

Living in (Sometimes) Glorious Harmony with Ambiguity

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The Rev. Larry Smith told me something important about giving sermons, or in my case, a simple talk from one Unitarian Universalist to another. He said that if the group hadn't yet heard it, it was OK to recycle. When the Worship Committee contacted me to speak this month, I said sure, as long as I didn't have to use a summertime brain to create something totally new. My apologies to the handful of you here who may have heard me give this same talk in Dublin a couple of years ago. You have my permission to sleep through the service, but not to snore.

Arlen Goff travelled every Sunday for a while to the UU church in Dublin to do an adult Religious Education program called Building Your Own Theology. High Street UUs may not realize it, but you have several real evangelists among you, including Arlen and Dorner and Nancy and Jane and Mary Lou and Bob and Beth. I had already been engaged in Building My Own Theology for years, and I took advantage of the contact with real UUs, putting my mind and heart and soul into the course. For several weeks I struggled to articulate for that kind but very perceptive group a piece of my own theology. Today I would like to share with you some of the results of that effort.

You may agree or disagree with my premise or with the assumptions I make or the definitions I use or my personal conclusions.

But it is my belief that you will learn as much from what you disagree with as from what you agree with and perhaps even more.

I invite you to listen now as I explore the concept of ambiguity and the role it plays in my spiritual life and my daily conversations with the universe. For I have found myself gradually learning to live in (sometimes) glorious harmony with ambiguity.

When you check the dictionary, ambiguous means permitting more than one interpretation or explanation.

Ambiguity can also indicate some lack of clarity or presence of uncertainty.

With fair certainty, and with perhaps with the only certainty I will muster today, I can state that ambiguity permeates my religious life at many levels.

As a first instance, ambiguity exists within me at any given moment. I was born with a tendency to see more than one side to any issue, whether it is political, spiritual, intellectual, or whatever. With something as simple as which way the toilet paper should hang, I can tell you not just the arguments for each side, but I can feel the rightness of both points of view. Sometimes that makes me a little uncomfortable, but in my more positive moments (and with more important issues than toilet paper) I see that discomfort as a way to harness energy for me to grow.

For each of us these bits of ambiguity currently existing in our minds may be different, but I would guess that we each have our share. For me...right now...I am trying to reconcile my lifelong commitment to others B to bettering the lives of others, easing their burdens, and tackling the unfairness in life that assails other people --with my increasing respect for the autonomy of other human beings and the good that comes to them if I step back and allow them to succeed or just fail on their own.

This is not a simplistic question for me. There are grave concepts of power and caring, independence and dependence and interdependence here. I have not yet found all my answers to the multiple facets of helping others.

I find hints of the resolution of this problem in the Golden Rule from many religious traditions. One Christian version from Mark 12:30 says: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and all thy strength." Whatever God is to me, this tells me to look to my own spiritual wellness as part of the process of being a person and being a giving person. I need a base from which to give. Mark 12:31 continues with the other half of the Golden Rule, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," which reminds me that I should not scatter what I may think are good deeds mindlessly over the landscape (although hugs and smiles don't count, I believe in the liberal use of both). Instead of good deeds, I need to offer others the same consideration I would want for myself, that I receive help, encouragement, and a smoothing of my path, but with due respect and dignity given to my abilities and my choices and my right to rise and to fall and pick my own self up or not.

This is complicated stuff for me, and I expect to continue to make many mistakes. I also expect to continue trying to tease out the principles involved and how to apply them.

In addition to such immediate concerns about spiritual and ethical living, I have also noticed ambiguity within myself that exists over time.

For example, I grew up believing in a Godhead expressed as the Trinity. I went through a time of questioning all the creeds and givens I had been taught. I wondered what was wrong with me that I could not feel God when I tried to pray. I moved on to being nearly unable to say the word "God." It was almost profane for me. Gradually, I learned new meanings to attach to the word "God" B meanings I could feel safe and comfortable with.

In fact, ambiguity was saving here for me. I gathered definitions of God from Unitarian Universalists, from nature religions, from mainline Christian faiths, from Judaism. The multiple definitions I could give to God freed me from feeling separated from God by a terribly limiting definition I could not accept.

I still feel myself growing in terms of how I understand God. My youngest child, Caitlin, says I use the words mystery, wonder, and feel too often when I give her my best personal answers to her questions. Perhaps a little child shall lead me, too. Or perhaps I will lead her to a jumping off point for her own experience of transcendence.

Ambiguity also exists between my own beliefs and those of others. Any one of us could cite numerous examples of times when we discussed differences in belief in a friendly (or not so friendly) way with other middle Georgians.

I contend that these differences are as they should be. We are all as unique as snowflakes, and our relationships with God are, fundamentally or minutely, different. My heart sings out for us to revel in the differences. Rejoice in them. Appreciate the unique person before us, whether it is culture or language or religion or color or personality that illuminates the differences that we are privileged to see. Then move on to find and love the likenesses we humans share, to one degree or another.

This love of differences and likenesses, particularly the religious differences, does not always come to me easily. But I am learning to be grateful for the spiritual challenges that force me to growth.

Without the challenge of living in the Bible Belt and associating very closely with conservative Christians, I would not have refined my religious understanding in quite the same way. If my own beliefs had not been shaped on the anvil of fundamentalist belief, they might not have the breadth and depth they now have. If I had not been exposed to Christian faith, even though it is not my own, I might have lost a real opportunity.

Given that my own beliefs are very different and that I went through a long period of suspicion about the religion of my childhood, what do I think now about the Christian who seeks God through his or her relationship with Jesus Christ?

Sometimes I think it's wonderful. I feel the joy and peace radiating through some Christians. It is wonderful. There are many paths in my own mind to a relationship with the spirit that is both eternal and ever-changing. The approach to God through Jesus is one that opens the door for many people - a thing we can rejoice in.

I have come to understand, finally, that I can find it spiritually uplifting to see the effects of Jesus in the lives of some people I know while rejecting the mind-numbing and heart-breaking limitations of Christianity.

I reject that it is the way for me.

I reject that it is the one way for everyone.

I reject that it is the way for people with dead eyes and hearts who adhere to some outward observances and some inward acceptance of what they have been told to believe. I reject that it is the way for people who hurt as they hate themselves for not having the transcendence or the relationship with God through Jesus they have been taught to expect.

Yet I accept and appreciate it when Christianity does lead a person into true relationship with God.

I can live with both responses to Christianity existing within me at the same time, and I can be a whole and honest person.

With this insight, I am learning to live in greater harmony with the Christianity that swirls around me in Dublin. But this line of thought does not just apply to Christianity, but to my responses to other religious beliefs as well.

At various times I hear a coherent argument or feel a compelling insight about another path to spiritual wholeness. Deep down I know that sometimes what I am appreciating is not the rightness of that path for me, at least for now, but the rightness of that path for someone else.

Other times I realize I am tapping into a source of wonder of the universe, ready to grasp it with both hands, perhaps ready to tentatively touch the edges or only ready to watch and wait to see if it is right for me, and me for it.

An example, I feel a gentle future pull toward some aspects of Buddhism. Who knows if I will ever go there, or if I need to?

Another example, my heart beats in rhythm with Neo-Paganism, even though my understanding of paths to the Goddess is still limited and my regularity of religious observance is appalling.

A third example, I periodically hear discussion of reincarnation and feel respect for the meaning it has for others, but I feel no resonance in my heart for it. Nor do I feel affinity with a Christian Heaven with pearly gates and streets of gold and God on a throne.

I do not know what happens after we die. My genetically coded human desire for life and continuance cries out for some individual life after this life yet my rational mind and my heart's connection to the universe say that any continuance is not likely to be anything I expect or recognize.

For now, I believe that I am gifted with an individual consciousness rooted in this world and this time. I have some awareness of the Eternal which exists before, during, and after my life as well as the interdependent web of all that is animate and inanimate and spiritual in the universe.

How my relationship with this Web will change after I die, I do not know. That lack of certainty is anathema in some religions and to some people. I understand. Ambiguity is more difficult for some of us than others; it's more of a challenge some days than others; and life after death is a pretty powerful concern, making ambiguous answers even more painful.

It is my feeling that it may be enough of a challenge to live this life fully and mindfully. Perhaps Judaism's approach, if I understand it correctly, to focus on this life and let God focus on what happens after death, has its merits for me.

Finally, viewing religion from the vantage point of ambiguity is also personally revealing when I look at individual beliefs I hold.

I jumped on Unitarian Universalism as a religion when I was 16 first because of its open-minded attitude and second because the name made sense to me. I still find I can comfortably take Unitarianism and Universalism literally from their names. As a Unitarian, I believe that there is one spiritual Eternal that we all try, in our limited ways, to understand and be in relation to. As a Universalist, I believe that salvation, whatever that is- and that's a whole other discussion, is equally available and automatically part of each of us.

As an ambiguiist, on the other hand, I admit that I could be wrong. This life is not doled out equally and fairly, at least to my human eyes, no matter what the Unitarian and Universalist fathers of our country may have said. If this life is not always experienced with equality, what does that say about life after death?

Babies are conceived whose mothers cannot carry them for physical reasons or because of circumstances or because of their own internal lives. Babies are born who die soon or suffer handicaps in living the fullness of their lives. Children are raised in families that are more loving, or less so. They come to us with personalities that attract other people and those that repel. People live in places with many opportunities, or places of terrible hardship. An old woman like the Queen Mother can drink a quart of gin a day and live and die safely, surrounded by riches and people who care for her, while another old woman does the same, and dies homeless and unlamented. Religions throughout time have postulated reasons why these apparently unfair allocations of life, liberty, and the opportunity for the pursuit of happiness occur, frequently resorting to past or present lives as explanations.

The ambiguiist in me accepts the lack of fairness in this life and is still able to postulate universal salvation both in this life and, whatever it means, after death. Sometimes I'm amazed at myself for having the audacity, but that's what I believe.

There are days when all these possibilities seem almost overwhelming to me. And others when I find it invigorating. One certainty for me is that when I am among Unitarian Universalists, it is safe for me to delve into the un-certainty of life and spiritual belief. If we wanted it laid out with no question marks, we would be in another church.

Thus I am free to live, at least sometimes, in glorious harmony with the ambiguity of the universe and my understanding of my relationship with it.

The Unitarian Francis David has said: "You need not think alike to love alike."

Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."