

**“For Love of Zero”**  
**01 January 2006**  
**Unity Church-Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Katie Lawson**  
**Worship Associate: Laura Smidzik**

**READING: The Snow Man – Wallace Stevens**

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

**Reading: from Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for Ministry**

We need the religious capacity to make and keep vows about time and money. The dominant religion that is winning in our lives is the economy – it is the ruling theology on our globe. The economy defines what it is to be human and what it is to be fulfilled, and tells us that we are competitive, self-interested individuals. We know that this is an inadequate definition of who we are. But it is the ruling theology of our society and has become a danger to the planet itself. We need a spiritual/religious dissent from this collective state religion.

To dissent from the established religion we need spiritual practices.

[One important one] is to keep the Sabbath: One day a week, do not go shopping, do not go to work, do not do work at home, do not do the dishes, do not do the laundry. Rest. [I remember a time when] in the morning we went to church, and sang songs of praise for the goodness of life, we prayed for all people in the world that there would be food, comfort. We studied, and we uncovered the news. Then we went home and had the best food of the week, gathered with family, friends, strangers. We played, we went for walks in the woods, and in the evenings we went back to church for discussion of politics and ethics. This practice makes it possible to stay in touch with discussion about the meaning of life. This is a practice of resistance to the dominant religious system.

## SERMON:

Some time ago someone said of Unitarianism, "It embraces everything and stands for nothing." To which, over the course of the years, many Unitarians have responded with great conviction... "Does not."

The interpretation that Unitarian Universalism stands for nothing and can be anything is a product of the container into which religion fits in people's minds. If it has no creed, where's the religion? This view is clearly limited by the majority of experiences people have had with religion, which are creedal and often dogmatic. We know this. Still, we adamantly argue against what feels like a belittling of our chosen faith.

Truthfully, though, we must feel unsettled by it or we wouldn't *be* so adamant. I know that *my* instinct is to rail against any claim that this tradition stands for nothing. It is, after all, a little nerve wracking to believe that I have devoted my vocational energy, three years of schooling, and thousands of dollars to...*nothing*.

It's not true is it? Is nothing at our center? It doesn't *feel* like nothing, but if you ask one of us what it is exactly that we *do* stand for, I've noticed we often get a bit hazy around the edges. Either that or we fall back on the seven principles or the "different trinity" "respect, freedom, and justice" with a dogmatic-like certainty.

Just this year the Unitarian Universalist Association published the findings of a *three*-year investigation of what it is that holds us together called Engaging Our Theological Diversity. You can get a copy on line at the UUA bookstore. I recommend it. It's full of surveys results, interviews, and historical analysis that all try to answer the question, "What is at the center of Unitarian Universalism?" The idea of nothing makes us very uneasy. And why not? Nothing reminds us death, of the deeps of the unknown, mystery. Nothingness isn't really nothing, and if it weren't so hard to swallow, religion might not have caught on in the first place.

Lately, I've heard this uneasiness expressed in an increasing focus on the absence of a central metaphor or narrative in Unitarian Universalism. Clearly we are not going to adopt a creed, that is theologically untenable, but what about a story or a symbol similar to the crucifixion or other religious centerpieces?

Most recently, the subject of our central metaphor came up during a discussion with 20 or so veteran ministers about the Legend of the Holy Grail and the Knights of the Round Table and Unitarian Universalism. A powerful story itself, the legend of the Holy Grail has been retold in great variety, but essentially involves a quest for ultimate truth, the Grail, and a homecoming. Then, in most versions, the knight, having gone on an individual pursuit of Truth, returns to the Round Table — the Round Table, which is a symbol for equity in interaction and bearing.

At some point in the discussion, a someone asked, "But what is in the middle of our table? To what do we return after our quests? Why return at all?" People began to propose all sorts of centerpieces for the Unitarian Universalist table. Some were rather elaborate in their symbolism and construction, and while insightful and meaningful, I couldn't help but think they'd be a little difficult to see around. Surely you've been at a dinner where you wanted to push the showy flower arrangement aside so that you could see the person sitting across from you. It was a thoughtful and *urgent* discussion. It is interesting to note that, in fact, by most accounts the center of the actual Round Table was hollow. It held... nothing.

This discussion may seem academic and not particularly relevant to our real lives, even our real religious lives. However, this would underestimate the power of metaphors and stories, which are essential tools in connecting people to each other and to ideas. In the words of cognitive scientist George Lakoff, "Metaphors can kill." It is his contention that the metaphors we use to describe our lives or, more frequently, let *others* use to describe our lives frame our experience of the world, connect us with others and guide our choices. We lose elections, start wars, choose life paths all on the basis of the way metaphor is being used to describe the world to us and what we accept as a framework.

The metaphors and stories we use to talk about ourselves especially shape and invigorate our religious lives and are critical to how well we manage to communicate our values to others. For Unitarian Universalists, in this time in particular, when religious and moral conversations are dominated by the framing and metaphors of the Christian conservatives, having our own stories and metaphors is critical to our ability to speak with religious conviction. Therefore it is reasonable that the search for a central metaphor for our faith feels so urgent, especially now.

In the absence of story of Jesus and the crucifixion, in the absence of Mohammed speaking the word of Allah from his cave, in the absence of the life of the Buddha and his Eight Fold Path, what do we have to hold us in centrifugal community? Some argue that our history is our story. Others that the chalice is an important metaphor. Others say that it is rituals like the bringing together of the waters. The Prophetic Sisterhood who started so many churches out here in the Midwest during the 1800's chose home as their metaphor. I agree that all of these serve us well, and there is no rule that says that we have to choose just one metaphor. However, I worry that our pursuit of the perfect metaphor is born out of our deepest fears – fear of not being seen, as a movement and as people, fear of not being, fear of Deep, dark Nothing. I wonder if we are running from exactly what we should be embracing.

During the early 1800's the more orthodox of the Congregationalists were *accusing* certain ministers and churches of being "Unitarian." Unitarian was a depreciative description until William Ellery Channing went ahead and adopted it for us. What if we listened to the people who say we stand for Nothing and just, yes, thank you very much,

AND...

A few years ago, I got back in touch with one of my closest friends from high school who had married since the last time I saw him. I hadn't seen Dan in five or so years. I showed up for dinner more than a little worried that we wouldn't have anything to talk about. However, both Dan and Michele were finishing their PhD's, and I figured that the subjects of their dissertations would provide plenty of conversational fodder. I also knew that I could be getting in a bit over my head, but I was feeling adventurous.

"So, Michele, tell me about your thesis. What's it about?" I asked to which she responded without blinking,

"Nothing,"

It reminded me of being asked by my parents whenever I fell silent in the backseat of the car what I was thinking about, to which my response was invariably, "Nothing." It's a conversation killer, but I was undaunted.

"No really. That can't be true. I'm sure it's fascinating."

"No really. It's about nothing."

As it turned out her thesis really was about Nothing, or more precisely, the numeral Zero and the way its arrival impacted Renaissance culture and the works of Petrarch in particular. Much more thesis-y. You have to admit it's a bold choice to write your whole doctoral thesis on Nothing, but as Michele writes:

Investigating nothing inevitably reveals changes in the status and nature of something; new modes of representing nothing and making it apprehensible, throw into question old modes of representing, knowing, and being any thing. Thus, asking what it means to be nothing is the same as asking what it means to *be*.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jaffe, Michele. *The Story of "0"*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

While many valid arguments continue to be made that Unitarian Universalists do indeed stand for something, I hope that this effort to articulate Something will not be at the expense of the challenge of standing for the something that is Nothing. Enter zero.

Zero came to Europe from India around the same time that the first Grail stories emerged, in the late 12th century. It's emergence in the next two centuries is credited with democratizing mathematics by making it simpler and more accessible. Interestingly, around the same time our theological forefathers were making a lot of trouble for the Church by democratizing the Bible, making it more accessible by translating it into the vernacular. Already we find a kinship between liberal religious and Zero.

The Greeks and the Romans had no zero. It is thought that Zero, was derived perhaps from the concept of a void as it existed in Hindu philosophy and in Buddhism – that is as Nirvana implied becoming nothingness.<sup>2</sup> In Buddhism, the wisdom of enlightenment is being able to see through one's essential nature. That essential nature is described as such-ness or one mind or, in Zen, Nothingness. In achieving emptiness, the Buddhist says, we achieve...Unity. Hmm.

The original Hindu symbols for zero were alternately referred to as 'sunya', which means empty, and 'kha' which means place. Zero, like religion, examines the intersection between an actuality, life, and its total absence, death. The Hindu talk about God as that which has no beginning and no end – that which is nothing, but can be everything. God is nothing and whole at the same time. Zero.

In our current culture, Zero is a radical religious metaphor in its role as a place holder and its respect for open space. Sometimes I view my ministry as an exercise in holding a seat for holiness because our culture does not naturally provide that space. It seems to want to fill in any nook or cranny that is not being occupied by human busy-ness. Consider wilderness, which has long been valued in our tradition, as one example. The effort that continues in Congress to protect the Arctic Wildlife Refuge from drilling is just one more example of how hard it is for us to hold a place open – a place where our temporal human concerns are not placed first, but where some other, perhaps more sacred, order can prevail.

Our culture devalues is-ness and emphasizes usefulness and productivity, but maybe we need to complicate our understanding of usefulness.

Lao-Tse says:

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
It is the center hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel;  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
Usefulness from what is not there.

We are working more hours to keep up, our heads are filled with media messages about how to regard ourselves and our lives, and the emphasis is constantly on more and still more productivity. In the face of these pressures, Rebecca Parker, advocates for zero by reminding us to keep the Sabbath. Ensuring that the "dominant theology" of the economy does not close in on us by keeping the Sabbath, holding a place for holiness, is a religious act of resistance to the belief system we would otherwise let define us.

Zero is also an important concept as we come together in community as Unitarian Universalists because it allows room for difference and provides the conditions under which meaningful dialogue can happen. Zero plus anything equals that thing. Zero lets truths stand on their own and challenges us to see the world as it

---

<sup>2</sup> Arsham, Hossein. *Zero Saga*. <http://home.ubalt.edu/ntsbarsh/zero/ZERO.htm>

really is, to see ourselves and each other for who we really are. The Buddhists tell us this is the first step to enlightenment.

Victoria Safford, the minister at White Bear, tells the story of being in her office one day and having a small boy appear in the doorway and say to her, "Hey you! Here I am, it's *me*." To which the Reverend Safford responds prophetically, "Hey yourself. I see you." She reminds us that this is one of the major roles of religious community, to be *seen* and to see. An open space, uncluttered, that does not obstruct our view of one another, serves our spiritual lives well, especially in Unitarian Universalism which is premised on our ability to respect each others differences and to learn from each other's journeys.

Critics say that if Nothing is at our center, we are inviting moral relative-ism. When any belief is as good as the next, what keeps us from a total moral free-for-all? What this view presumes, is a very Un-Unitarian Universalist understanding of what it means to be human. A stand for Nothing is actually a statement of faith about human nature.

A colleague was explaining Universalism to a skeptic who finally asked, "So you can do anything you want to do, steal, rape, kill?" To which the minister replied, "Is that what you *want* to do? Steal, rape, kill?"

Our theology presumes a divine spark in each person. We do not try to be good because we fear God, but because we are divine. Our essential nature is clean, it is absent of the fear and distortion that is the product of suffering here on earth. It is open, it is nothing and because it is nothing it can welcome everything. Zero.

The poet Amy Uyematsu says:

there is a zero vector, which starts and ends  
at the same place, its force  
and movement impossible  
to record with rays or maps or words.  
it intersects yet runs parallel with all others.

a young man I know  
wants me to prove  
the zero vector exists.  
I tell him I can't,  
but nothing in my world  
makes sense without it.

While it may be an exaggeration to attribute the fall of the Roman Empire to the fact that it ignored Zero, let be a cautionary tale for those of us who too quickly would run from it. At the dawn of this new year especially, when we empty our vessels and vow to start from Zero, take heart from Zero, let Zero guide your choices from time to time, let Zero give you courage to live lives of integrity. The center of our faith my difficult to describe, difficult to contain in simple description or imagery, it may often look a lot like Nothing, but that nothing is something that deserves to be held open, and I know that nothing in my world makes sense without it. Amen.