

Shari Woodbury - Theological Context Essay

As a preteen I named my gerbils for Rev. King and Mahatma Gandhi. It was one of the earlier clues to the religious calling that eventually ripened in me. Other hints appeared too. Camping and stargazing brought visceral experiences of reverence and belonging in nature, from a young age. My spiritual leanings were already evident in junior high, when I declined to confirm the Methodist creeds; they neither made sense to my head nor spoke to my heart, and I wanted to be honest, authentic. As a teenager, I also read voraciously on social transformation, yearning to shape our culture for the better. I was a sociology graduate student before I happily discovered Unitarian Universalism. Soon I was organizing spiritual growth groups and social justice efforts.

In all my efforts, both paid and volunteer, I have devoted my energies primarily to what Gandhi called Constructive Program – being the change you wish to see in the world, creating the social institutions and lifeways that will help manifest more of the Love that is our deepest reality. However, I was also deeply influenced by my participation in what might, by contrast, be called Obstructive Program – protesting what you are against. I was terribly troubled by our nation’s knee-jerk response to the events of 9-11 and became an activist for nonviolence. During this period I had several spiritual experiences which were rooted in a deeper reality. In the midst of a dream filled with anxiety and concern about war, the kernel of my mantram reverberated through my mind. The ringing “Om” washed out all my inner turmoil, radiating healing power through me. Another incident occurred in June 2002, when I was out walking with a heavy heart. I described this experience in a poem titled Oneness Walk:

I am walking, seeking solace
in the twilight from the smallness
of my life and the big brokenness
of the world.

Dark woods soothe the ache
and as the path opens to meadow,
countless fireflies signal life mysterious,
winking among the wild nodding
brown-eyed susans,
wandering through swaths of Queen Anne’s
lace,
seeking in the tall rustling grasses.

Amidst the cricket song and cool breeze,
Oneness alights in me
and I feel the holy infinity
that is my true being,
that is all Being.

Only in my skin and skull am I small.
The primordial Love blossoming through me
is all powerful and healing –
the quiet force of peace
in the world, of joy
in me.

As far back as 2000, a loved one had suggested that ministry was a fit for me. It was only a few years ago, after coming to a sense of completion in my philanthropy career, that I began to take this calling seriously. I mentioned ministry offhandedly – apparently not for the first time – to one of my pastors. She suggested it merited real consideration. When I looked back at my artwork and poetry of the past few years, even the mission statement I had written for my new freelance venture, a religious calling was so evident. And the idea sent strong, clear energy flowing through me. Two phrases from beloved meditation passages that had been bobbing up in my mind repeatedly also began to make sense, interpreted in the context of a ministerial calling. One, from the Invocation to the Upanishads, was “Lead me from the unreal to the real.” The other, “May we all be aware of thy presence,” is from Swami Omkar. Here is how I have come to understand these messages from my deepest Self: I am called to help people to experience that mysterious Presence in their daily lives and to live from the most fundamental reality, our interrelatedness. I realized that ministry is, as Parker Palmer might put it, the life that is wanting to live through me.

I have been influenced by various strains of mysticism – including the natural wisdom of Taoism, the metaphysical clarity of the Upanishads, the ecstatic surrender of the Sufis, the lucid psychology of the Buddha, and the tender intimacy of Christian and Hindu saints, as well as the earnest voices of such unique figures as Peace Pilgrim and Ety Hillesum. Many have come to me through the spiritual teacher Eknath Easwaran, my gateway mystic. Through Sri Easwaran’s teachings and his Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, I deepened in my spiritual practice and perception. Passage meditation draws on scriptures and mystics of all the world’s major wisdom traditions, and was modeled on how Sri Easwaran witnessed Gandhi meditate on the Bhagavad Gita. Through this daily practice, the life-deepening meditation retreats I attended, and rich spiritual reading, over the course of a decade I was gradually formed as a mystic. I came to experience the truth that “That art Thou” (*Tat tvam asi*, from the Chandogya Upanishad) – Atman is Brahman, my deepest Self and the Ultimate Reality are one.

Going to theology school brought me into contact with new voices that further enriched my understanding. Courses on paganism and ritual brought expression to my deep connection with nature. When I studied liberal theology, I found a friend in Schleiermacher, and second cousins in the Transcendentalists – like them, for me the encounter with world religions was central, and putting my ideals into practice in the world goes hand in hand with personal spiritual growth. Also like many of the Transcendentalists, and Channing too, nature has been a continual ground of First Source experiences for me. Learning of the Pietist heritage in Universalism helped me see my own turn to *bhakti yoga* as having precedent in the UU lineage. I also fit right into our tradition in terms of valuing reason and experience as sources of religious authority – and in my contentment in “faith without certainty.” James Luther Adams spoke to the activist and sociologist in me (“by their groups you shall know them”!) and gave me greater appreciation for the prophetic imperative, which I cherish and claim from our Judeo-Christian heritage. Sharon Welch’s spirit of a feminist ethic of risk has also infused my perspective.

My two greatest sources of theological enrichment in seminary came from exploring diverse early Christianities, and encountering process theology. In the Gospel of Thomas and history courses, including a readings course on so-called gnostic groups, I recognized mystical and egalitarian strains from early in the Christian tradition, before the power structures pushed them out and warped Jesus’ legacy. In UU history class I came to honor, especially, the prophetic DNA transmitted down our Universalist line – a legacy that insists no one be left out of love, justice, community. I see a line of continuity between those groups who were first pushed out of the orthodox box, and the “heretics” who founded both Unitarianism and Universalism. To my mind, these religious ancestors were simply correcting mistakes that had crept into the Jesus tradition in its formative centuries – distortions that had dimmed its light.

Discovering the metaphysics of Whitehead, and feminist voices in process theology, was another homecoming. This was a conception of God consistent with my own experience and intuition: a

God of Becoming, who loves all and lures all toward the greatest beauty, truth and love; whose power is the knowledge accumulated across all space and time through the experiences of all members of this living universe, and the power of attracting us toward an evolving vision of the highest. Years ago I had read a scientific description of holograms and been struck by this as a metaphor for our underlying reality: not only is the whole made up of all of its parts, but even the tiniest piece of the hologram contains the whole within it, just as every being contains, within, the whole that some call God. Process thought likewise confirms the words of Rumi that spark recognition within my being: “The beauty you craved in things was always my face, seen through a veil. Turn around. See now where beauty comes from. Try another way of looking. Try you looking and the whole universe seeing.”

Over the last three years of seminary, I have gained new language to express my theology, and a historical perspective that connects my theology to our liberal religious tradition, as well as to much older strains of the Jesus tradition. My basic theological orientation – that of an interspiritual UU mystic and deep activist – has remained constant. I need community and value tradition. These ground me in important ways. But I place my greatest trust in direct experience, most significantly the experience of underlying unity – the intuition that I, and you, are not (just) the body, not (just) the mind, but in the most lasting sense of self (and the most ego-transcending), we are a refraction of the consciousness that pervades and unites the universe. We are each a drop in the ocean of cosmic consciousness; a leaf on the transcendent tree of life; kin to Mother Earth, Father Sky, and all the sentient siblings of our evolutionary epic; profoundly belonging to each other and to our sacred, mysterious home. This view calls us back to a story of who we are that can help heal people and the planet. Our culture needs expressions of this story that meet us where we are, here and now. This is the theological context of my call to the Unitarian Universalist ministry.