

THE FAITHFUL KIND

A sermon given as the 2nd in the 10-Part Series, ‘What We Believe’, by

The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on

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If you ask people in our liberal faith to sum up a distinctive religious identity, very often they will say simply, ours is a creed-less or non-creedal tradition, or if you prefer, creed free! We require no formal or public religious declaration for membership in our communities. In that sense, we do not have any standard-issue Unitarian Universalists. Yet both our Unitarian and Universalist heritages have included successive propositions about the things commonly held among us.

Last month, at the very start of our church program year, we looked at the 10 points of shared belief notably catalogued by UU minister David O. Rankin in *What Do Unitarian Universalists Believe?* Today we consider his second point: “We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only intrinsic merit, but also potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.” We consider Rankin’s point, and very possibly, we question it.

All religions? In every age and culture? That sounds impossibly broad, especially to those of us who emerged from more repressive traditions. Whatever we might print on sundry wallet cards or bookmarks or pamphlets, we UUs know that each of these statements is subject to revision. Just as we lack a creed, so too do we lack a

catechism. Nobody here has to parrot what they've been told, line by line, whether by a minister or not. But we're asked to attend to a whole host of religious propositions instead. As you might suspect, this very quickly gets complicated.

Muslim author Eboo Patel characterizes ours alternately as “a theology of interfaith cooperation” or “an ethic of interfaith collaboration”. In the Ware Lecture he gave to the UUA General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, Patel commended us UUs for being active proponents of interfaith dialogue all across this country, particularly in places where we were called upon to be vocal in confronting Islamophobia. He thanked our denominational presses for publishing books such as his that furthered interfaith understanding. But he also reminded us to harness the “great power” that comes when we communicate our particular religious perspective to a religiously pluralistic America.

Patel told the assembly: “You believe that difference is holy... Not only do you believe this, you act on it.” According to Patel, “the resources for cooperation with people who are different lie at the center of the thought and practice of the UU movement.” So the essential religious task is for us to make good use of these resources and continuously cooperate around our own differences, which first involves our tolerating them. In the couple of months that I have been here at UU Wellesley Hills, I have come to appreciate just how much internal theological diversity within this community. It's quite impressive, really.

In his book Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America, Patel notes that where differences feel profound, our temptation is to gloss them over, often out of a desire to be polite and preclude any unpleasant tension. In addition to being a noted scholar and celebrated writer, Patel is the founder of the Interfaith Youth Corps, an organization that works with students on a range of college campuses across this country. He notes that the inclination of many undergraduates is to keep things friendly and light. Yet that casual desire can keep them from being faithful friends to one another. Stronger bonds require more authentic and nuanced engagement.

Consider this comic tale he tells about two students, Cassie, a devout Christian, and Ahmed, a righteous Muslim. Each admires the other and both assume a degree of goodwill between them. So when they meet one evening in the library, the two assume that the time is ripe for proselytizing. It somehow does not occur to them that their religious agendas would be in competition. Although their library episode happily ends in laughter, doubts about that talk linger, especially for Cassie, who hailing from the conspicuously secular suburbs of Seattle, has made a faith commitment that feels total.

The questions that persist for Cassie are exacting ones: “Are his beliefs wrong — or are my beliefs wrong?” My hope for her is that over the course of her higher education, she will learn to formulate questions that are less limiting. As the dean of her school told Patel, “We need a language that maintains our own distinctiveness... while respecting the goodness in others,” ultimately “affirming the holiness of relationships”. That is precisely the sort of religious education that our UU congregations can provide across the lifespan.

In addition to releasing books by public intellectuals such as Patel, our denominational presses also publish titles of special interest to UUs, including an expanding series of books that now includes the titles: *Buddhist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, *Humanist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, *Pagan Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, and *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. In our vestibule here at UU Wellesley Hills, you will spy a newer UUA pamphlet called ‘A Home for Multifaith People and Families’.

Historically, our congregations have been provided religious community to the so-called “intermarried” and their children. Nowadays, UU congregations are increasingly providing shelter to those who have been dubbed “spiritually fluid” or “interreligious” themselves, who have the sense that they honestly and necessarily multiply belong to diverse faith traditions.

Maybe you count yourself in that number. If you do, please know that I want you to be bring the whole of yourself here, in your totality and your ambiguity and your complexity. I trust that you know something, as Rankin wrote in his 10 points, about “the art of listening” and that you hear music from spiritual spheres outside my range. I trust that you understand the intrinsic merit of whatever religious teachings have captured your mind and heart and soul. I want this Sanctuary to be a place where disparate parts of your experience can be gathered together in friendship and celebrated in our communal life.

“We human beings were made for diversity,” Patel stated in his 2013 Ware Lecture. Revisiting the sacred scriptures of Islam in light of our UU “ethic of interfaith collaboration”, he recognized: “Creation is not a single name repeated over and over and over again. Creation is many names.” It is polyphonic and multivocal and encompassing. Patel himself speaks of the rich “resonance” between religious traditions. Even at the subtlest registers, we can pick them up, if we open our ears to hear.

“Faith and philosophical traditions have both beautiful resonances,” Patel noted, “and really profound disagreements. Religious diversity, I think, is about engaging both.” The spiritual growth of our own multifaith UU congregation and its diverse members requires that we do both as openly and humbly as possible, deepening our belief “in the toleration of religious ideas” , even those that might potentially seem at odds.

For as long as I have been a Unitarian Universalist, I myself have been a Christian. To some here that sound paradoxical, but my theological commitment is much more than a legacy of being reared Roman Catholic. Decades ago, it was a UU congregation that gave me the spiritual freedom required for me to become the kind of Christian I needed to be, and I still owe my home church a mighty debt of gratitude. There no one ever asked to renounce my religious past.

When I married a Jewish spouse, thankfully, no one asked him to renounce his religious past either. We could see the “potential value” that Rankin describes in allowing religious ideas to coexist in a climate not only of toleration, but kindly curiosity. Within our UU

congregation in New York, we could hold a Passover seder in the same spot where the Christmas pageant was staged, with neither celebration compromising or diminishing the other one iota.

In his hymn to religion, the late UU minister Vincent B. Silliman declared, “Let religion be to us the wonder and the lure of that which is only partly known and understood.” How countercultural it in our information age to keep company with partial knowing in an attitude of wonder! The pluralistic America that Patel envisions can seem a distant dream, especially when our country and its politics are frightfully polarized. But I believe this is a dream most of us share with him and with very many of our fellow citizens, too. We are asked to hold out faith in possibility.

The child of Indian immigrant, Patel was raised in the midwest. His father was given a spot in a graduate program at Notre Dame, and one of Patel’s early memories is of his father bringing him to the Grotto on campus, a shrine to the Virgin Mary surrounded by flickering votives, so that they could light a candle and pray that the Fighting Irish would win their upcoming football game. When the boy asked his father if good Muslims did such Catholic things, his father said that Islam taught that G-d is light, and there was plenty of that in the Grotto.

These can seem like such dark days in our democracy, I admit, which means that we need all the more to train our eyes on the points of light, and what Patel calls the “sacred ground’ of interfaith engagement is where I expect we’ll find some. Yet Patel wisely cautions us against building self-congratulatory multifaith coalitions that aim only “to bring together theological liberals and political

progressives of various religions to share how their different faiths brought them to similar worldviews”; those don’t tap the full power of our religious imaginations.

One of Patel’s religious heroes is the Dalai Lama, who has famously proclaimed that kindness is his religion. I hope we UUs, too, can be the faithful kind, especially in times of conflict and division. We bring such a glorious array of perspectives to the religious projects - we Buddhists and Jews and Humanists and Christians and Pagans - and Hindus and Muslims and Agnostics and Taoists, too.

“How are all of us, with our beautiful resonances and our deep disagreements, to share a nation and a world together?” Patel asks. Carefully, I guess. Reverently. We non-creedal UUs may not be generally proselytizing sorts, but I do see us reenacting that scene between Cassie and Ahmed again and again, sometimes in our congregations, sometimes within our own conflicted ourselves. “Are those beliefs wrong, or are these beliefs wrong?” Here we are asked to expand our religious imaginations in ways perhaps unprecedented in human history. Of course there will be friction. Of course there will be error aplenty. But there may also be - as there was that night in the library - some surprise and laughter.

“Let religion be to us a life and joy”, Silliman wrote in that passage we recited this morning. Let us take those words to heart. Addressing the UUA General Assembly in Louisville, Patel advised our wider movement to be “guided by the UU ethic of intellectual activism and truth-seeking”, to remain “risk-takers”, and to “[a]lways remember this... [i]nterfaith work... is sacred.”

As Patel reminds us, we will be most effective when we take care “to extend a hand instead of wave a finger or shake a fist.” But first we have to loosen our own grips on what we think we know, or even on what we want, which can be particularly challenging in such anxious times.

The point of this 10-part sermon series of ours is not for the good people of UU Wellesley Hills to rattle off on their fingers our terminally unique truth claims. Rather, such sustained reflection is intended to make us more aware of religious selves and further encourages us to notice the beliefs that we actually hold, especially in this polyglot, eclectic, and inter-religious faith tradition that does not ask us to be standard-issue adherents. Over time, it may even make us more prayerfully determined to become more fully the kind of people we have long hoped to be.