

Unitarian Society of Hartford
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Alone Together
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How do we reconcile our propensity for viewing our beliefs in mostly personal terms with the need to create an authentic religious/spiritual community?

First reading

From backyard banter, Oxford Street

Anthony Massaro is my next-door neighbor, and a good friend. He owns reliable auto tire Service on Maple Avenue in the south end. The business has been in his family for 80 years. As with any small, family-owned enterprise in a mature market, the pressure from chain stores is high, and the margins are tight. You have to buy right, sell right, know your customers well, and serve them better. Anthony does everything from mounting tires to negotiating large fleet orders. He often leaves for work before six in the morning, and rarely gets back before 6:00 at night. Here is what Anthony has to tell us.

“You do what you gotta do, you take care of what you gotta take care of. Along the way, enjoy everything you can, because you ain’t coming back anytime soon. That’s my philosophy.”

Our minister has admitted to bringing a copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* any time she travels. It serves as a spiritual benchmark and even a devotional guide. This book is, of course, the work of William James, the well-known philosopher, psychologist, and essayist as well as the leader of the pragmatic school of thought. A full century ago, Pragmatism became a philosophy of personal liberation, enabling us to rid ourselves of those annoying moralistic Victorian strictures that seemed to get in the way of nearly everything. As pragmatism became generally accepted (if not fully understood), it came to be applied to everything from progressive social reform efforts to big business combines. Liberal humanist religion owes much of its philosophical legitimacy to pragmatism, and James was very familiar with the Unitarian world of the latter half of the 19th century. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* we can trace a clear progression from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s experience-is-revelation ethos to the action-is-thought principles of William James. Appropriately, Emerson was also James’s godfather, and a fellow member of the metaphysical club.

From *Pragmatism* (1907)

“Pragmatism asks its usual question, “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those that would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is truth’s cash value in experiential terms”?

Sermon

When my friend Anthony does get back home, he can be found by his back porch recovering from the events of the day. Anthony is a beer and cigar kind of guy, and he’s not too concerned about whether or not this might affect his longevity. His dad was a beer and cigar kind of guy too, and he lived to 87.

Several times a week, I’m in the backyard with him, shooting the breeze, reliving the day, telling work stories back and forth. A while back, he relates how “This yuppie idiot drives up to my shop in his new Cadillac SUV just as I’m closing the door. He’s yelling and screaming about how his tires are no good, and we gotta change them right then and there. Only he didn’t even buy the tires at my store. I tell him I’m closing; I’m all covered with crap, so he doesn’t know who I am... then he demands to speak with the owner. I walk back up to his window and say, “Buddy, knock yourself out.”

When it comes to pragmatism, William James doesn’t have anything on Anthony. Anthony knows who his real customers are, and where not to waste effort. Like James, Anthony has expressed his belief system as a philosophy of self-constructed necessity, and regards it as such. This should not be a surprise; after all, we are a nation of philosopher-theologians, and UUs are no exception.

The impulse for religious experience drives people into places like this one – people who are looking to make sense of it all, people who are wishing for a deeper and more profound connection to...they are not always sure what. Its as if each one of us is saying to the great unknown, “I want to speak to the owner” and the universe is answering back, “Buddy, knock yourself out”... So we do...we keep reinventing existence in our own image over and over again no matter what we purport to believe, or not believe. Our friend William James effectively restates and validates much of this process when he posits that to ask the question whether or not existence is “moral” i.e., meaningful, is never meaningless, because in the process of asking and especially doing, we create our own new meaning, which he asks us to evaluate by its “cash value.” In other words, apart from being an idea, pragmatism is a theory of action, one in which thought and practice are not differentiated, but are integral. At the close of the nineteenth century, his stripping away of sentimentality and moralizing, plus the use of terms like, “cash value,” must have seemed deliciously liberating, and pragmatism became one of the great movements of the age, with a large number of adherents. The list of thinkers associated with pragmatism is impressive and

lengthy, and while James is seen as its chief exponent, he was by no means its originator. The term pragmatism itself came into being during the meetings of the metaphysical club, which contained many leading American thinkers around the 1870s. It included a number of Unitarians, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and close friends to Unitarianism such as John Dewey. In fact, it could be reasonably argued that nearly all of the members fell into one of these two categories.

So, it should come as no surprise that much of contemporary Unitarianism Universalism is largely a product of pragmatic thought processes. The stress on action as an essential part of thought, the shedding of the dogma that is inherent in moralistic religions, the reaffirmation of personal experience as a guide to truth, -all are in keeping with current UU beliefs. In particular, the integration of thought and action was in large part the impulse for the social service component so frequently celebrated, if not always exercised, in our congregations. Certainly, our embrace of humanism, and the range of personal religious visions we encourage are fully in keeping with the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Our own modern witness for a pluralistic, inclusive, and evolving community probably owes more to James than even to Emerson. In this age of renewed intolerance, and artificial division, this message is more important than ever.

All of this sounds just wonderful, but there is just this one little problem: we can barely just regenerate ourselves, let alone bring an important message to the larger world. Our membership as a movement does not grow, and there are a variety of reasons that knowledgeable experts in this field have made abundantly clear to us should we care to listen. Of course, the biggest reason why we are continually on the edge of marginalization is that very few of our children stay in the UU fold, and we have effectively become the generational way station to non-religion. We act as if we don't believe in our own product, let alone its "cash value."

To me, all of this seems to imply some sort of odd intentionality behind our somewhat self-destructive institutional behavior. Now, there are only two reasons for self-destruction: extreme despair, or extreme ego. (I'll show them!) Oddly, both are parts of loving one's self; in the first case, self-destruction becomes a means of avoiding further pain, a last kindness to one's self; our case is the second: for us, the romance of identity has become so compelling that we act as if we would rather expire than evolve. This is not unusual; every one of us has some aspect of themselves that they prefer to retain, even when it is no longer practical. Personally, I hate cell phones, and all menu-driven electronic items, and constantly assure myself that, in my recalcitrance; I am the last bastion of western civilization. I also know that this is just reverse snobbery on my part, to justify my discomfort with these devices.

Now, I am not suggesting that we love ourselves any less, but that we learn to love ourselves in a different, more utilitarian, way. Somewhere between the authoritarian, repressive, self-negating piety of the Victorian Christian model that pragmatism rejected, and the proud existentialism of the humanism that we frequently invoke, is a calm acceptance of who we are, coupled with an understanding of the need to go forward in a reciprocal universe. Our minister calls this “Good Orderly Direction.”

So it is time to revisit our pragmatic roots to understand just how deeply this particular form of individualism runs in our religious tradition. Personal idealism is not by itself the cause of our self-inflicted disease, but if it is not tested by its full operating value, as Mr. James requires, it becomes permission for destructive self-absorption. Every tradition has its vulnerabilities as well as its value, and they are usually related. A religion that relies on individual conscience will always be at risk of becoming the Church of the self-obsessed, just as a religion that relies on revealed truth or catechism is always at risk of becoming destructively repressive. But, unlike one hundred years ago, “repressed” is not a term associated with this age, and the “small t” truths we develop through our pragmatic exercises are, by James’s description, transitory, and to be judged by their full results, not their capacity for emotional, spiritual, or intellectual pleasure. In his own words, “If merely “feeling good” could decide, drunkenness would be the supremely valid human experience.”

My nominally-catholic-backyard-philosopher friend Anthony has it figured out: “You do what you gotta do, you take care of what you gotta take care of.” In other words, before you indulge yourself, make sure the important things are taken care of first. Anthony is practical as well as pragmatic; he knows who his customers are, who his friends are, and especially, makes sure his family’s real needs are met. Then, if there is anything left over, one can splurge a bit, sometimes more than a bit, but always with the knowledge that this is not essential. So Anthony makes a clear distinction between what he thinks is desirable, and what he thinks is necessary.

Creating this separation between the objects of our desire and that, which is truly needed, is difficult for people today, because we are the most indulged culture in history. At no time like the present has there been an effort to sell so many possessions, luxuries, ideas, values, and just plain stuff to so many people as now. The clever folks to do this for living have figured out that identity is even more powerful than sexuality when it comes to selling; and as a result, we are buying. Our things, our understandings, our associations: all of these are marketed to us as a metaphor for that which we wish to believe about ourselves. And it’s not just Madison Avenue; its politicians, its gurus, its entertainers, its artists, sports heroes, shock jocks, press agents, literate commentators, even ministers, but not ours; it’s anyone who needs you to attach yourself to, and identify with, them (for their success).

Don't think we are immune.

Frequently, the more educated and ostensibly accomplished we are, the more vulnerable we are to these messages. Our whole educated upper middle-class culture of professionalism, education, and achievement is shaped around identity and prizes it. It has become for us the holiest of the holy, and unless we are very careful, we are lambs to the slaughter. Like all those great metaphors, myths, and philosophies, identity is useful as a tool, but not as a fixed reality. The second we allow ourselves to elevate any of these to the status of broad, rather than personal, concepts we are as lost as those who accept traditional doctrine as authority. Call it modern day liberal religious idolatry, American style...Sophomorphism for the already fortunate.

“ It speaks – and lo, new truth”

The real reason to hold belief in this age is neither to worship authority, or personal identity, but to help us determine when each is appropriate in its turn. We will always be faced with apparently conflicting dichotomies: practice versus theory, individual rights v broad social needs, safety versus innovation. The major task for liberal religion is not to expressly validate ourselves, but to give us the means by which to reconcile our aspirations with our essential knowledge, even as it changes.

“You do what you gotta do.”

To love ourselves well, rather than foolishly, we need to take care of the Essential first. This starts with our church family, and especially, our children. The willingness to invest generously in the coming generation is the acid test of a social covenant, and it would be a poor commentary, if we, with our personal freedom and choices, cannot do as well in this respect as the traditional faiths so many of us have left behind. Children require continuity and care ahead of “feel good” platitudes. If we will not serve our own children, then who shall we honestly serve? If we are so good as we say we are, why do so few remain as adults?

Truly caring for our future may well require that we release ourselves from some of the personal metaphors and other non-essential products of our longings, as we conduct ourselves as a culture. As James reminds us, “Many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

The different way of loving ourselves is to enter into covenant with each other to preserve our best, most knowledgeable, and most useful witness together, to stand for this witness when called, and then to teach these ways to our children.

William James, again:

“The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”

Amen