

Faith In Motion

Rev. Lyn Cox

May 6, 2018

“Enter, Rejoice, and Come In,” we sang together earlier. I think of that hymn as a very active song. We are calling out to each other, encouraging movement from one place to another, encouraging movement in the way we listen, encouraging movement within.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism is an active faith. It requires something of every participant. We come together to care for each other and the world. Describing a congregation or the Unitarian Universalist movement as a whole can be difficult, because we don't have a rock-solid, unchangeable creed. It's a different way of thinking of religion than many people are accustomed to. What draws us together are sacred promises about ways of being and doing.

Universalist minister and scholar L.B. Fisher wrote in 1921, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all. We move.” Even to these many years later, after consolidation with the Unitarians and epic world events, we have inherited this active faith. We move.

This explanation, “we move,” is satisfying in a number of ways, but pretty soon we have even more questions. Where do we move? How do we move? We're all in this movement together, and I'm not saying I have any final answers, but I would like to ask those questions along with you for a while. In our Unitarian Universalist faith, where do we move and how do we move?

Linear Motion

UU students and campus ministry advisors filled the room, perched on the edges of couches, sprawled on the floor, reaching up to cheer and reaching out to encourage. We were playing improvisation games to practice articulating our faith for outreach activities with campus ministry groups. There were two chairs at the front of the room, one for the role of questioner and one for the role of UU representative. Anyone could offer to “tag in” and replace either person any time. (We were gathered for a UUA-sponsored Campus Ministry training, which drew in part from the curriculum “Articulating Your UU Faith” by Barbara Wells ten Hove and Jaco B. ten Hove.)

Questioners tried to stump their friends in the UU representative chair. “What do you believe about Jesus?” “Is this a cult? If you can't give me a straight answer, I know it's a cult.” “Why do you get together? What's your goal?”

For their part, the people in the UU representative chair did pretty well, smiling and answering as non-defensively as they could. Sometimes they would respond with, “Well, that’s a good question, what do you think?” Many of the UU representatives tried to give objective and “right” answers, and they had some good ones. “We believe in keeping faith with justice, equity, and compassion.” Some of the representatives would say, “I can’t answer for all Unitarian Universalists, but I can tell you what I think.”

Before playing this game, we had prepared by filling in the blanks for the sentence, “I used to believe _____, but now I believe _____.” For instance, I used to believe that God was a man in the clouds, but now I believe that the Holy is beyond our narrow human understanding of gender or geography. I used to believe that people go to Heaven when they die. Now I believe that, when I die, the matter and energy that make me who I am will be released and re-absorbed by the forces that create and uphold life.

When I say, “We don’t stand, we move,” the first thing I think of is this linear motion from A to B. In order to describe this kind of motion, I need to have a way to describe point A and point B, and maybe something about the time it took to get there. To tell the whole story of motion, it’s not enough to say, “I don’t believe in such-and-such.” That’s like describing point A without any other information. We can’t describe motion with only one piece of information. Telling the rest of the story isn’t always easy. Describing point B can be emotionally difficult. Leaving point A may have been painful, how can I commit to finding a point B that I might have to leave again. Describing point B requires focus and creativity.

One of my professors in seminary, Rosemary Chinnici, told us that we come to a time when we realize the faith we have inherited is inadequate for what we are facing. She called this religious impasse. I don’t think she meant that everyone changes religious affiliation when hitting a rough spot, I think she meant that we have to change how we relate to our faith.

Another of my professors, Rebecca Parker, writes what she learned from Professor Chinnici about running into religious impasse. “[A]t such moments we have three choices: We can hold to our religious beliefs and deny our experience, we can hold our experience and walk away from our religious tradition, or we can become theologians.” Parker and Chinnici both recommend the third option.

Religious impasse happens to people who were raised with no formal religious tradition. It happens to lifelong Unitarian Universalists. All of us have beliefs. Beliefs can be challenged by personal experience, no matter who we are or where we’ve come from.

When the workshop facilitators asked us to frame positively, “now I believe,” they were asking us to become theologians. This is what our religious communities must do. We must equip each other and encourage each other to become theologians. If we can do that for each other, we will be able to describe where we move.

I’m curious about where we move collectively as well as individually in faith. We draw from the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, people who drew maps for their generations and for ours. Sometimes we follow those maps and sometimes we move off the edge. How do we map out our shared hopes for ourselves and for future generations, giving new edges for future generations to move off from?

Where we move isn’t just about us as individuals, or even us as a group, it’s also about welcoming others who are moving toward point B.

Circular Motion

How we move is part of the story, just as much as where we move. Physicists study at least 5 or 6 kinds of motion: harmonic motion like a swinging pendulum, reciprocation, rotary motion, Brownian motion, circular motion, and linear motion such as the point A to point B that I just described. I’d like to think for a bit about circular motion.

Let’s say I’ve got a rock on the end of a string. If I swing it in a circle, I’ve got centripetal force, a center-seeking force that pulls the moving rock toward the center of the circle, and I’ve inertia that keeps the rock moving in whatever direction it’s going away from the center. The force that pulls the rock to the center is tension on the string. If I cut the string while the rock is going around in a circle, the rock will fly off in whatever direction it was pointed it, tangential to the center, probably injuring someone or breaking something in the process. That’s how I feel when I can’t find my spiritual center.

If we are in motion, acting in a dance of dynamic tension with a set of forces and influences, how do we stay connected to the center? If we are telling the story of how we move, the center and our relationship to it is part of the story.

Where is the center? What keeps us connected to the center? In this congregation, you proclaim a common bond through your mission statement: “Build Bridges. Celebrate Community,” and through the Unison Affirmation: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its prayer.” Perhaps the visible and tangible forms of that bond have to do with love, service, and acceptance of one another. The common bond is the string tying the souls of this congregation to the center. Love and acceptance are inward acting forces. I don’t think love and acceptance form the center, they are the forces that keep you connected to the center as you keep in motion.

In his essay, "Walking," Henry David Thoreau writes:

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks – who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived 'from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la Sainte Terre,' to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, 'There goes a Sainte-Terrer,' a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean.

Thoreau did a lot of wandering, often not far from home in Concord. I think the Holy Land he referred to is any place that is walked with reverence. He made side trips to point A, point B, and point C, and he ended up not far from where he started, a circular motion that was significant without needing to measure long distances between the beginning and the end. In sauntering around the center, let us move in ways that reveal holiness. Ultimately, the questions of where we move and how we move center around something that is beautiful and mysterious and worthy of our pilgrimage.

Sources of Energy

"We move." In addition to questions about where we move and how we move, there are questions about what moves us. By what power do we move? What are our sources of energy? What kinds of powers support and uphold life for you? Do you have a shared purpose as a congregation? Does that purpose move you? Do you trust that purpose enough to be moved?

Caring for each other and the world are worthy goals. You don't have to do it alone. The powers and blessings we hold are entrusted to us by unseen hands. Let me try to clarify what I mean by that. Unitarian Universalist communities embrace people who believe in a personal god, people who interpret god as a metaphor, people who don't find god to be a useful concept, and many others. That diversity doesn't mean we live in a world entirely of our own making. There are sources of energy that move us forward, around, inside out, and through. When we honor the namable and unnamable forces, we open ourselves up still further to the energy of those sources.

We have many ways of understanding the mysteries of creative, sustaining, transforming power. Your description may involve the inspiration of ancestors and prophets, or it may involve the momentum of stardust forming and re-forming in echoes from the birth of the universe. Your description may involve a still, small voice within. It

may involve the dreams of generations to come, calling you into being. There are many names for the source that sustains us and transforms us while we are constantly in motion.

Moving On

“We do not stand at all. We move.” True enough. Where do we move? How do we move? By what power do we move? May we become theologians, creating maps for our spiritual journeys. May we circle around the center in service to a shared purpose. May we empower each other for the journey in cooperation with the Source of Life.