the one way.

But I firmly believe that there is more than one way to answer those questions – more than one good way. Each person is living her or his answers. Each person's life is his or her answer to the same, ultimate questions that face all of us. Whatever our preferences, each one of us, whether we travel a way we cobbled together on our own, or follow a well-worn path taken by millions of others, must answer the questions of life by

living. That is why it is an article of faith for us that we must respect the inherent worth and dignity of each person and his or her individual right of conscience.

So when it comes to making decisions about our community, about living together, what does respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person require us to do? What I want to do is to focus on the one way of questions, not the many ways we and others answer those questions. The one way of life is what unites us rather than divides us. That is what I wish I had said to my fellow traveler; that despite our differences, he and I and all of us are truly fellow travelers. That recognition, I think, is what unites Unitarian Universalists.

And that oneness really does unite us with others, UU's and non-UU's alike, whether we acknowledge the underlying sameness or not. "Not two, only one!" In all our differences, I desperately want us to feel the common destiny that unites us all as living beings. I cannot believe that feeling that ultimate unity, that one way to death, would not incline us to be more patient with

others. I cannot believe that it would not incline us to treat them with more lovingkindness as we disagree, really disagree, about the choices we make.

What difference will all our differences, our opinions, our certainty, finally make when we die? I keep coming back to the realization that the only difference that counts for anything is how we treat each other. What is sacred is not what separates and divides us, but what brings us together and unites us. In that sense, I might agree with the T-shirt wearer that there is only one way to joy. For in the end, we all have only one way to go, one life to live, one True Source of Being, one end. Blessed be.

BENEDICTION: “Everything that divides and separates removes us from what is sacred, and so weakens our chances for joy.” May each of us celebrate the one way of life that unites us, even as we celebrate the many ways in which we live it. Go in peace.

Reading: “Not Two” by Mark Nepo, from his Book of Awakening

“To reach Accord, just say, ‘Not Two!’ – Seng Ts’an”

“Almost fourteen hundred years ago, one of the first Chinese sages we know of offered this brief retort to those who pestered him for advice – ‘Not Two!’

This reply is as pertinent as it is mysterious. To make sense of it, we need to understand what isn’t said; that everything that divides and separates removes us from what is sacred, and so weakens our chances for joy.

How can this be? Well, to understand this, we must open ourselves to an even deeper truth: that everything – you and I and the people we mistrust and even the things we fear – everything at heart follows the same beat of life pulsing beneath all the distractions and preferences we can create.

Once divided from the common beat of life, we are cut off from the abundance and strength of life, the way an organ cut out of the body dies. So, to find peace, to live peace, we need to keep restoring our original Oneness. We need to experience that

ancient and central beat [] we share with everything that exists. In feeling this common beat, we begin to swell again with the common strength of everything alive.

Yet we tend to lose our way when faced with choices. Tension builds around decisions because we quickly sort and name one as good and another as bad. This quickly twists into an either/or sense that one way is right and another is wrong. In prizing what we prefer, we start to feel a thirst for something particular, which getting we call 'success,' and a fear of not getting it, which we then call 'failure.' From all this, we begin to feel the tightening pressure not to make a terrible mistake. Thus, we are often stymied and confused because we forget that – beneath our sorting of everything into good and bad, right and wrong, success and failure – all the choices still hold the truth and strength of life, no matter what we prefer.

To be certain, sharing a common beat does not mean that everything is the same, for things are infinite in how they differ. And faced with the richness of life, we can't value everything the

same. But when we believe that only what we want holds the gold, then we find ourselves easily depressed by what we lack. Then we are pained by what we perceive as the difference between here and there, between what we have and what we need.

We still need to discern the ten thousand things we meet, but holding them to the light of our heart, we can say, ‘Not Two! Only One!’ and realize there are no wrong turns, only unexpected paths.”

Responsive Reading: # 518 – Ojibway Indians of North America

Grandfather, look at our brokenness.

*We know that in all creation
Only the human family
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.*

We know that we are the ones who are divided,

*And we are the ones
Who must come back together
To walk in the Sacred Way.*

Grandfather, Sacred One, teach us love, compassion, and honor

That we may heal the earth And heal each other.

Story for All Ages:

Once when the world was young, there was a great mountain in the middle of a huge plain. The mountain was very high. One day a girl decided she would like to see what was at the top of the mountain. The girl's name was Aiella. Aiella went to her grandmother to ask her whether there would be anything worth finding at the top of the mountain. Her grandmother said: "That depends on you, dear. Only you can decide what you are searching for. And only you can decide whether it was worth what you did to find it."

Aiella had heard lots of stories about what was at the top of the mountain. Some people said there was a large diamond there that was worth a lot of money. Some people said that once you reached the top of the mountain, it was so beautiful that you never wanted to leave. And some people said there was a very wise person there who could tell you anything you wanted to know.

Aiella decided that she wanted to discover for herself whatever was at the top of the big mountain. So she set out

across the plain. When she got to the bottom of the mountain, she found many other people who also wanted to climb to the top. But they were all arguing, saying that there was only one way to get there.

“There is only one way to get to the top. The shortest way is the best. You must go straight up,” said one.

“No, that way is too steep. There’s nothing to hang onto, and you could fall and hurt yourself. You must take the long, winding path around the mountain,” said another.

A third person said, “No, that will take too long, and you might run out of food and water. You’re both wrong. The only way to get to the top is to start climbing straight up, and then find a path around the mountain when going straight up gets too steep.”

A fourth person believed the only way to the top was to fly there in an airplane. A fifth person thought you could not get there by yourself. She thought the only way to the top was with a guide, someone who had been there before and had a map.

(That person was a woman; the men didn't want to ask directions.) A sixth person was convinced that the only way was to think very hard about how to get to the top, and then you would float there by magic.

Aiella listened to all the people arguing about how to get to the top of the mountain. But they weren't doing anything else. They weren't starting to do whatever they said the only way was. Aiella decided she would have to decide the best way for herself. She would think for a while about what seemed the best way to her, and then she would start climbing. And that is what she did.

Aiella climbed until she noticed she couldn't hear the other people arguing anymore. She looked down at the bottom of the mountain. She saw the man who thought the only way was straight up. He was going straight up the mountain. She saw the woman who thought the only way was to go around and around the mountain. She was doing that. Another had left to go find an airplane. The man who thought he could get to the top by magic was sitting on the ground and concentrating very hard.

Aiella climbed and climbed. She got very tired. She also got a little scared when she realized no one else was taking her way. She couldn't see the top of the mountain yet, but she kept climbing. At last, she got to the top of the mountain. And it was beautiful. She could see for miles and miles, even all the way back to her home. Aiella was seeing things she had never seen before, things she couldn't have seen unless she was very high above the plain. She saw many other mountains and counted three huge rivers. She could even see the ocean far, far away. So she sat down and thought about how wonderful it was that she had found a way to the top of the mountain to see things she had never seen before. Even though it was a lot of hard work, she knew seeing the things she was seeing had been worth the hard, scary climb.

After a little while the man who wanted to climb straight up got to the top, too. Then the woman who wanted to fly in an airplane got to the top. The woman who thought the only way was to get a guide with a map got to the top with her guide and

her map. The man who wanted to take the long way around and around the mountain finally got there, too. And do you know what they did when they got to the mountaintop? They started arguing again!

“Well,” said the woman who came in the airplane, “of course there were other ways to get here, but mine was the best.”

“No,” said the woman who went around the mountain, “my way was best because I saw lots of beautiful trees and flowers and animals on my way that you didn’t get to see.”

“No, said the man who climbed straight up, “you wasted time getting here. I got here more quickly, so my way was best.”

“You’re all wrong,” said the woman with the guide and the map. “My way was best because I didn’t have to worry like you did about whether I could find my own way.”

Aiella just shook her head. She said, “Why are you arguing again instead of enjoying seeing everything we can see from up here. Isn’t the important thing that we all made it? Since we’re all here now, what difference does it make how we got here?”

The other people didn't say anything for a while. And then they started nodding their heads and smiling at each other. And then they all sat down together to enjoy the view. So remember, there may be lots of ways to get where you want to go, even if you only take one. And it's O.K. that other people take a different path than you do. It may work well for them. And that, children, is the end of today's story.