

CRAZY QUILT RELIGION

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July 24, 2005

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Did your family ever move when you were younger and your world was completely turned upside down? Did you ever live in a place so different from what was familiar to you that you actually thought, “I must be on a different planet!” That’s what happened to me when I was in 5th grade. My family moved from the urban Mexican War Streets of Pittsburgh to the rural farmlands of Central Pennsylvania. No more familiar parking meters, sounds of cheering for the Pirates home run, or smells of chocolate baking at the Clark bar factory. My world was now filled with hitching posts outside stores for Amish buggies, and the alien sounds of horses whinnying and muscle cars roaring. And then there were the new smells. Smells of farmers putting down fresh manure in their fields. Oh, I would have given anything, to have the smell of Clark Bars. So, it’s a strange irony that I was immediately befriended by another girl whose family owned the largest dairy farm in the county. On her farm, I was introduced to quilts, particularly – Crazy Quilts.

As recently as the 1980’s many of the families in central Pennsylvania were making quilts. These weren’t art quilts – these were functional necessities. Quilts, mostly crazy quilts, were made to keep you from freezing at night when your furnace inevitably ran out of coal at one a.m. These Crazy Quilts - made from scraps of fabric from other sewing projects or sometimes from old coats or jackets – were absolutely beautiful.

I’d like to take just a moment to share with you some of the history of these beautiful Crazy Quilts and their social significance. Some contend that the beginning of crazy

quilting started in colonial times. Much like their central Pennsylvanian contemporaries, colonists may have stitched recycled materials from worn out blankets or leftover fabrics. This was the start of the evolution of the Crazy Quilt which is really, as Betty Pillsbury writes, “the triumph of women’s imaginativeness and ingenuity in the face of unimaginable trials and tribulations.”¹ So, if the colonists made the first known Crazy Quilts, they were sewn around the same time as the formation of Unitarianism and Universalism in America.

Around this same time in 1770, one John Murray, credited as the founder of Universalism in America, braved unimaginable trials and tribulation too. What imaginativeness and ingenuity he must have cultivated despite his Calvinist upbringing in England, then the early death of his young child and wife, and finally time in debtor’s prison. Despite all this...he found the strength to come to America and preach that salvation was for all and we weren’t going to burn in hell!² Or how about the unimaginable trials and tribulations of Joseph Priestly, a great scientist in England and close friend of Benjamin Franklin, his entire house, laboratory, library, and church were burned to the ground by a angry mob in 1791, because of his religious views. Views that Christianity should be “genuine and rational,” that “all truth had religious value.” As we know, the flames in England brought Priestly to Pennsylvania a few years later.³

But, back to quilts...it wasn’t until the 1880’s, over 100 years after the first Colonists started making Crazy Quilts, that these quilts saw an emergence as “art.” Crazy Quilts had a true social significance. During this Victorian time period, when women’s lives were ruled by stifling social codes of conduct, Crazy Quilts took on another meaning beyond simply keeping folks warm. These quilts became a means of breaking social constraints.

They were a means to both individual expression and when in quilting bees, united community expression. A Crazy Quilt's defining feature was non-conformity - irregularly shaped pieces, a variety of fabric with no planned single design and no set center focal point to the quilt.⁴ No Crazy Quilt was like the next. Each was truly unique with an untamed beauty that looked random, but, was in fact, thoughtfully put together. And I suspect it was a bit of creative, daring adventure that led to truly remarkable results. They were born from these women's souls expressing their deep desire to simply, though through very elaborate design, be themselves. The act of quilting in this organic and intuitive way provided a means for a woman to express herself as an individual in the world she lived.

In current times, right now, we as Unitarian Universalists have been struggling to find ways to express ourselves. Our faith *as* faith in the world we live. As holy. As a calling. Recently, I was in discussion about religion with one of my friends, a former Catholic. The conversation turned to my own interpretation of Unitarian Universalist faith, and an exchange went something like this:

"It's a difficult thing to describe the faith of UUs," I began, "But, I really think it is important to..."

"Wait a minute," my friend stopped me mid-sentence and quipped, "Unitarian Universalists don't *have* faith, they just like to *talk* about it!"

"Well, of *course* we have faith!" I retorted.

Now, here is where a definition of faith was important and made the difference between me believing that Unitarian Universalists have faith and my friend thinking we didn't.

I recently found a workable definition for faith that I think is useful to religious liberals. The Rev. Dr. Barry Andrews in his paper entitled, "Educating for Faith," found in *Essex Conversations, Visions for Lifespan Religious Education* writes,

I would say faith is comprised of both spirituality and religious identity, and that these are interdependent. Spirituality, as I understand it, is largely personal and perceptual.... It has to do with our own innermost thoughts and feelings about life and death and the nature of things – our own answers to the questions, Who am I? Why am I here? What is expected of me? What happens when I die?

Religious identity, on the other hand, is communal and conceptual. It represents those values, beliefs, and rituals that a group of people hold in common.... It is a community's attempt to answer the big questions.

In my view, spirituality and religious identity are reciprocal. On the one hand, our spirituality needs to be shaped by a heritage of wisdom that is preserved in our religious community....On the other hand, religious identity is shallow and ineffectual without a depth of personal feeling and individual commitment. A rich spiritual life is the nourishing ground of any religious tradition. It is through *faith*, the congruence of spirituality and religious identity, that religion comes to life and finds expression.⁵

We as Unitarian Universalists, as individuals and as an organized religion seem to be so worried about proselytizing it stifles our ability to find that expression of faith. I understand the concern. I wasn't born into this faith. I chose it based on what I believed to be true. So, I understand the worry....BUT, we risk continued marginalization in society and indeed, risk the extinction our free faith if we don't find the courage and the means to articulate it. The world will lose our message of hope. The Universalist message of hope that says you are worthy of love, you matter; you belong. The Unitarian message of hope that says critical thinking is a good thing. The Unitarian Universalist message that says - let us promise how we will be with one another, not promise to all subscribe to a creed.

This message of hope has made a profound difference in my life. Now, this may come as a shock to many of you – so hold on to your pew cushions – I am not a big fan of our church building. Now I'm not saying that it isn't architecturally stunning (of course it

is), or that I'm not honored and humbled to worship in a place built 101 years ago by Unitarians for a free faith (again, Amen and Bless Their Vision!). However, I remember driving around this building for the first time and thinking – wow, now there's a churchy church, I bet I can't wear my jeans in *there*! My misconception at the time was that this building, and therefore the theology found inside, just wouldn't fit with my beliefs. I sometimes wonder how many people walk by this building everyday and think the very same thing. I wonder how many people who walk into our church for the first time are thinking this. And let me say this to you, if you are in our pews today - be open to truth, don't get caught up in the wrapping paper of a truly wonderful gift. If the wrapping enhances the gift, and for many it really does, enjoy it. If it doesn't – let it go. Regardless, the gift is for everyone. There is a place for you here, if you chose. I love this faith not because of the pews, but precisely for the *people* in our pews. Our community awakens my best self.

Now is the prime opportunity for, we, the people in the pews, to work on our collective expression of faith. How can we start? Part of this work involves understanding what unites us as Unitarian Universalists. What holds us together as a liberal faith tradition. The religious right has been scarily good at articulating their message and what unites them. We see the results all around us. Last week, the largest church in America, a mega-church, opened in Texas in what was once the former arena of a professional basketball team, the Houston Rockets. The church attendance was 16,000 people at their first service.⁶

This reminds me of the Unitarian Universalist worship service that I attended that was also held in a sporting arena. It was during General Assembly in Boston in 2002. It was fun doing “the wave” before the service started, but I wouldn’t necessarily advocate adding it to our order of service. (Although I’m sure you would find some children willing to lead it.) And personally, I like to go to arenas to see sporting events, drink beer, and yes, occasionally yell at players with words that are certainly *not* what our Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford would call “language of reverence.”

But, joking aside...is not the message of liberal faith just as valuable as what they are doing in Houston, if not more so, for the same amount of ears to hear it, minds to think it, hearts to feel it, and hands to sow (and sew) it?

This idea of unity has been on the minds of many in our faith, including the Unitarian Universalist Association. Here are some ideas The Commission on Appraisal, an independent review board of the Unitarian Universalist Association, played with as metaphors for Unitarian Universalist unity. In their newly published report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (2005), most of the metaphors involve the idea of a center or core or heart. The center point of a circle, the handle of an umbrella providing support to the parts of the whole, or a living cell with the nucleus at its core holding the genes that make up the organism.⁷

But, the Crazy Quilt is the image that came to me prior to reading the report. Picture if you will each quilt made up of uniquely individual pieces, each on with its own history, each one different. These bits of cloth could represent each individual Unitarian Universalist. If the pieces of cloth represent each one of us, then the entire beautiful quilt

represents our beloved community. And that community, our religion as relationship to one another, is desperately needed in our time. In the words of our own minister almost 11 years ago in his December 1994 sermon, entitled More Hope, David preached;

Historically, we have been champions of individual freedom, emphasizing “Me” over “We.” But that emphasis is no longer enough. The creation of community is an urgent challenge in our society nowadays, and mechanical assertion of our individual freedom without regard to our interdependence looks more and more like irresponsibility. Unitarian Universalists need to learn more about uniting our aspirations and our efforts, about making common cause, about building strong and effective religious institutions. We Unitarian Universalists need to make peace with the inescapable fact that to be human is to be essentially social and forever part of a larger human context. Over and over, I hear newcomers say, “What I like about this church is freedom.” Just once I would like to hear someone new to our church say, “I came here because I admire the way Unitarian Universalists blend personal freedom with community responsibility.”⁸

If the entire quilt is our community, the threads that connect all the pieces together represent our *unity*. Like the Crazy Quilt, Unitarian Universalism provides warmth and it provides beauty. It is stitched together first and foremost by a thread of love. And this is what we need to articulate to help build stronger community. And how we put the quilt together, how much attention or inattention, matters to the overall aesthetic – and this represents how we covenant with one another.

So, what is the unity in our Crazy Quilt Religion? The idea of unity has been hotly debated throughout our history. Here are some current findings from the Commission on Appraisal’s report. First some findings on shared values or what the Commission calls “To What Do We Aspire?” and second some findings on shared theology, or “How Do We Frame the World?”⁹

Four values garnered some of the highest affirmative responses. First and foremost, *love*. Love was a core value expressed in more than one word including *love, compassion, connection, and community*.¹⁰ “Love is the doctrine of this Church,” begins a covenant in our own hymnal.¹¹ John Murray said, “You possess a small light...uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage.” This light is love and compassion which leads to connection and community. It provides courage to do all the things in life that matter. And so, we could say we value love and it is a thread that unites us.

Second, *inner harmony*. Inner harmony was a core value for nearly 90 percent of laypersons and clergy.¹² Many of us value finding that sense of peacefulness and balance. As we heard the words of Thich N’hat Hanh a few weeks ago, “let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds. Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves...”¹³ I’d like to think that it wasn’t just curiosity about the exotic nature of a woman Buddhist priest at our pulpit that made so many of us listened to Kyoki Roberts. Her words had meaning. And so, we could say we value inner harmony and it is a thread that unites us.

Third, *Harmony with The Divine*. Wherever folks saw themselves on the theological spectrum – language used in core statements about values included the words *holy, divine, and transcendent*. One person wrote, “the deep-set belief in a great good that lures us forward to our best selves, a.k.a. God.” Another said, “deepening experience of and relationship to the Holy, shared in community and encouraged through mindfulness.”¹⁴ And so, we could say we value harmony with the divine and it is a thread that unites us.

The last value I'd like to mention is what is being called in the report as *The Quest*. Words used by respondents in the study included *quest, transformation, search, growth, and learning*.¹⁵ It seems that the continually process to becoming is an essential value to many Unitarian Univesalists. I personally love this. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that read, "I AM BORN AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN." And so, we could say we value the never ending process of living and learning and changing and it is a thread that unites us.

Turning to theology, first, concerning human nature, around 90 percent of lay respondents and clergy considered the following statement highly important, *humans are born with the potential to be good; we are committed to nurturing good through love and learning*.¹⁶ It seems our Universalist roots continue to hold us close. Or to steal from popular culture, "The force is strong with you young Unitarian Universalists." And in a way, we are young; the Unitarian and Universalist merger just happened in 1961 and we are also, I'd like to think, young at heart. And so, we could say we value goodness as a theological grounding and goodness and the nurture of that goodness is a thread that unites us.

Second, our theology is grounded in Unitarian Universalist history including our Principles and Purposes. Interestingly, a little more than half – 54% of lay people, but 80% of ministers agreed with the following statement as highly important to theology, "*Sharing stories from our larger UU faith traditions*."¹⁷ We need to ask ourselves why we as lay people tend to value our history less than ministers do. Is it because we wish to ignore our Judeo-Christian roots? Is it because many of us didn't grow up in this faith and don't know

the history? I am hopeful that the thread of our history will strengthen, not weaken over time. So, for at least today, we could still say we value our history as a theological grounding and our history is a thread that unites us.

Finally, consider this statement, *“The depth and dimension of our lives (spiritually) calls us to live mindfully, seek meaning and serve love.”* Close to 90 percent of survey respondents ranked this affirmation highly importance.¹⁸ Could this be our Christian Unitarian roots speaking? And so, we could say, we value a life of spiritual purpose as a theological grounding and what we do with our lives is a thread that unites us.

This certainly ties into social justice. This was not something that was ranked highly important as a value. This surprised me and I’m guessing it surprises you too. But perhaps, it is because social justice is not what unites us – it is what we live. If the pieces of the quilt are the person, the quilt itself – the community, the threads – our unity, then what we do with our quilt, represents our works, our justice seeking, our collective calling.

Our religion is born to be used for its functional necessity and longing to be used as an artistic canvass for the human soul. It keeps us warm and it inspires the depths of our very being. We could say we are united in the value of love, inner harmony, the quest, harmony with the divine. We could say we are united in theology and how we frame the world in goodness, Unitarian Universalist history, and life of spiritual purpose. But, will we proclaim this unity?

My daughter who is almost two, is a typical toddler. She likes animals, for now its crocodiles, and she love to recognize and name body parts. The other day she pointed to my eyes and said, “Mama’s eyes.” “Yes, mama’s eyes,” I confirmed. Then she pointed to the dry skin on my elbow, furrowed her brow and said, “Scales.” “No, that’s skin,” I said, “Mama doesn’t have scales.” “No! Scales!” she continued to exclaim.

What do people see when the see Unitarian Universalism? Let us make sure they see our true religion and our true faith. It not so great having someone believe you have scales. But is far worse having someone believe your faith is watered down religion. What will we chose to have the world see? Let’s show the world that yes, we know how to sew. Yes, we have the thread. Yes, our quilt is for you.

Blessed Be.

Amen.

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1. Betty Pillsbury in Collaboration with Rita Vainius. “The History of Crazy Quilts, Part I” The Caron Collection. 1997. <<http://www.caron-net.com/featurefiles/featmay.html>>.
 2. David Robinson. The Unitarians and The Universalists. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 49.
 3. George N. Marshall. Challenge of a Liberal Faith. (Boston, MA, Skinner House Books, 1991), p.67-70.
 4. Betty Pillsbury in Collaboration with Rita Vainius. “The History of Crazy Quilts, Part I” The Caron Collection. 1997. <<http://www.caron-net.com/featurefiles/featmay.html>>.
 5. Reverend Dr. Barry M. Andrews. Essex Conversations, Visions for Lifespan Religious Education. (Boston, MA, Skinner House Books, 2001), p. 5-6.
 6. The Associated Press. “Church Opens in Former Houston Rockets Arena” CNN.com. Sunday, July 17, 2005. <<http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/07/17/mega.church.ap/index.html>>.
 7. The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Engaging Our Theological Diversity. (Boston, MA, 2005), p.12.
 8. The Rev. David Herndon, “More Hope” December 11, 1994. p. 4.

9. The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Engaging Our Theological Diversity. (Boston, MA, 2005), p. 45 and 65.
10. Ibid p.53
11. Covenant by L. Griswold Williams, Singing the Living Tradition, reading 471.
12. The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Engaging Our Theological Diversity. (Boston, MA, 2005),p.59
13. Thich N'hat Hanh, Singing the Living Tradition, reading 505.
14. The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Engaging Our Theological Diversity. (Boston, MA, 2005), p. 60
15. Ibid, p. 56.
16. Ibid, p.75
17. Ibid, p. 70
18. Ibid, p. 77