

## IS THERE NO REST FOR THE SEEKERS?

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There is within us a spiritual restlessness. There is a longing deep within our hearts and consciousness that never quite seems to be satisfied. We sing it in our hymns. We acknowledge it in our worship.

Our busy world exploits this longing with an ever more fantastic offering of entertainments, technology toys, distractions, and obsessions. Art, literature, philosophy, and religion try to answer this longing. It is a longing that is fundamentally spiritual. Paul Gauguin gave one of his paintings the title “Where did we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?” It is a fascinating painting with native Tahitian figures in various activities and poses. The title itself captures the essence of our spiritual situation.

We are seekers. It is our human condition. We want to know who we are and what we are doing here. What is our purpose in this particular moment of time here on this particular planet within this amazing and wonderful universe. What is the meaning that we seek for our lives? These are spiritual questions.

Religions try to answer these questions. As Unitarian Universalists, we put the questioning itself at the center. We treasure our freedom to seek truth and meaning with open hearts and minds. We are seekers. At the same time, as human beings, we want to be finding something. And at other times, we get just plain tired of the seeking. At least once in a while, we want a comfortable place to rest from the endless questioning and doubting and forever trying to build our own theologies. But we risk the temptation of wanting a neat and final statement that sums up who we are and where we

are going. We risk the temptation of wanting a simple, rational explication of the core of our faith.

I hear many of you raising these concerns. They were in the air at General Assembly this year in Ft. Worth, Texas. We even learned a new song, “Where do we come from? Where are we going? Mystery. Mystery. Life is a riddle and a mystery.” This song does not answer very many questions. No rest for the seekers was to be found there. At least we knew we were not alone. After three years of deliberation, the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association published its report this June titled “Engaging our Theological Diversity.” No rest for the seekers here, either. Notice the title. It’s about diversity.

In many respects, this desire for a rest from searching reflects the apparent confusion of our present time. We live in what many people are calling the postmodern age. It is an age that doesn’t even have a name yet. It’s the age that comes after the modern age with its confident optimism in individualism and democracy, reason and science. This age of modernity now appears to be ending. I am not saying that the ideas of individual autonomy and democracy, or our commitments to reason and the methods of science are ending. By no means! These values are important and necessary. Indeed, they are embodied in our Unitarian Universalist principles. But the idea that these are the *only* values by which to build the world is proving inadequate. Other ways of looking at the world and experiencing our humanity are making themselves heard.

This new age is marked by the pluralism of different religious beliefs, different world views, and different cultural values. We are coming to suspect that whatever our own worldview, it is one that we construct out of our own personal history and social experience. Our own worldview

therefore cannot be universal, nor can it be ever be a final answer. There are lots of worldviews, many of them perhaps just as valid as our own. There are many ways that people interpret life and find meaning. Thus it seems as if there may be no core system of beliefs that can be universally true for all people. At least that's what the postmodernists seem to be saying. Understandably, it makes a lot of people nervous and anxious and longing for some certainty.

We live in an exciting time in history that is sort of an in-between time. That's why it lacks a name of its own. We are leaving behind the comfortable certainties of the modern world view for something that is still unknown. We live in a very creative time in history. New insights and ways of understanding our world will emerge. It is also a dangerous time, as the newscasts remind us every day.

In some ways our situation may not be so very new. I am reminded of the ancient story of the Exodus, when the people of Israel left the more or less comfortable certainties of Egypt, even with its slavery, for the hardships and uncertainties of life in the Sinai desert. Spiritually, the struggle was even harder. The challenge to forge a new religious identity is very difficult. The temptation is strong to give into easy answers. But the Israelites persisted. There in the confusion of the wilderness experience they encountered God, Yahweh, the ultimate reality of being, the creative power at the heart of existence whose very name in Hebrew means "Becoming what I am becoming," the "I Am that I Am." Reality was not something that was static. Ultimate reality was experienced as a dynamic process that worked in history whose justice was commanding and whose love was steadfast.

The details of the ancient story of course are very different from those of our own. Our world is very different than that of the Israelites there in the desert 3,000 years ago. Yet like them, we strive to forge an understanding of our lives that leads to a sense of our spirits wholeness, that leads to a sense of ourselves being at home in the world with all of its terrible beauty and wonder. Even so, the story perhaps may tell us something important about our own religious quest. We find truth and meaning in the hard places of our lives. We find it in the wilderness places, the in-between places, where there seems to be confusion, and where nothing seems to be as it was before, and where it seems that there is no rest.

But can there be no rest for the seekers? I believe that we can find rest. But it may not be rest as we want to imagine it. We can find rest, but we are not going to be relieved from all our searching.

When I was in Jerusalem two years ago, I hired a Palestinian driver to take me out to Mar Saba, which is an ancient, ancient monastery way out in the Judean desert on the West Bank. It is perched high up on the brink of the Kidron river gorge out there in the desert. The monks offered me gracious hospitality. In conversation with one of the monks, he in somewhat limited English, I tried to explain Unitarian Universalism. He was very patient. I explained that we seek the wisdom in all religions. He looked puzzled and even a bit concerned. "But why do you keep searching?" he asked. "It's all here!" I thanked him for his hospitality, but of course I chose to continue my journey. Returning home, I continue my searching here in my own religious tradition.

There are many answers in the world. We could stop at any one of them and have an end to our searching. But that is not who we are. We are seekers in the spirit's endless quest for meaning and wholeness.

Yet, we can find rest. But it is not going to be release from the rigors of the journey. Instead we can know times of respite and renewal, like travelers on a journey stopping at a hostel along the road.

Where can we find rest? From my own experience and from the testimony of other spiritual travelers, I believe that most of all, our rest is found within a radical trust. I don't believe we will ever find just exactly the right summary of words or principles or ideas that will give us the spirit's wholeness we seek. Our peace is to be found in our capacity to trust totally the larger reality of being in which we have our life, a reality which I experience to be profoundly compassionate and just. I think this is what Jesus was getting at when he urged his followers to consider the birds of the air and lilies of the field and not to worry about tomorrow.

You see, our search is not really about finding the right ideas or the right answers, or the right worship, although this is interesting and no doubt worthwhile. When we seek, what we will find is no so much an idea or a set of particular beliefs. What we will find is wisdom. What we will find is understanding. What we will find at the heart of reality is a profound and transforming love that will bring us to life and sustain us on the journey.

As we seek, we will also find ideas, but we will find them to be evolving or deepening with time. I remember a conversation with an elderly member of the congregation many years ago, she was in her 90's, a retired art teacher, who had become blind. She spoke with me one day about God. She was quite taken with the fact that over the years her idea of God had been evolving. She was still questioning. But with all her years of seeking, she had found great wisdom. She had found a deep trust, and she knew a profound love.

On the one hand, ours is a religion that cherishes the seeking. Yet, we are also a religion that offers opportunities for rest and renewal along the way. That is why we gather in our churches each Sunday. We remind ourselves that we are part of a larger history. Others have gone before us who have wrestled with their questions, their doubts, and their not-knowing. The spirit is in the very stones of these walls. Yet they were also people who lived with vitality, positive purpose, and with joy. We sing hymns together that remind us of the values and ideals at the heart of our religious tradition and that inspire us in our journey. We gather as a community of companions on our journey. May we each be companions for each other on the road to wholeness of spirit and wisdom in living.

HYMN: #295 Sing Out Praises for the Journey.