

The Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism

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If you are a Jew, your spiritual roots are held in the firm soil of the Torah, and it is to this sacred text to which you will turn when you have need for inspiration, or wisdom, or answers to your questions about God and the nature of life.

If you are a Buddhist, your search will lead you to the writings of the Buddha, where you will explore and learn from the words of his teaching and find guidance for your quest in the wisdom he shared with his followers.

If you are one of the Native Peoples of the Earth, you turn to the wisdom stories of your ancestors, passed down to you through the ages and generations. From these you glean wisdom and insight, which serve as a source of guidance for your actions and choices.

Most religious traditions trace their connection to their form of “truth” through a sacred text or set of wisdom stories and traditions. These bodies of knowledge capture the essence of how they explain the nature of being, what it is they believe to be true, guidance on how one can best live and thrive in this world, and answers to the mysterious questions of life. The Bible, the Mahabharata, the Q’uran – we are familiar with these and many other examples that have served as spiritual inspiration for the world’s faith traditions.

Groups of religious people usually reference a text that represents the teaching of their leader and/or their tradition. In today’s sermon, I want to talk about the sacred traditions from which we draw inspiration and wisdom as Unitarian Universalists. We refer to our references as the Six Sources, and they describe the diversity of points of view that we bring to the theology of our denomination.

At last Sunday’s Peace Vigil, I talked with a woman who attends a United Church here in Hamilton. It was the first time she’d been in the building and she was curious about our faith. Perhaps you have had similar conversations. As we discussed the essence of Unitarian Universalism, I could see her struggle with the concept of our broad, inclusive theological embrace. Finally, she said, “So, you’re non-denominational?” “No,” I replied, “We’re a religious denomination – Unitarian Universalist.” “But you don’t use the Bible, so you aren’t a religion?” “We use the Bible as one source of wisdom in our religion, but we also use other sources, as well.” I bet you’ve seen the look that followed that statement – glazed eyes, a bit of a pull back of the head – the conversation was over, I knew! She said, “Oh, well, how interesting,” as she turned toward the door and left the sanctuary, totally confused, I think, about what I had told her.

We live in a world where people seem to yearn for certainty, for a definitive answer, for the one way that things should be. I think that lady, as perhaps many people, wanted to ask, “How can Unitarian Universalists embrace a faith that draws from not one, not three, but SIX different sources of wisdom and truth? Surely, there’s only one truth, isn’t there?”

Despite the yearning for simple answers and single sources, we know that the world is full of differences – in opinion, in belief, in culture, and so forth. How, some people ask, can anyone claim “faith” in something that presents so many opportunities, so many varied viewpoints and possibilities?

We who identify ourselves as Unitarian Universalists actually find this freedom from a single creed or dogma a relief in terms of our search for truth and meaning. We appreciate the options that our faith tradition encourages us to pursue, freely and also responsibly, as we seek to grow spiritually, intellectually, and interpersonally as a community.

Our Six Sources open the door to diversity. In our tradition, we could not honor the dignity and worth of every being without opening the doors to continuing revelation and discovering new wisdom from many traditions and multiple sources. Unitarian Universalists value deeply this rich resource in which we may seek that which for us has heart and meaning. We treasure the choice we have to be in relationship with that which speaks to and informs the deepest and most vital part of ourselves and our spirit.

In the six months since I've been here, we've explored aspects of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. I think UUs proudly speak about our Seven Principles, and we know them pretty well, particularly because we use them as a way to explain our faith tradition to those unfamiliar with UU who are curious about what we believe or hold to be of value in living a faithful life. I know for me they are a lens for considering my life options and how I choose to live faithfully.

Our Six Sources, while also familiar to us, are somewhat less celebrated and acknowledged within and without our tradition. Not so much because they are any less important, I think, but perhaps because the Principles are so rich, we just don't get to the Sources. Perhaps we take our eclectic approach to theological options for granted. It pays to remember that we are unique, as a faith tradition, in honoring such a variety of sources of wisdom, truth, and insight with our spiritual practice. We know that we value the rich, diverse theological heritage that has brought us to where we are today as a denomination, as a congregation, and as individuals within this faith.

The Rev. Jason Shelton is familiar to many of us through his musical compositions for UU worship, many of which can be found in the teal hymnal supplement. To celebrate the Six Sources, he has composed a "Sources Cantata." Here's a small selection of it (SOUND BOOTH.) You can hear more on his website. It's quite beautiful and moving.

Rev. Shelton believes that the Six Sources should have a more prominent place within our movement. Here's what he has to say about why he chose to focus on the Six Sources in composing this choral and orchestral work: "We have a marvelous statement about theological diversity in the Sources, but it largely gets ignored," he says. "Most of our folks can talk about the Principles in glowing terms, but they're a statement of covenant among congregations and how we will be in the world. The statement about what we believe is a statement about diversity, and that's the Sources."

So, let's dive into these fountains of our theological diversity, and explore what each of them contributes to the fabric of our faith.

First Source: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

Through the experience of everyday life, or through the use of our own spiritual practices, each of us has experienced moments when we feel we are a part of something larger and more important than just ourselves. For a brief moment - perhaps for longer, if

we are fortunate – we transcend our sense of ourselves as individual, as alone, and experience a spiritual bond to all that came before us and all that will come after us, to all that is below, above, and around us. In that moment, we feel uplifted and renewed, open to life and the possibilities we experience in a transcendent instant.

Our faith tradition calls this feeling of mystery and wonder an important source of wisdom and inspiration; a Source for the knowledge and truth through which we can more thoroughly and deeply connect to life and all that is a part of it.

Second Source: “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

We draw from the inspired actions and words which have come down to us through the ages from people that we admire for the conviction of their beliefs and the integrity of their actions. We know of Unitarian Universalists who stood up for what was and is right, answering a call and seeking to create a world that works for all, including Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, William Channing Gannet, and James Reeb. We come from a long line of people who have cared about the state of the world and been willing to do something to make it better. We are inspired by the work that they undertook and the commitment they showed to creating change. It would be hard to be a UU and NOT care about social justice.

When we consider what it means to be a “prophetic” man or woman, we sometimes think that it requires someone who is exceptionally brave or larger than life. However, when we hear the stories of these people, we understand that they were no larger or better than we. They were people who responded to what they saw happening around them and chose to take a stand. In this way, we are reminded that each of us has the potential to be prophetic, to make a contribution to justice.

Being in a faith tradition that encourages action, we know that we don’t have to take on the world’s problems alone. We have each other to work together, to provide support and encouragement for the long haul. No one needs to wait until they have the right answers or knows just how to proceed, because together we will find the way. And the work is so important and so vital that everyone is needed and necessary. The encouragement we find in the actions and words of those who have gone before beckon to us to continue in our efforts to make a better world for all.

Third Source: “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

Despite differences in language or culture, all humans experience many of the same life joys and sorrows – things like finding love or experiencing the birth of a child, suffering the loss of a loved one or being in pain. The world’s faith traditions remind us of these commonalities, of the need to respond to each other with compassion and caring in the face of life’s joys and sorrows.

There is some version of the “Golden Rule” in most of the world’s religious traditions. In sentiments similar to our own words, people are reminded to do unto others as they would have done unto them. The people’s of the Earth have identified something of which we all need to be reminded, a value above others that is universally held – that

we must think of others and treat them with the dignity and respect that we would expect for ourselves.

Unitarian Universalists draw from the world's religious traditions because, in them, we find truths and insights that help us better understand what it means to be human.

Fourth Source: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Unitarian Universalism has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we have proudly drawn from the wisdom of these ancient religions for hundreds of years. While our views about the prominence and importance of these traditions has changed as the years have gone by, they remain a part of our denominational DNA, inexorably linked with the basic values and tenets of our faith.

As the fourth Source indicates, the primary lesson we draw from this tradition is our emphasis on love, specifically the call voiced by Jesus to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. From our Universalist heritage, we affirm the inherent goodness of all humanity, and we seek to affirm and encourage that goodness by loving others and loving the world.

It's not that we are unaware of the evil or disheartening in the world. We know it's there. It's just that, as Unitarian Universalists, we'll choose to stand on the side of love, seeking to find redemption in hope and renewal in love when we, or one of us, has violated the covenants of community or fallen by the wayside.

Fifth Source: Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Unitarian Universalists are strongly supportive of the worth and dignity of every human being, believing that each life has value and a gift to offer to the world. Our faith calls upon each of us to determine what our gifts are and how we can use them, along with our skills, to help heal the world.

While our first Source opens us to our direct experience of mystery and wonder, this fifth Source reminds us to pass that experience through our filters of reason and rationality, to keep ourselves intellectually honest and emotionally grounded.

Joseph Priestly – a scientist of great renown and reputation – is often cited as one of the first to bring Unitarianism to the “Colonies.” He used his reason to explore the mysteries of his age and the capacity of his mind to expand what it was possible to know and understand about how things work in nature and in our own bodies. Utilizing his creative and curious mind, he discovered much about the mysteries and wonders of science. He is an example of our heritage of reason and science.

Here's how UU religious educator Gail Forsyth-Vail explains our Fifth Source: “Unitarian Universalists embrace the guidance and teachings of science as part of our tradition. We delight in scientific discoveries that enhance our understanding of the world in which we live.” When we tell the stories of scientific discovery, we explore how they can inform our ethical, moral, and spiritual development and understanding, in order to live life more fully and confidently.

Sixth Source: “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

The first five Sources were included in the 1984 revision of our Seven Principles. This sixth Source was added during the 1995 General Assembly, to honor and acknowledge the growing presence of those who follow Earth-based religious traditions within Unitarian Universalism.

It is a reminder to live in balance, in constant relationship, with the natural world. We are reminded by the traditions of Earth-centered spirituality that time spent honoring and respecting nature is ultimately time spent honoring and caring for ourselves, as we live within the interconnected web of all existence acknowledged in our Seventh Principle.

From the Buddhist tradition, we have heard it said that “When the student is ready, the master will come.” One of the joys of the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism, to me, is that it opens up the door to “masters” – to wise teachers – of many types and kinds, so that, as I’m ready, I can find the inspiration and guidance I’m seeking for the next phase of my spiritual development and growth. This diversity of thought, this wonderful freedom to draw from so many sources, in my free and responsible search for truth and meaning, is one of the blessings of this faith tradition that touches my mind, my heart, and my soul.

Our Six Sources mesh with and support our Seven Principles, and vice versa. Together they form a vivid outline of what we value and esteem as Unitarian Universalists and the rich, diverse well of knowledge and wisdom from which we draw our truth. They help us explain our faith tradition to those unfamiliar with UU, and they remind us of the parameters within which we search for meaning in our lives. As a denomination, we draw significant meaning from all six Sources, although each of us as individuals may find one or a few Sources more meaningful for us personally than others.

Having a statement of our Sources which specifically highlights the variety of resources from which we draw legitimizes our Unitarian Universalist diversity of theology by implying that the traditions noted all contribute to our Living Tradition.

Our statement of Principles and Sources ends with this paragraph: “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.”

We are saying that we’re all part of the fold; that despite our theological differences, we believe we can form and nurture together a loving, vital, and worshipping community.

It is written. It is taught. May it be so.