

Cross Cringe

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The parking lots are full. The decorations have been up for months. And, each morning, the newspaper has more ad sections than news sections. So, it must be coming on Christmas. What better time to talk a bit about the issue of Christianity, which I acknowledge is not always a popular topic in our Unitarian congregations, but, one we're going to spend a little time with today.

I want to gather some data from you this morning. Here's what I want to know: How many of you are life-long Unitarian Universalists? In other words, you come from a family that was UU and you attended a UU church as a child? Just raise your hands, please. That's about ____ percent.

How many of you started in another religious tradition as a child or young person? That looks to be about ____ percent of those here today. Lastly, how many of you would describe yourself as not

I imagine that if we took that survey in any Unitarian congregation today, we'd see roughly the same percentages.

There are all kinds of people in life, and a sampling of those kinds ends up here. Some of us found Unitarianism because we were running toward our own vision of what it means to search for truth and meaning, and Unitarian Universalism represents to us the best way to pursue that spiritual journey. Others of us found our way into this faith community because we were running away from a set of beliefs, practices, or theological perspectives that no longer were a good fit for us.

While both of those journeys can bring us here, they represent two very different points of view about "religion" – and I'm using that term – religion – in the sense of the consideration of the meaning of life, our consideration of the questions that for us have ultimate meaning and inform our understanding of what life is all about.

Unitarian Universalism, in its modern manifestation, is a denomination made up of people from a wide variety of beliefs and positions on the issue of "religion." There are even those who would say that UU isn't a "religion" at all, per se. They might call it a movement or a community or a society. Throw in words like "faith" or "belief" and we could be here all day discussing, and perhaps even arguing, about whether Unitarianism is, in fact, a religion.

But that's not the issue I want us to focus on today. Rather, I want us to consider how we arrive at Unitarianism as our faith home – our religious community - and what it is we do with ourselves once we get here.

Unitarian Universalism is, theologically, a "big tent" – and we proudly open our doors to people who describe themselves as religious and those who want nothing to do with the term. Among us we include pagans, atheists, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and former-whatevers and current seekers. It is a treasure to be a place where so many, of so many different ideas and beliefs, can find community, support, encouragement, and welcome. The joy of our diversity is the opportunity to learn from and experience so many points of view and so many journeys of the soul.

And, it's a challenge to sustain a community that tries to be that open, that embracing, that diverse, when we live in a world that tries to reduce, specialize, limit, and constrict. Sometimes our own personal history leads us to want to limit and restrict, too. While our

historical Unitarian and Universalist roots are deeply rooted in Christianity, we have moved far from that tradition as our only source of inspiration and truth. But, because we are sometimes uncomfortable with our religious past, individually and/or collectively, it is often unfortunately true in our congregations that those who enjoy a love of their Christian heritage and embrace of Christian values feel that their views are not welcome.

That concerns me. While I don't personally identify as a Christian, I value many of the teachings of the Christian tradition. I know that the many of the values I learned as I was growing up in a Christian culture stand the test of time. I don't want to shut out that part of my religious heritage, nor eliminate it as a source of inspiration and connection with the sacred in my life.

The "cross cringe" in today's sermon title refers to the reaction that some of those who come into Unitarian Universalism bring with them about Christianity, about either Catholic or Protestant churches. While our Unitarian sources remind us that we draw inspiration from our history in the teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, there are those who would be more comfortable if we focused on only FIVE sources and became the "ABC" church – Anything BUT Christ.

In relationship to this phenomena of "cross cringe" the Rev. Kit Ketchum says that one of the challenges in our UU congregations is "the attitude of some UUs that their early Christian upbringing or the shenanigans of the religious right, entitle them to look down their noses at "those people," people who revere the teachings of the church and Jesus, and actually try to practice them in their lives."

It is particularly challenging when some of us feel that aspects of our early experience in churches were so painful that we no longer are open to any of the possible positives of that experience, but have pushed it aside and want to avoid contact with it now. Since most of us are products of Western culture, the majority of us who have moved away from our earlier religious community have usually rejected the teachings of Christianity. I know that for some people, the hurts of those early experiences are very real, and I am most definitely not discounting that experience. There are so many examples of unconscionable things done in the name of religion, of every persuasion, and that is unfortunately also true even within our own denomination's history.

And I know that it can be genuinely mystifying to ponder the seeming loyalty of Christians, in particular, to a belief system that seems to some of us to be based on the supernatural and non-rational. We who so value our freedom of inquiry and independence of belief can be baffled by what we see as rigid dogmas and limiting creeds. My goal in talking about this today isn't to convince you to move to "cross cling," but rather to consider a life that is "cross compatible."

So, how do we develop spiritually over a lifetime? There are many models, but I find that articulated by psychiatrist M. Scott Peck to be accessible, so I'd like to share it with you today. There's an excellent discussion of Peck's model in the book, *Not the Religious Type*, by David Schmelzer. Peck's model of spiritual development posits that spiritual development happens in stages. As we move through our life, we have the opportunity to stop at any of these stages of spiritual development, or move on to others.

The first stage he correlates to toddlerhood, where the person is primarily focused on themselves. Toddlers are in need of good boundaries and clear behavioral parameters to deal with a life that can feel chaotic.

The second stage in this model correlates to the development of children that happens around age seven or so and might be called “rules-based.” The importance of boundaries is still there, along with a set of rules. In Peck’s understanding, he says that most churches are focused at stage two – they exist to tell people the rules and to set the boundaries of life.

Understand that Peck is not saying this in judgment and he acknowledges that the religious experiences of people in this stage are real and sincere. These are good people who get things done and raise strong families. He acknowledges that the heart and soul of most Christian countries are right here in this stage of spiritual development. The challenge is how this stage interacts with the next stage – the third stage of spiritual development in Peck’s model. This he correlates to the teen years, and is characterized by rebellion – the need to question the rules learned in stage 2. In this stage, we want to know what’s behind those rules and why they are so important. Author Schmelzer says that universities are a great support to stage 3 – a place to learn and explore and question.

The important consideration for Peck in this model is the interaction between the stages. Schmelzer explains it this way: “Stage 2 is an important, but often embattled stage. On the one hand, in stage 2 religious communities, there’s the assumption that anyone outside of the community is stage 1, a lawbreaker who needs to find God and keep the rules of life. Stage 3 is especially threatening to stage 2, because stage 3 folks are seen as unique kinds of lawbreakers – they’re liberal religious libertines! Stage 3 folks sometimes look at stage 2 with contempt for how they could be so ignorant.”

It seems you can look “downstream” in this model and see the stages you’ve passed, but it’s almost impossible to look “upstream” and appreciate the spiritual possibilities outside of your understanding.

Our Unitarian Universalist values call on us to honor the worth and dignity of every person, regardless of the stage to which they have developed spiritually. We could get caught up in the dynamic cycle of stage 2’s insistence on rules and stage 3’s rebellion, but there is an alternative.

There is a fourth stage in Peck’s model of spiritual development, called the “mystical” stage, where one realizes that much of what one learned as spiritual truths in stage 2 may actually be true, but in a much richer, deeper, and more mysterious sense that one could have, or would have imagined. Stage 4 is about questions – stage 2 is about answers. In this way of thinking, according to Schmelzer, stage 2 looks at truth from the outside, as if it were a book that can and must be mastered. Stage 4 looks at truth from right in the middle of it, as if truth is everywhere and takes a lifetime to explore. Stage 4 is about life transformation. It is moving into this next level of spiritual development that we have the opportunity to heal our religious wounds, to claim a new vision of faith.

What moves us between these stages and facilitates our spiritual development? While some change may inevitably occur as we mature and grow as people, probably the most important factor in creating an ability to move into the next stage of spiritual development is our own willingness to consider allowing changes in our viewpoint.

We open ourselves to this when we interact with and consider other points of view, other people, other ideas, and other traditions. Being open to transformation through sharing with others our stories and experiences, thoughts and learning is a profoundly moving and potentially life-changing opportunity. Creating that opportunity is one of the reasons

we choose to affiliate in faith communities in addition to pursuing our spiritual practice on our own.

Not only do I wish us to consider this from the perspective of facilitating our own spiritual healing and community building, however. I believe our faith and values must have a face and a voice outside of these hallowed walls, into the realm of public policy, politics, and legal decisions. I'm concerned about our ability to effectively advocate for our values and moral positions in the public sphere that, in the last few years, in both the United States and Canada, has moved toward a kind of conservatism being heavily influenced by the Christian Right, or what Rick Hertzberg and others have labeled "Christianists – an old-style militant Christianity fusing super patriotism, male supremacy, and rigid Biblicism more fueled by fear than love." This group, in my opinion, has moved far away from Jesus' messages of justice and mercy, generosity and compassion.

But, what have we, as religious liberals, done? We've turned our backs on our Christian roots. We've shelved our Bibles and refused to read them. This from Rev. Peter Laarman, editor of *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel*. "This is a strategic mistake as tens of millions of North Americans continue to respect and even revere the Bible's authority. A plain reading will find Jesus and the prophets fiercely at odds with the kinds of social arrangements (notably rule by and for the wealthiest) now prevailing in the (Christian Right.)"

But, speaking in broad generalities, this is a group operating at a level of spiritual development significantly different than our understanding. To counter bad scriptural interpretation, we need to be as Biblically literate as possible, so that we have the words and understanding of scripture to speak to them in their own terms, so that we can reclaim the gospel message of hope. We have the need to study Jesus' message more, not less, in order to develop a degree of sophistication for witnessing for our truth, our values, our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus example.

That is why it's important for us to continue to pursue our own spiritual growth and development, so that we can not only offer a welcoming presence to those who seek us out and need our kind of embracing, affirming faith community, but we can be a voice of reason and alternative interpreters of what the Bible really says. We need to heal our own religious hurts not only to save our own lives, but to allow us to be there for others who would like to find a place where their life can be saved, too. A place where all of our diversity, including our theology, is welcome. May it be so.