



# VOICE

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## Why Have We Traded Democracy for Consensus?

By DAN MEYER

The founders of our country, many of them associated with Unitarian and Universalist traditions, took great pains to try to secure sovereign rights by instituting democratic process as the most fair means to accommodate the expression of diverse views and make group decisions. Disenfranchised groups in America have fought for and won a voice and a choice in the matters which affect their lives, and many nations today still look to us for their hope of liberty, even acknowledging our considerable shortcomings. Nearly every UU publication includes the principle of democratic process among its essential values. Congregations are accepted into UU affiliation by virtue of their acceptance and implementation of UU principles, including democratic process.

After all of the effort and sacrifice made by our forebears, are we really sure we want to relinquish the hard-won right to democratic decision-making for the popular concept called "consensus"? In the various newsletters and postings for UU meetings and groups, how often are the choices which are made and implemented described as democratic and how often are they referred to as "reaching a consensus"? Does anyone

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## A Unitarian Universalist Theology for the Twenty-first Century

### Toward an Ecstatic Naturalism

By ROBERT S. CORRINGTON

The somewhat immodest proposal in this essay is that it is still possible to create a coherent, nondogmatic, radically open, and realistic theology within our movement. This might seem ironic because we are also at a historical nexus in which the richness of thought and experience within our ranks has reached new levels of expression. The danger in such an enterprise is obvious: the attempt to impose yet one more colonial (perhaps Euro-American) thought system onto a protean stream of experiences and ideas that cannot be held back. Emancipatory forces are continuing to break free from patriarchy and other forms of race, class, and gender domination. The very concept of theology, where the word is even tolerated at all, seems threatening

when it promises a science of the divine that can encompass and ground all other human enterprises. Why then try to turn back the clock and return to something that has been, and can continue to be, so damaging to the needs of the self?

On the other hand, what does it mean to be part of a movement that can simultaneously, and even joyously, affirm logically incompatible assertions? Is there a way to reconcile the justified respect for difference and diversity with a philosophic need for consistency? When some of us assert that a divine power (rarely a personal being) does exist, while others of us deny such a possibility or probability, yet

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both parties also strongly identify themselves as Unitarian Universalists, we are led to wonder if thoughts have any purchase at all, that is, any meaning outside of our private language games. Or is this interest in conceptual consistency merely a churlish residue from the earlier creedal ages that used thought systems as a form of communal policing? Perhaps the Scylla and Charybdis of our movement could be defined as the tension between a justified fear of theological colonialism and a refusal to take some of our most important ideas seriously enough.

My motive for writing this essay is to try to clarify for myself and others the inner genius of Unitarian Universalism and its prospects for the century now sending its penumbra into the fading light of this one. Is it possible to find some way toward an understanding of the self, nature, the sacred (where even discussed), and the role of our movement in providing a guide to others in an age noted for extreme social and political violence? Can Unitarian Universalists even have (or want) a theology if that entails something like a body of assertions that by definition exclude others? In attempting to answer these vexing questions I will move toward a very different conception of theology than that found in traditional doctrinal expressions (Scylla), and that kind found in the carnival of postmodern exuberance (Charybdis). The goal of these theological reflections is to open out the prospects of what I have come to call *ecstatic naturalism*, a post-monotheistic conception of nature that has profound room for emancipatory and sacred energies, while also honoring the utter indifference of nature to many of our deepest longings.

Asked more simply: can we be systematic about being anti-systematic? I am persuaded that Unitarian Universalism has unique spiritual gifts, and has now entered into a powerful historical momentum that can regenerate theology and help us even closer toward an understanding of and participation in nature. Of course, we must beware of a kind of nature romanticism that promises more than it can deliver, and must also recognize that nature has no special obligation toward our species, to name no others. As we will see, this qualification puts

some pressure on our seventh principle which affirms our, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part." But more of webs later. In what follows I want to say something about a protean theology that moves across shifting and often unconscious currents and say something about my own conception of nature.

In talking about a Unitarian Universalist theology I want to shift away from discourse about the *object* of theology to discourse about the *how* of theological reflection. The basis for this shift comes from the particular form of congrega-

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tionalism inherited by our movement as one based on a "community of autonomous congregations." The 1997 report of the Committee on Appraisal, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, lays out the inner logic of this tension between radical congregationalism and the struggle toward a cohesive social movement that can speak with one voice, especially on social issues of national and international importance.

Tensions create energy. Insofar as the energy is liberating it is possible to live in what I call a *natural community* that has its own history and myths of origin, while also moving toward what Josiah Royce (1855-1916) called a *community of interpretation*. Natural communities are jealous of their heritage and can sometimes guard their signs and symbols in such a way as to make them opaque to outsiders. The most extreme form of this is the Nazi myth of blood and soil (*Blut und Boden*) that rooted the so-called Aryan peoples in their allegedly unique conditions of social and even cosmic origin. Natural communities merely reiterate their own symbols and fail to probe into their possible demonic features.

A community of interpreters on the other hand will take each primary symbol and probe into its various layers of meaning, some healing and some

demonic. At its worst this can become what today is known as the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, based to some extent on psychoanalytic models of denial and repression, that won't allow *any* symbol to stand for long at the center of community. At its best it insures that symbols (religiously charged signs) shape communal life in healthy ways. The creative tension comes in precisely where the natural dimension of community intersects with the interpretive. None of us can live in a fully interpretive community, if for no other reason than a kind of semiotic entropy where symbols become rigid and lose their order and higher dynamism.

How does this new/old congregational model work theologically? It would be too simplistic to equate the local with the natural and the national or international with the interpretive. Indeed, natural dimensions of community can exist on both sides of this tension, while interpretive possibilities can slumber or emerge on both sides. Our own primary symbol of the flaming chalice can function in any local or non-local context as a symbol of opaque identity (i.e., there are insiders and outsiders) or as a deeper symbol of spiritual and rational transformation of personal and communal life. We are reminded of the former kind of tribalism in the somewhat humorous Nantucket phrase that refers to the benighted part of the human race as mere *off islanders*. From the standpoint of any natural community other than our own we are all off islanders.

Yet even islanders need to connect with the larger community to survive. This very process begins to erase the distinction between the small center of light (often self-generated) and the "dark" continent outside of it. What happens when off islanders begin to import theological goods that do not fit in to the economy of discourse on the island? This is precisely where we as Unitarian Universalists find ourselves both within our own movement and in terms of our relationships with the "outer" world. For us, interreligious dialogue is most often intrareligious confusion: a kind of highbrow speaking in tongues that leaves us more weary than we sometimes admit. Yet the inner genius of our movement is precisely this

growing respect for theological goods that can find some kind of home, however precarious, within our economy of identity and difference.

This latter reality gives us an edge on doctrinal communities for whom the entrance requirements are clearly spelled out in advance. We are asked to undertake the far more difficult task of working *toward* inclusion criteria in the future, the domain that Ernst Bloch calls the *not yet conscious*. How generous are these inclusion criteria to be, and who gets a vote? The radicalness of our congregational model compels us to open the doors as widely as we can (remembering that the very concept of a royal "we" is itself demonic) while struggling toward some way of not only respecting but of entering into the speech rhythms of other tongues.

Does all of this sound hopelessly romantic in a time in which the great monotheisms are waging continual war with each other? Are we not more like a little boat caught in a churning sea that hardly recognizes our slight pressure on its water surfaces? What does it mean to even speak of something like a *not yet conscious* when unconscious powers rule the world and send millions to their death? These are hard questions, yet ones that we all recognize are just beneath the surface of our sense of liberal community. Yet the obverse of this is the equally important fact that our movement is itself part of a species-experiment (if this doesn't sound too presumptuous) in converting unconscious religious powers into at least partly conscious emancipatory energies. And it is here where the theological *bow* of congregationalism manifests itself.

There remains the creative tension in which each congregation (or each personal perspective) will find energy and confirmation (as well as prophetic challenge) from those others that wish to belong to the larger experiment known as Unitarian Universalism. This is the *bow* of a theology that is less concerned with affirming or denying traits of the divine, than it is moved to strengthen those fragile forces that cannot exist on their own. Why are we drawn to this heterogeneous movement? I suspect that it is because we cherish the continual invitation toward finding our own *not yet con-*

*scious*. Yet we are also drawn toward those interpretive energies that enable us to cease being off islanders, at least among ourselves.

But this theological *bow* has a deeper momentum in which it moves us beyond even respect for and openness to otherness. I am persuaded that some form of commonality will (or at least can) emerge for our movement that is different in kind from the doctrinal. How do we avoid the Scylla of an identity that effaces difference? My sense is that we avoid a hegemony of the powers within our own ranks by more fully participating in the

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very logic that brings us together in the first place. This logic moves us from natural to interpretive community, from unconsciousness to the *not yet conscious*, which itself points toward a different type of religious consciousness. What does this mean in practical terms?

If doctrines divide, then something post-doctrinal may have the chance of providing a unity-in-difference. But is this special form of connection guilty of destroying our precious intellectual heritages by exchanging a kind of nascent (but heartfelt) series of pulsations for coherent and powerful discourse that matters in a largely secular world (again, our Charybdis)? We begin to emerge from these depressing prospects when we allow ourselves to be grasped by something toward which all of our various meaning horizons point.

Interpretive communities always interpret something other than themselves (at least). This something other can be specified in two ways. On the more immediate level it can be seen simply as the off island universe. Here we encounter those theological goods that enter into and flow out of our natural and interpretive lives. And it is here that we fight those frustrating battles in which we somehow want one great

power to dominate the others (remembering that this desire is often unconscious). Each "something" in this world has a shape, a contour that can be roughly mapped. I can know what "they" think about worship, or about the divine, or about immortality. And, of course, I can also know the specific inadequacies of each perspective, especially if it stands outside of my own tribalistic universe.

But is there a dimension of our congregational and interpretive life that participates in a greater something that is not so specifiable in the world? Do we sense something that cannot convert into a doctrine or a meaning horizon, and if we do, can this vague something have any value in a world struggling for justice? By way of attempting to answer these questions about the greater *something* that flickers into and out of our sight I want to conclude with a few thoughts about my conception of nature and the role it might play in some kind of post-monotheistic understanding of the *bow* of our world and the *where* of the sacred.

Earlier I stated that I was less interested in the object of theology than in its *how*. In this shift to a discussion of nature am I not violating that self-imposed limitation by pointing to the something that is alleged to lie in the heart of our many perspectives? Or is there a way of talking of this something that does not turn it into an object about which we could disagree? I am throwing my lot in with the latter prospect, as I know of no other way to rescue a concept of nature that is religiously compelling (without being a romantic wish fulfillment), and of finding a place where each *not yet conscious* can find its own inner expression.

I start with a bald assertion: nature is the genus of which the sacred is a species. That is, nature is much larger in scope than any real or alleged divine power that might be found within it. There is nothing outside of nature, nor is there anything that is not fully natural. In his wonderfully detailed article "The Seven Humanisms and How They Grew" (*Voice*, Vol. II, No. 3), John H. Weston delineates the various forms that humanism has taken, and continues to take. Referring to the 1933 *Humanist*

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*Manifesto* as an expression what he calls a *religious humanism*, he reminds us of the type of naturalism found in this crucial document. For our purposes its first proposition is the most relevant: "Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created."

Not only is this a firm rejection of the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine, but it is also an affirmation of the utter scope of a nature that was neither made nor shaped by a divine providence. My sense is that this proposition unites humanists and non-humanists within our movement insofar as it points to a more generous conception of nature than that found in the monotheisms. There is nothing larger than nature and our place within it is reduced to that of an often unwitting spectator. This entails that there is no supernatural dimension, but it does not

entail that there is no suprahuman dimension in which we participate. This dimension must, by necessity, be named in various ways, but the naming process does not exhaust its utter fecundity.

How do we begin to characterize nature if there is no perspective outside of it by which it could be measured? The obvious answer is that we cannot. Yet we can and do come up with powerful metaphors that help us to understand at least *part* of the inexhaustible something that permeates our being.

Returning to our seventh principle we find the image of the *web* to be central for many of us. Simply put, to be is to be connected with all that is. But how true is this belief? At this point I ask two questions. The first: just what is a web for? My answer: to kill other creatures so that they may be eaten (my plea against the current romantic visions of

nature). The second: are we really connected with *everything* in the universe (a view held by process theology)? My answer: surely not as there are breaks in continuity that must be acknowledged no matter how painful to our wounded narcissism.

Insofar as I wish to characterize this elusive something that enters into our diverse lives I would characterize it as the unconscious dimension of nature. It is neither a divine mind nor a repository of truths, but the source for the continual unfolding of all that is, whether human or not. We encounter it through the mood of ecstasy, a standing outside of the self that participates in the suprahuman. The naming process comes later and often lives in melancholy remembrance for what is lost. For Emerson, the best name for the lost unconscious of nature is derived from

Spinoza: *natura naturans*, or *nature naturing*. It is nature in its hidden dimension of naturing that "publishes itself in creatures," making all manifest life possible. The religious life lives in this tension between ecstasy and melancholy, between *nature naturing* and *nature natured* (the manifest world of creation).

But it is this self-unfolding nature that underlies all acts of naming, all emancipatory and demonic energies, and all quests for justice. Our pictures of nature are hopelessly small while our conceptions of the sacred have been inflated with dangerous psychic content. In becoming permeable to *nature naturing* we also have some sense of what ani-

mates the heart of the *not yet conscious*. This animating principle, what Emerson calls the "quick cause," is emancipatory whenever condescended shells of the past open to something of a higher ordering that cannot be found in antecedent structures. There is no built-in *telos* (end) here, only a radical hope that derives its momentum from nature, precisely as that hidden nature is honored in communities of interpretation that protect the nascent forms of the *not yet conscious*. Looked at from this larger perspective, nature is both a slaughter house *and* the great mother. It is indifferent to its most complex earthly creature, yet has astonishing resources for

ecstatic renewal slumbering just beneath the surface. No one religion can even begin to fill-in the abyss of *nature naturing*, nor should any try. The genius of Unitarian Universalism is that it has come to know this.

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