

First UU Church of Berks
UU Source 3: The Wisdom of the World's Religions
Rev. Sandra Fees
March 2, 2008



Several years ago I had the opportunity to hear Huston Smith speak and attend a dinner with him. There were about 15 or so of us who went to dinner. Huston Smith has difficulty hearing, and at the restaurant he suggested the use of a talking stick. Some of you know the idea.

The talking stick has been used for centuries by many Native American tribes. They used it to designate who has the right to speak and also to facilitate a just and impartial hearing.

The person holding the talking stick has the respect and attention of all others who listen actively until it is their own turn to speak. This avoids the kind of cross-talk and talking over one another that often makes it so hard to have a meaningful exchange in a larger group.

This practice of the Native Americans is an example of the wisdom found in other religions. In this case, the talking stick offers the wisdom of listening. The talking stick made it possible for each of us at that dinner to have a turn to ask a question or have dialogue with Smith, to hear each other, and to hear his response. In the presence of a wise teacher, our desire to hear and be heard is strong. We didn't have a real talking stick so we improvised. Any object works – a feather or stone. Smith passed around one of those light pointers used during presentations.

During the conversation, Huston Smith mentioned the way spiritual seekers sometimes treat religions like a buffet table. They sample a little of this and a little of that. Because we UUs are spiritual seekers who indeed can do this, I asked him whether he himself had one primary religious tradition that he is part of. He shared that he is a Methodist. This is where he finds meaning and belonging.

But he also said, “the wind bloweth where it listeth.” (John 3:8) Quoting from the Gospel of John, Huston Smith acknowledged that the spirit like the wind moves where it will. It really isn't possible to limit it, even if we want to. It simply isn't possible to limit the truth and religious meaning to one and only one way, to one and only one religion be it Unitarian Universalism or another.

He actually explained this idea in a bit more detail in an interview I read later. In it, he was asked whether he would call himself a Christian or an adherent to all traditions. He said:

I have a body and I have a soul. My body remains in the Church, the faith to which it was born, the Methodists, and I will be buried in a Methodist Church funeral. But I also have a soul and no institution can contain completely my soul. And then I quoted Ibn Arabi, who said “my soul is a Mosque for Muslims, a Temple for Hindus, an altar for Zoroastrians, a Church for Christians, a synagogue for Jews, and a pasture for gazelles.” And so that's the way I identify myself. (“Mystics Speak the Same Language,” an interview with Huston Smith by Liza Hetherington)

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We can be steeped in one tradition. We can embrace one religion, while also listening from the heart to what other religions have to say to us. The spirit seems unwilling to have it any other way. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we are unwilling to have it any other way. We try to follow the light wherever it may lead us.

We have recognized that by naming the wisdom of world's religions as one of the sources of our faith. It is the third of our six UU sources.

For those who may not have been here for the services on the first two sources, each of our sources in some way seeks to answer the question: "Where can I turn for inspiration and meaning in my faith and spiritual life?"

The first source points us to direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. The second directs us to the words and deeds of prophetic men and women which challenge us to justice, love, and compassion.

The third is "Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." The insight, rituals, and history of the world's religions can deepen our experience of the sacred and inform the way we live in the world.

Our foray into world religions as a denomination began in earnest with the 18th century Transcendentalists who introduced Eastern religions into Unitarianism. The 1893 Parliament of World Religions marked another milestone. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a Unitarian minister, organized the Parliament of Religions at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition where representatives from Eastern and Western religions gathered.

This launched formal inter-religious dialogue worldwide. Swami Vivekananda's introduction of Hindu thought at the Parliament, for example, is believed to have given birth to a genuine interest in Hindu philosophy and religion in the West. ("The Cathedral of the World," A Chosen Faith by Forrest Church)

In the many years since then, religious pluralism and world community have grown tremendously. They have grown not only in our religious tradition but throughout this country. The presence of Taoism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Hinduism, African, and Afro-Caribbean religion can be felt throughout the world.

The architectural signs of these religions can be found in places across this country if we stop to notice. The mosques of Muslim Americans are visible in many of our larger cities.

Buddhist temples and Hindu temples have sprung up on hillsides across the nation. And synagogues and Christian churches have long been part of the American landscape.

There is an ever-growing appreciation and desire for opportunities for dialogue, worship, and work with members of other religions. There is an appreciation for the fresh insight and new understandings other religions can offer on matters of faith and spirituality.

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There is an awareness we have for the need to introduce children to the religions of the world. We have Sophia Lyon Fahs to thank for bringing about an important shift in the way we teach children in our Sunday school about matters of faith.

Fahs knew back in 1952 when she wrote a groundbreaking book on children's religious development (Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage: A Philosophy of Creative Religious Development) that we were on the brink of a new religious landscape in this country. She saw that children needed to be introduced to the wisdom stories from all traditions and cultures as well as from their own. Fahs recognized that children needed to learn about the Bible, but not exclusively so.

This is a matter of cultural and world literacy. But it is also more than that. It has to do with helping children discover and develop their own religious beliefs. We teach them other religions as well as our own.

This has to do with helping them honor their own authentic religious experiences – whether they happen while meditating, chanting, or during some other spiritual practice. “The wind bloweth where it listeth.”

Fahs knew children needed exposure to other religions so they can become ethically well-grounded and spiritually mature individuals. Just as adults do. So we have programs like Neighboring Faiths to teach children about other religions.

It isn't always easy for parents, though. I often hear from parents who are struggling with how to help their children religiously when there is so much to learn and experience. How can a parent responsibly teach this faith and all the others? We are also challenged, let's be honest, by our own preferences and prejudices in religion.

I think of the story of Sarah Conover. When her family's Labrador retriever died, her children confronted her with the question, “Where did Carmen go?” She found herself speechless. It was then that she and her husband decided they needed to be able to provide more spiritual guidance for her children and have a better understanding for themselves. (“Dharma and Damnation,” At Work in Life's Garden: Writers on the Spiritual Adventure of Parenting)

In her search, she found Buddhism and that's what she and her family came to practice at home. But after moving to conservative northeast Washington State, she soon learned that her children needed to know about other religions, including Christianity.

Her family actually began to incorporate some of the rituals and celebrations from their own upbringing, which was Christian. Conover says:

Though we've explained our preference for Buddhism, [our children have] also heard that Jesus lived and breathed and taught love. We clarify certain terms along the way as Christianity is far less familiar to them: [my daughter], for example, confused preacher with poacher, Seventh Day Adventists with Seven Day Atheists. And it's not always

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simple to draw clear demarcations in the complexities of postmodern hybrid faiths – I am a Buddhist who also believes deeply in the mystery we indicate by the word God.

We live in a world touched by the beauty and complexity of many religions and many cultures. Each presents opportunities to deepen and enrich our spiritual and ethical lives and the lives of our families, if we will let them. We don't need to be an expert at each and every one of them. We don't need to have all the answers for ourselves and our children. But we can be open to learning and experiencing. We can listen to our own spiritual needs and those of our families and be responsive to them as they arise.

Don't get me wrong. I'd love for all our children and each of you to be Unitarian Universalists. But there is something higher still – a higher calling. That is to have a powerful grounding as an ethical and spiritual person. It is to be able to experience the sacred.

Over the last two weeks I have invited you into a reflection on how the source we were exploring was at work in your spiritual life. I asked you to reflect on your direct experience of the sacred. I asked about your experience of prophets and your being a prophetic witness.

Today I encourage you to reflect on the wisdom you have gleaned from the world's religions. What have you adopted into your ethical life and spiritual practice?

My own list includes but is not limited to these: From Zen Buddhism, I have learned mindfulness meditation and the practice of compassion. I have been inspired by engaged Buddhism and the peace activism of Thich Nhat Hanh. From Islam, I have been delighted and inspired by the beauty of Sufi poetry. From Taoism, I have learned something that has turned out to be quite counter-cultural in America. I have learned what it means to practice inaction. Judaism has taught me the power of the covenantal relationship. Christianity is the faith of my childhood and the religion that rooted me ethically and spiritually as a person of faith. From Christianity, I learned to pray.

All these inform my faith as a Unitarian Universalist. They enrich my spirituality and contribute to my experience of the sacred. And yet I am still learning, still opening myself so I can follow the light.

May we each learn to follow the light wherever it may lead us, finding meaning there. May it be so. Amen. Blessed be. Shalom.