Autonomous and Interdependent

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, August 4, 2019

There’s a debate about the nature of the universe that goes something like this: there are those who say that the universe is an indifferent place, that is, it cares not about human need or human suffering. It is neither benevolent nor malign. It is simply indifferent to a humankind that sees itself as set apart from and given dominion over the world of matter. Then there are those who say that as long as there are people who care about each other, the universe is a caring place, for we are not separate from but part of this vast cosmos, and that each of our individual actions have consequences that reverberate throughout the web of life.

Some of our religious ancestors who brought what we know today as Unitarian Universalism to American soil, engaged this same debate on a micro level – the microcosm of church life; struggling with how to uphold individual freedom while belonging to a body committed to shared values, how to be independent while connected to a larger whole, how to be both autonomous and interdependent.

This faith, this living tradition of ours came to be here on American soil because of those who dissented from and sought to reform the Church of England in the direction of a more personally experienced spirituality. They held study groups and conferences and preached on market days, for which they were persecuted and punished by the monarchs and bishops of England.

These dissenters and reformers left England – part of what was known as the Great Migration of 1620 -- and settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, hoping others would join them. Life was difficult; indeed, it was a struggle simply to survive. Still, they managed to find time devoted to the larger purpose of their exodus from England, to form a religious community based on a more personally experienced spirituality not ruled by monarchs or mediated by priests and bishops. They met regularly, in Cambridge, to study and deliberate questions of how and under what authority they would gather a Church. They looked to scriptures in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible for answers to their questions, what today we more commonly refer to as the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Let me just say here that this in itself was a departure from the Catholic and Protestant Christianity of their time. Mainstream Christianity then and still to a large extent today, tends to privilege the New Testament over the Old and uses passages from the Old Testament that prophesy the coming of a messiah. This privileging of the Christian scriptures over the Hebrew scriptures has worked to dismiss the legitimacy of the Jewish faith and Jewish people, leaving them open to centuries of persecution and genocide.

Not that the Puritans weren’t capable of persecuting others. In addition to the burning of witches, we know they brought with them the Doctrine of Discovery and the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny that worked together to dislocate people indigenous to this land and created conditions of genocide. Theirs is a mixed legacy, part of our UU DNA, and more importantly, part of our American DNA. We have as much to overcome as we have to embrace and celebrate.

Still, the Puritans used the scriptures not to prove that Jesus was the promised messiah, but to answer their questions about how and under what authority they would gather as a Church. They looked not just to what Jesus and the apostles had to say, but also to what figures such as Abraham and Sarah and Moses had to say, and the Hebrew prophets. There, they found very different patterns of authority. Their study gave them a roadmap for how to be a gathered people in covenant with each other and with their God, or in today’s language, the Holy or the Divine, or any other ways each of us has of naming that ineffable dimension of life.

Another result of their study was The Cambridge Platform, a document that laid out the purposes for which the Church they envisioned would exist and how it was to be governed. That document is foundational to how our Unitarian Universalist congregations are organized today. It is the basis for congregational polity, locating authority in the gathered members of the congregation. That is, each congregation has authority over all matters pertaining to the congregation. Though the theology doesn’t resonate today, many of our current day practices are outlined in The Cambridge Platform – the election of officers, including pastors and teachers, and the ordination of ministers.

In our congregations, what may be the most lifted up and easily recognizable manifestation of congregational polity is the authority of each individual congregation to ordain and to call ministers of their choosing. Whatever thoughts or feelings you may have about the Puritans, you have them to thank for this right of membership which is to participate in the choosing and calling of your next minister.

Our UU congregations have the authority to write their own bylaws, establish their own policies, choose their own forms of worship, and their own practices for everything from membership to religious education to how to bring about more justice in the larger world. This is all well and good, allowing for each congregation to express their own sovereignty and individuality – and – The Cambridge Platform envisioned more than that, congregations that were autonomous and interdependent, individual and part of a larger whole, or in the language of The Cambridge Platform, “the communion of churches one with another.”

The Platform says that the communion of churches is exercised in sundry ways: -- and these are greatly paraphrased.

1. By mutual care in taking thought for one another’s welfare.
2. By way of consultation with one another when we have occasion to require the judgement and counsel of other churches.
3. By way of admonition, to wit, any case of public offense to be found in a church.
4. By way of participation. The members of one church occasionally coming unto another.
5. By way of recommendation, when a member of one church has occasion to reside in another church.
6. In case of need, to minister relief and succor one unto another.

Our religious ancestors, the authors of the Cambridge Platform put forth a way of being interdependent with each other, a congregational way of care and accountability, presence and support, a way of mutuality, recognizing that what happens to each happens to all.

A few years back, in 2012 to be more precise, The Rev. Fred Muir delivered the annual Berry St. Essay, a cherished Unitarian Universalist tradition going back nearly 200 years. Rev. Muir titled his essay: From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice. (When you hear iChurch, think iPhone or iTunes.) In the essay, he recounts the decline in recent years of participation in religious institutions of all sorts. Amazingly, during this period of decline, Unitarian Universalism has held somewhat steady. Still, says Muir, there is a storm brewing for us too. He says, and I quote:

“I am calling for a renewed and renewing story about how we and others know Unitarian Universalism. What I’m wondering is: Twelve years into a new century, with the radar telling us that a storm is coming, knowing how this storm has affected others like us, I say we are in danger if we continue with the story of iChurch. In the aftermath of this storm, many will simply want to reassemble the old story into a meaningful and recognizable narrative, using our Principles and the lens of iChurch. But that story is over, it has ended; it’s a story that won’t take us where we must go, it is turning our backs on what we need for a healthy future, which is the Beloved Community, a community of justice, a religion and spirituality that Unitarian Universalism does have as a vital and vibrant part of our history, it’s only that we have chosen not to build on the promise of covenant but instead to follow the tenets of the iChurch.”

If I may be so bold as to paraphrase my esteemed colleague, we can become so enamored with our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person that we spend enormous amounts of energy trying to shape the church to meet individual preferences. We forget that our seventh principle, respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, is about more than caring for the earth, it is about recognizing our interdependence with each other. We forget that our principles are not only guideposts for living, they form a covenant for how we are to be with each other and with life. We forget that our individual lives are like the single butterfly whose flapping wings effect weather patterns half a world away. Our individual lives matter because they have an impact on the larger whole.

The lyrics of the hymn we sang earlier, *We Would be One,* were written by the Rev. Samuel Wright to commemorate the merging together of the Unitarian and Universalist youth groups a full two years before their parent denominations merged in 1961. The resounding call for unity of purpose – “We would be one in living for each other to show to all a new community” – is a call for unity – not the iChurch but the we-church -- as Unitarian Universalists but not for ourselves alone. It is a call to model for the world a way of being together in community, a community that is more than a collection of individuals, a beloved community bound together in a covenant of love and a commitment to justice.

There is wisdom in our congregational way, our congregational polity that grants us the authority to govern ourselves. Our ancestors knew that self-governance is not the reason for our existence. It is the *how* of our existence but it is not the *why*. The why of our existence is to bring more peace and justice into the world. Together with Unitarian Universalists locally, nationally, and continentally, we are part of a mutual covenant that is grounded in love and rooted in history. We are part of a network of sibling congregations, autonomous and interdependent, congregations that share our principles and values, congregations that we can turn to in our time of need, congregations to whom we can offer our strength and support in their times of need. We can draw on the wisdom of other congregations. I love when members travel and visit other UU churches, fellowships, and societies and bring back ideas that might work here like these words of welcome used at the Door County Fellowship in Wisconsin – “No matter what you call this building, no matter what you call this gathering, you are welcome here.”

This is the wisdom of our congregational way. It is here, together, that we are reminded that we are not isolated beings but connected to each other, autonomous and interdependent. It is here, together, that we recall those who came before to give us a religious heritage that is ever growing and ever evolving. It is here, together, that we know that we are greater than the sum of our parts. We are like separate fires that kindle one flame. Together the flame grows brighter. We are like separate strands woven together to form a fabric that is more colorful and stronger than any one strand alone. We are like separate streams that meet and merge. The streams form a mighty river that is deeper and wider together. We are like drops of water that together form a vast ocean. We are like the individual stars in the sky that together form a galaxy, a cosmos, a universe. If we are to live in a universe that is not indifferent to human need, it is we who must make it so.

Amen and Blessed Be