

Draft

THEY SAID WHAT – WISDOM BEYOND THE DOORS
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
March 13, 2011

What is wisdom for Unitarian Universalism here in Clemson?

This morning I ask us that question because unlike knowledge, wisdom is not easily learned. Steve Bynum and I were talking the other night before Monica's beautiful concert performance here. We were talking about the earthquake in Japan and how one man in California decided to take pictures of the tsunami as it came onto the coastline. He was swept out to sea despite his sure knowledge that he was in danger. Wisdom dictated that he move to high ground. His knowledge was there but his wisdom was absent.

I got to think the other day how many years of knowledge are here every Sunday. Most of us are holders of multiple degrees and are professionals in our various fields. Usually we have 70-80 adults here each Sunday. Let's suppose our average age is 44. That adds up to an average total of 3,300 years of total knowledge. That's more total time than much of human civilization, writing, literature, and philosophy.

How many years of wisdom do we have? That leads to a practical question: how do we measure wisdom? Knowledge is pretty straightforward. There are degrees, certifications, tests, and many other ways to assess our level of knowledge. Wisdom seems to be more difficult. A small group of philosophers and psychologists met in Minnesota last year to discuss ways to measure wisdom. This event was part of the Defining Wisdom project funded by the University of Chicago. The blog of the group noted that **“Wisdom seems a very tricky thing to measure...it might be that the fact that wisdom has a broad sense that includes many other virtues makes it more difficult to measure.”**

Wisdom is also harder to define. Here are three definitions from one dictionary: **“The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting insight; Common sense; good judgment: A wise outlook, plan, or course of action.”**

This morning I would invite us to explore wisdom because there's a quiz at the end. What would Clemson be without a quiz? I will offer up three questions for conversation time. The first question is this: **“is there a unique wisdom that Unitarian Universalism possesses?”** The second question is **“if this special wisdom is present, are we willing and able to share it with the world beyond our doors?”**

I'll get to the third question a bit later.

So, the first question: **is there a unique wisdom that Unitarian Universalism possesses?** That's a broad category so let's narrow it down to whether we of UUFC have a unique wisdom to share.

This takes us back to the Mission Statement we read a few minutes ago. Those who were here last Sunday will recall I proposed this mission statement might be ready for a tune-up or assessment whether it still is your shared ministry and mission in the world.

To build and sustain a welcoming, caring, inclusive community for all ages, that nurtures each person's lifelong journey of faith informed by reason. Dedicated to peace and celebration, our sacred space provides a supportive environment in which we can create lives of integrity, service, and joy. We call one another to live our Unitarian Universalist principles in our communities and in the larger world, striving for social justice and caring for the earth.

Is there lasting insight, good judgment, and wise outlook or plan in this mission statement? Many religious community mission statements have words and themes like the one above. Many Christian churches have variations of this statement. The UCC Peace Church that meets here on Sunday evenings has a mission statement that welcomes and embraces through with a Christian emphasis.

Words in your UUFC vision/mission statement that seem to imply special wisdom include "inclusive" and "caring for the earth". "Inclusive" means that we try to be a Welcoming Congregation to all who come through our doors regardless of their particular religious histories. People need not believe in a God or a special holy book to join here. Our phrase for "caring for the earth" is more common in religious institutions today than a decade ago but it still speaks to our Seventh Principle of interconnectedness with no one left out.

The mission statement isn't all. I'd suggest we also consider our Six Sources that are roots for our Seven Principles. We propose that each Source carries unique wisdom and insight. Each Source supports our holistic faith. And as importantly, we do not get to pick and choose which ones we ignore and what ones we carry. They are all essential sources of knowledge and insight.

For example, one Source speaks to Jewish and Christian teachings and another reminds us of insights and wisdom from the world's religions. We need only explore the parables of Jesus the subversive sage, or the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Testament (Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, etc) to find wisdom that still holds true today regardless of our particular faith tradition.

We can look a little further and study prajna (wisdom) from the Buddha and his teachings. Wisdom sayings and doctrines exist in Taoism, Hinduism, and Islam along with many other faiths. If we truly mean that all our Sources give us spiritual insight and growth, then is this unique wisdom to share?

That brings me to the second question: **“if this wisdom is present, are we willing and able to share it with the world beyond our doors?”**

Certainly we can say ‘yes’ when it comes to our caring for the earth. We need only look at the continuing work of Green Sanctuary and Outreach to see continuing efforts in that expression of wisdom. It’s a wisdom that like our Seventh Principle that suggests ‘changing one part of a system begins to change all of it’.

We say in our First Principle that every person has inherent worth and dignity. That would probably be understood as wisdom in every UU congregation. I expect there are many other examples of wisdom we would like to share with the world beyond our doors.

However, this question of how to share our wisdom becomes a problem with many Unitarian Universalists. We don’t generally like proselytizing let alone conversion. We can express our virtues and wisdom by our deeds but bringing others around to UU’ism is a bit much for many of our congregations. We seem just as happy to have people find us through Wikipedia or Beliefnet.

In some of our congregations, this passive approach can lead to exclusiveness confused with elitism and being aloof.

This brings me to the third question. It’s the essence of Adlai Stevenson’s words this morning in the reading: **“Are we ready to explore fresh solutions to the problems of life; to vigorously use critical self-examination, and to understand the possibilities in opinions other than our own?”**

The words of Stevenson suggest that at our best we be ready to cheerfully have our wisdom challenged and debated. I expect that Helen Bishop’s visit this coming weekend will also provide important insights that will broaden our perspectives and challenge our assumptions in gentle ways.

Some of you here took the Jesus Reconsidered class I taught last fall. Some even attended the lectures that Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossen gave in Anderson a few weeks ago. You may recall from the class or lectures that there are two varieties of wisdom in the world of Jesus and his followers. Marcus Borg speaks of them as conventional wisdom and subversive wisdom. Dr. Borg tells us that conventional wisdom is a culture’s taken for granted understandings about how things are. Conventional

wisdom for Americans might be that we believe we are “Number 1” in the world or that our culture is really the best of all cultures.

Subversive wisdom challenges much of what is conventional in society. People who challenge the conventional wisdom that America is and should always be Number 1 are treated with scorn by some but their perspective can bring deeper wisdom and insight.

What might be conventional wisdom and subversive wisdom for Unitarian Universalists today?

Our conventional wisdom says that we are open and tolerant of all opinions and convictions. Our conventional wisdom – I suspect – also assumes that we all listen to NPR, we all vote Democratic or at least liberal independent, and we would all have at least one Prius if the opportunity presented itself.

Are we ready to have subversive wisdom presented to us as a challenge to our presumptions?

Last Sunday we had a wonderful UU and You class hosted by the Membership Committee and led by Linda Law and others. I asked if there were any questions. One of the newer folks who attends regularly put up their hand and asked this question (somewhat paraphrased): “I see in your mission statement about doing good, social justice and care for the earth. Is there an assumption here at a religious liberal is by default a political liberal?” The person went on to say that they were politically conservative but religiously liberal; that they’d felt uncomfortable when during conversation or joys and sorrows people sometimes put down conservatives, Republicans and Christians. The person wondered if they would truly feel at home here and whether Obama buttons would be handed out in 2012.

I submit to you that the person’s questions were subversive and challenging conventional wisdom. They tie directly into Adlai Stevenson’s comments that the possibilities in opinions other than our own can enrich us in knowledge and in understanding.

My own response to these questions I’ve posed is to plan to do a service on May 1 (May Day) to speak to this person’s question of perceived political exclusivity. Are we more tolerant than accepting of others’ views when it comes to the hard core of political or religious identity?

My second response is to plan a series of services next church year about how we can be a unified religious community AND certain varieties of Unitarian Universalists. People at the Sunday Services Committee suggested some: Southern UU, Christian UU, Pagan UU, Humanist UU, etc. For each of these services, I’d invite at least one person who sees themselves

in such categories to speak along side me in the program. I bet we'd learn a lot together.

Here are the questions for our quiz together.

Is there a unique wisdom that Unitarian Universalism possesses?

If this wisdom is present, are we willing and able to share it with the world beyond our doors?

Are we ready to explore fresh solutions to the problems of life; to vigorously use critical self-examination, and to understand the possibilities in opinions other than our own?

The quiz doesn't end, of course. We have an opportunity to take it again every Sunday and every time we think that we might invite someone to 'our' religious community.

The quiz is ready to be taken every time a visitor comes to our doors or when we consider ways to be visible in the larger community.

The quiz is based on knowledge but its roots are in wisdom.

What do you think?