

One of the key sermons in our religious heritage was given in 1828 by the great Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing. The title of that sermon was “Likeness to God”. In that sermon, Channing asks this question: *Whence do we derive our knowledge of the attributes and perfections which constitute the Supreme Being?*

He answers: *We derive them from our own souls. The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator. The idea of God, sublime and awful as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity.*

I would add the obvious, that our Supreme Beings have also contained our imperfections and impurities, as well. Our deities were – and can still be - brutal, petty, jealous, homophobic, greedy, and lustful – as well as loving, caring and understanding.

For those of us in the tradition of Channing, I believe our ever evolving understanding of the idea of God – what I like to call the Great Mystery - has largely been the process of trying to tease out these enlarged attributes from what it is that this Great Mystery is actually doing - like separating the wheat from the chaff. I would argue that the most common mistake that humans make is to confuse this enlargement of our own natures onto the infinite mystery WITH the infinite mystery itself - and that this mistake has lead to all sorts of trial and tribulation.

There seems to be a dynamic and indeterminate un-nameable and un-definable something that seems to both reflect and embody everything we project onto it. This is both empowering and sometimes frightening. Empowering because it makes us active participants in the co-creation of our world. Frightening because it clearly

gives us great responsibility for our part in that co-creation, and we are still unsure how to wield this power.

Let me be clear that I think this is a mystery can never be solved. There is no final answer. No matter how much we enlarge our ideals and our knowledge and our compassion, this mystery will always be larger, for that is the nature of the infinite.

We can personalize it, depersonalize it, try to shape it into some fixed form, call it by many names - and it will always be “more than”.

Our realities are complex and many-layered, and contain multiple truths that sometimes contradict each other. Indeed, it may be the tension between these truths that forms the fabric of existence, not the truths themselves.

Religions are meaningful to the degree that they lead us along a path of transformation, paths that lead from narrow self-centeredness to increasing openness to both the reality – and the Mystery - of existence. Paths of increasing liberation from limiting perspectives. Paths of greater understanding and compassion.

Maybe the question we should be asking is: How we can enlarge who and what we are so that all may fully participate in the co-creative unfolding of the mystery? That means participation without fear or oppression or violence. That means participation with respect and love.

As children, we are self-centered. As we grow from child to adult - properly raised - we should become less and less self-centered, including family, then tribe, then maybe our nation, and then perhaps all humanity in our circle of meaning and love.

Our sages and great spiritual leaders include everyone without qualification. Each step of inclusion moves us past previous perspectives and increases our understanding.

Our ideal is the expansion of the circle of rights and care to all, in both word and deed. In the past few centuries the Western cultures have seen an all too gradual expansion of the circle of rights and care from a few wealthy white men – usually royalty – to all white men, then to white women, to people of color, and now we are attempting to expand those rights to people with different identities of all kinds. This struggle seems never ending.

Although this manifests in the political sphere, it is actually the embodiment of the spiritual recognition that we are one human family, each containing the divine elements Channing spoke of. This recognition is deeply embedded in our Unitarian Universalist heritage - and in the Enlightenment that inspired much of what is great in the modern civilizations of the West. This expansion is being echoed and engaged with around the world.

It is an uneven struggle, and not all are yet included. As the author William Gibson writes, “The future is here, it’s just unevenly distributed.” Much remains to be done. Much remains to be done.

Though this struggle is not over and we humans have not yet reached the promised land, it is time to make our family even larger, and include all life on Earth in the circle of rights and care. All life shares a common ancestry, and we are truly related to every living thing on our planet. We share a fragile home afloat in the infinite, and we depend upon that life to live and to flourish.

We must make the circle larger, AND we must make the circle itself more important than it has ever been. In the words of systems thinker Donella Meadows, “*we have become so enamored of our play that we have forgotten the playing field*”. And the playing field is in deep, deep trouble. Alarms are being sounded from all corners of the globe about the failing health of our planet, alarms we can no longer ignore.

This is a big step, this step away from being self-centered as a species. There are those who think that our survival depends it. That may be, but our survival should not be the only reason that we take it. This is one step further along our journey to liberation from limiting perspectives and understandings. Because in order to see ourselves for who and what we are, we must see ourselves through the eyes of other life, other species, other lenses than our own – and so come to know ourselves anew. Only truths can set us free, and these truths are seen through many eyes and spoken through many voices – most of them not human.

I believe it is time to make a small but crucial change to our First Principle, which now states:

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

I believe this is simply no longer in alignment with our present and ever-evolving understanding of the divine attributes. I propose a change that not only expands the circle of rights and care, but further entwines the First Principle and the Seventh Principle, which states: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Our new First Principle would say this:

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all being.

Notice that I didn't say beings, I said all *being*. Why? Because "being" is the fundamental attribute of all existence. Every rock and plant and creature, every fish and flying thing, every moon and star, broadcasts one simple message with its being. I am. I am.

As a brief aside, I find it interesting that a great many UU's, some quite well known, think that this is already the way our First Principle reads. I've actually heard them "quote" it using similar words.

Now, one could argue that not all of that *being* possesses sentience, or awareness, or consciousness, or some other criteria for this recognition. It isn't "alive" and hence possess no worth or dignity to affirm and promote. But that's a rather slippery slope. The closer you look, the harder it becomes to tell where such attributes begin and end.

Do the great redwoods and sequoias have worth and dignity? An aspen grove? Certainly. How about a splotch of lichen on a rock in Greenland? Does the Grand Canyon possess worth and dignity? Half Dome at Yosemite? Mount Everest? How about the heart-shaped rock you pick up and take home? The moon, the sun, the stars?

I want to introduce someone to this discussion that I regard as the greatest "Unitarian" of all. He lived in Amsterdam in the 17th century. His provocative and revolutionary philosophy laid the groundwork for much of what we know as the Enlightenment. He was reviled and branded as a heretic, and was cast out of the Jewish community that he grew up in.

I speak of Baruch Spinoza.

Spinoza contended that everything that exists in Nature is one Reality and there is only one set of rules governing the whole of the reality which surrounds us and of which we are part. He viewed God and Nature as two names for the same reality. In Latin, Deus sive Natura. “God or Nature.” They meant the same thing. Had Spinoza been familiar with contemporary police slang, he might have said, God AKA Nature.

This was heretical because all of Western philosophy at the time divided the Cosmos into that which was pure and divine – God – and that was impure and corrupt – the world that we live in. God was outside of Reality. Spinoza said this was not possible. There can be no outside to the One. God is not separate from Nature. This is still heresy in certain circles.

This idea also contradicted the prevalent Cartesian dualism of the times. Mind and body are intertwined, not separate as pure mind and corrupt flesh. Humans are not separate from God or Nature. There is only the complex interwoven web of all existence.

Like all philosophies, Spinoza’s had problematic aspects. Like his contemporaries, he saw the world as mechanical and deterministic, rather than organic and indeterminate. But his fundamental insights and the challenge his philosophy made to the religious authorities of the day were key to the Enlightenment that underpins our faith.

There is an interesting resonance at the intersection of Spinoza, his Jewish heritage, and the mystical potential of our faith.

One of the most common English translations of the Jewish name for God is rendered as “I Am That I Am” or “I Will Be What I Will Be”. From a Spinozist viewpoint, one might say that this great “I Am” is the collective voice of all the smaller “I Ams”.

Every rock and tree, every you and every me, every thing, every I am that I am. Every being, being what it is and what it will be. This is the radical God of Spinoza.

William Channing asked: Whence do we derive our knowledge of the attributes and perfections which constitute the Supreme Being?

I answer Channing thusly: *We derive them not only from our own souls, but from the souls of all life and the great soul created by all being. In the earth and waters and sky and the profundity of life, the divine attributes are everywhere. Any idea of God based ONLY upon human souls and attributes is an incomplete God. The idea of God is the idea of the spiritual nature of the world and everything in it, purified and enlarged to infinity.*

We must take the step of rewriting our First Principle precisely because it is one step farther into the Great Mystery and one giant step towards embracing the multiple, complex truths of all existence.

A step that forges the 7 principles into a golden ring of life and living, unified and whole.

A step I believe our heritage demands of us.

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all being.

May it be so.