

## Four Spiritualitrees

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I have a little sticker someone gave me that combines my love of trees with my enjoyment of science and fantasy. It reads: "May the Forest be with you". A joke perhaps, but also a wise sentiment; there is a power in forests. The power of the forest is the power of life, deep, rich, complex and always growing. Healthy forests protect hillsides from erosion, keep unwanted runoff out of streams, filter the air, filter the water, soften the extremes of weather, create alternatives to sun-bleached streets, temper the heat of cities and add beauty and wholeness even to urban areas. All of these ends are only possible if the forests are healthy and they are healthy because of biological diversity. When many people think of the woods they think only of trees. In Missouri and southern Illinois the primary forest types are oak / hickory, and to a lesser extent elm / ash / cottonwood blends. Any healthy forest is a blend of trees, not one single species. Furthermore, a forest includes many plants, ground-cover and flowers, vines and shrubs as well as many other living things. Not only the obvious deer and birds and squirrels, but microbes and insects and worms are essential to the life and health of a forest. All are part of a vast wholeness that is the forest. This unity in diversity is a result of millions of years of development. Thus, forest management is all about promoting diversity of life.

Likewise in a church it is essential to nurture both unity and diversity. As the 16 century preacher Francis Dāvid put it: "In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation; but you need not think alike to love alike". This church has many theological opinions and orientations, even differing political opinions. Our By-laws explicitly state: "The continuing purpose of this Church is ... to ensure for all individuals, freedom of conscience; and to restrict no one in his/her belief with creedal or doctrinal confession". But then we must ask, "On what do we ground our unity?" Some will often "hyphenise" their orientation, as in UU-Buddhist, or UU-Jew, or UU-Atheist. But this strains our unity. This practice reminds me of the story of Dustin and Austin. Austin was a rich rancher, owned thousands of head of cattle. Dustin was a little envious of him, but then one day he was driving his pickup along a Texas road and saw Austin walking in the heat, his jeans looking threadbare, his hat work-stained and old. Dustin pulled over and offered a ride. When Austin got in with a humble "Much obliged" Dustin asked, "Whatever happened to you Austin? I remember you had so much wealth, the biggest land holdings, where is your truck?" "Lost it all" was the terse reply. "How did that happen?" Austin asked, thunderstruck. "Well..." there was a pause, "You know I started with the Double X ranch. When I bought the Rocking O, well, I just added the two brands together, "Double X Rocking O", like that. Then I bought the Lazy R and another ranch after that and so on, till eventually, there was no cow that could survive the branding".

Earl Morse Wilbur in his two volume study of Unitarianism stretching over almost 600 years of history and a thousand pages of text looking at Unitarianism from Reformation France and Eastern Europe, to Enlightenment England, Revolutionary United States; reveals that, though each era and time had unique and disparate theological *beliefs*, all forms of Unitarianism shared

commitment to three principles: freedom, reason and tolerance. This unified our history. However, these guiding principles Wilbur saw as something different from "Unitarian belief":

"When the Unitarian movement began, the marks of true religion were commonly thought to be belief in the creeds, membership in the church, and participation in its rites and sacraments. To the Unitarian of today the marks of true religion are spiritual freedom, enlightened reason, broad and tolerant sympathy, upright character and unselfish service. These things, which go to the very heart of life, best express the meaning and lesson of Unitarian history".

Thus to deepen our faith in freedom we nurture enlightened reason, human sympathy, development of character and devoted service. Certainly there is something good in protecting freedom, affirming diversity and promoting tolerance as counter to the native intolerance and narrow-minded fear that permeates some parts of our culture. Intolerance can be so destructive that we are proud of our heritage and history of promoting tolerance. We know the wars and civil strife caused by interreligious hatred. We can easily mark how terrible violence of religious oppression appears in human history up to this present moment; bloodshed, suffering caused by oppression fueled by religious intolerance, the cruel imprisonment, torture, and murder of religious opponents. But the purpose of opposing this is not merely to end injustice but to make the way for true community to be built. Intolerance is bad, tolerance is good, but mutual understanding and a shared destiny is even better.

Elsewhere, Wilbur wrote:

"Freedom, reason and tolerance . . . are not the final goals to be aimed at in religion, but only conditions under which the true ends may best be attained. The ultimate ends proper to religious movement are two, personal and social; the elevation of personal character, and the perfecting of the social organism, and the success of a religious body may best be judged by the degree to which it attains these ends."

Thus our St Louis congregational by-laws affirm not only freedom from creed, but also "the religion of Jesus, holding in accordance with his teachings that practical religion is summed up in love to God and love to man". Furthermore, "We unite to provide a hospitable sanctuary" [here the by-laws say with unnecessary flourish "in time and space", but I don't know where and when else we would create a hospitable sanctuary] a hospitable sanctuary "for seeking the sources of spiritual strength, enabling ... a renewed ability to work for love, decency, tolerance, and justice". Along similar lines our Identity Statement voices our commitment to create: "a humanizing community for individuals of all ages ... to educate the human conscience and live our faith daily to make the world a better place to live". Herein you can hear the four spiritual types: those who seek understanding and wisdom, those who seek unselfish service, those who seek devotion and sympathy, and those who seek the elevation of character and inner strength. In Hinduism these are called jiana yoga, karma yoga, bhakti yoga and raja yoga.

When I advertised this sermon I said I would talk about the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator and Spirituality. It turns out I would need a full hour just to cover the basics. I tried to reduce everything in that system to four spiritual types, but to do that in any useful way I would

need two or three hours. I promise to share that material elsewhere. I will emphasize that the main idea is there also. The point of the Jungian personality theory is not to find your one type and feel comfortable in that box, but to also learn about the other types and how they complement each other. When I first learned of the Myers-Briggs Type system I was on a church board. I learned to identify the persons who had the exact opposite type than I and to appreciate that they could see things I could not, and would value important aspects of church life that I would easily overlook or misunderstand. In Carl Jung's psychology, and the Myers-Briggs system that drew from it, the point of personal individuation is to develop the weaker and hidden parts of your personality in the service of wholeness. In doing so you become a more complete person, but you also come to understand and appreciate people who are different than yourself and learn to work with them better towards common goals. The word spirituality is vague and actually has many meanings, but in our religion it is about feeling or experiencing a sense of connection to what is truly good and holy. For some of us this comes through worship and meditation, for others it comes through good work and unselfish action, for others it is found in deep thinking and development of wisdom, and for others it is found in experiences of love and devotion. The power of this church is determined by our ability to bring all of these together in the service of human beings and the Beloved Community.

I remember a time early in my ministry when I worked with the Catholic Archbishop of Lubbock Texas. Lubbock has far fewer Catholics than Saint Louis, so it was easier to connect with their leadership than it is here. In that city there had been a sudden rise in domestic violence and so both of us became involved in an effort to inform and awaken people to this problem and to develop resources to improve human relationships. In our conversations about the issue we found much in common. Both of us had been involved with counseling batterers, working to help them see that the problem was not in their partner's or children's behavior but in their reactions to their loved ones, their fear was their problem. So we were together in the spirituality of service, as well as expressing our love and devotion to what was holy and good. His name and image of the holy was different than mine, his more Christian, less naturalistic than mine, but we were both people of a similar faith. We were both people of spiritual discipline, seeking to master our own selves in the midst of serving others. We both believed in undoing economic injustice and racism. But then, in a panel discussion, he linked domestic violence to abortion. I was surprised. My theology and moral philosophy was different than his and we had found a place of serious difference. Still, because of all we shared, we were willing to listen to each other, defend our positions, and he helped me clarify and deepen my theology about the issues of abortion and of violence in human relationships. Even in the spiritual practice of knowledge and understanding we were able to challenge and deepen one another. In the end we still affirmed what we shared: a deep desire to end the presence of violence in people's homes and in society at large.

There are many more people who say they are Unitarian Universalists but who are not members of any congregation. I say that those people are missing out on the power and the richness of true spirituality. The spirituality that arises from being a tree in the forest of many differing trees, the power of communicating and sharing one life, interwoven of diverse types, all creating together the spirit force and power of the forest.