

THOUGHTFUL FAITH:

UNDERSTANDING UUism AS A FAITH TRADITION

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PRELUDE:

[[I don't really have an outline for the paper I will share with you today. I think you'll see why as I go along. If you feel in need of structure, I have written on the display easel three "themes" which will concern me as I propose we understand Unitarian Universalism as a faith tradition: Faith and Meaning; Meaning, Language and Conversation; and Conversation and Tradition.]]

In a sermon he wrote two years ago ["Something More", March 11, 2001], Charles Eddis, Minister Emeritus at Montreal talked briefly about the difficulties of speaking the unspeakable, demystifying the mystery, or explaining the inexplicable. "It is something we would all like to do", he said, "We want to know or [to] think that we know the key that would unlock the ultimate mystery." Charles then quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes. Holmes said: "There is in each of us a thirst for the Absolute, so much so that the poor devil who can do it no other way does it by getting drunk."

Alcohol was not the drug of choice for my generation. And I'm not too sure we of the '60s were looking for the Absolute. We spent almost as much time celebrating the meaning which we found in life as we spent complaining about the meaning which appeared to be missing.

I think there is a thirst for something in each of us, a thirst for something larger than ourselves, something that we can see ourselves as part of, but I don't think it is a hunger or a thirst for the absolute. I call it the search for meaning.

You might complain that compared to the search for the absolute, the search for meaning is an example of lowered expectations, and when we lower expectations we do not reach our potential. I'm not too sure the comparison is fair; the search for

meaning can be very demanding.

While the search for the Absolute lends itself to exclusive terminology, the search for meaning tends towards the inclusive. While there is only one absolute, everything in the realm of meaning, in some sense or another.

While discussion of the Absolute lends itself to vertical imagery, the discussion of meaning is very horizontal. Whereas the Absolute tends to rise above its context, meaning is always embedded in its context.

FAITH AND MEANING:

I begin with faith and meaning.

There is a sense in which we all begin with faith. There has to be some level of trust in order to bring a new generation into the world. From the time we are born we must necessarily trust those around us. Faith is often understood as trust -- and that's important to remember. Near the beginning of one of his books, Paul Tillich talks about faith and trust. He then goes on for two hundred pages pointing out how much more than trust faith must be in order to deal with ambiguities and insecurities of the human situation.

So let us say: faith might be a search for the Absolute or it might be seen as Trust. More carefully understood, however, faith is a hunger, an anxiety, or a concern for meaning in life. It is one of the qualities of being human. All of us have it, and like other qualities -- like courage or tenacity or integrity -- some have a stronger sense of faith than others. In the 1940s and 50s some Unitarians would have been hesitant to agree with such a positive understanding of faith. They understood faith in opposition to knowledge. They valued knowledge a lot, and valued faith only a little.

When we are dealing with faith, I suggest, we are dealing with something more profound than knowledge. The basic milieu of faith is not knowledge or the lack of knowledge or the opposition to knowledge. Faith is a human quality which is better appreciated in the context of human *understanding*.

Knowledge is an achievement. Knowledge is something we set out to get and when we get it, we can conscientiously demonstrate that we have it.

Understanding, however, is something you always already have. You demonstrate your understanding in everything you do, conscientiously or not. You are never without an understanding of one kind or another. You enter into each new situation in life bringing with you the understanding which you developed in your previous life-situations. This new situation will change your understanding -- your understanding of yourself and your understanding of the world around you -- so that you will enter into

tomorrow with a different understanding than you had today.

Knowledge is an important contributor to understanding: as the saying goes, the heart cannot lead where the mind will not follow. Knowledge is indispensable, but understanding IS where we have been, it IS where we are, and it IS where we want to go.

Faith has also been linked to the human need for certainty. Here too, I found it necessary to explore this further. In the New International Version of the Christian Scriptures, Hebrews 11, verse 1, Paul tells us that "...Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

For those who hunger for certainty, faith has become linked with belief. In one of the definitions in the Nelson Canadian Dictionary, faith is defined as "belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence". Understood this way, I think we can see how the desire for certainty occasionally overwhelms the need for prudence.

When we study other religions of the world, however, we discover that this understanding of faith also has very limited practical applications. My undergraduate degree is in Religion Studies. During those years my professors encouraged us to appreciate faith in a way which would help us understand the other religions of the world and not just the one in which we were raised.

For some, faith is a hunger for the enlightenment or awakening taught by the Buddhist masters, for others, faith is the life of devotion to Krishna, or an exploration of the nuances of the Vedas. In these contexts, justification is not an issue.

Over the years I have come to understand faith as a concern for meaning in life. Part of the motivation of understanding faith as a concern for meaning in life comes from my study of the religions of the world and from my experience of participation in interfaith groups.

There is another motivation which has led me to understand faith this way. This other motivation is a need to recognize the variety of ways in which people from many different walks of life contribute to our understanding of faith and truth and meaning. You don't have to go to a guru to discover meaning in life.

From my teenage years onward I have participated in philosophical and spiritual conversations that ranged over many different disciplines and areas of interests. One of the assumptions of these conversations -- conversations about Sappho and Homer and Virgil, about Aristotle and Immanuel Kant and Susanne Langer, about Wolfgang Mozart and Arnold Schoenberg and Judy Collins, about Leonardo da Vinci and Vincent van Gogh and Georgia O'Keefe, about William Shakespeare and Margaret Atwood and Robertson Davies -- in all these conversations I and my peers assumed that there was a way in which each of these people contributed his or her special

insight into our humanity by the quality of his or her unique work.

In other words, meaning is all around us. Instead of trying to speak the unspeakable, demystify the mystery, or explain the inexplicable -- paradoxes which arise in the pursuit of the Absolute, why not try to understand better and more profoundly the meaning which already envelopes our lives.

These two influences -- the interfaith conversation and the interdisciplinary conversation -- have moved me to understand faith as inclusively as I can. The goal is not to achieve inclusiveness by speaking in broader and broader (and therefore emptier and emptier) generalizations, but by listening more carefully and caringly to what is already at hand.

Whatever religious tradition we might be examining at any moment, whatever background of religious upbringing a parishoner might share with us, if we listen to their faith-articulations as an expression of what is meaningful in their lives and how they relate to the meaningful, then we will be able to hear them much more sympathetically and, I suggest, much more accurately.

When I say that faith is a concern for meaning in life, I indicate that people like meaning, they like meaningful things. They want their work to be meaningful, for their family relationships to be meaningful, for their lives to be meaningful. They like participating in activities which affirm their humanity, and which celebrate truth and beauty; they like telling stories and hearing stories.

People like living in a meaningful world. This doesn't mean that they can't live in meaninglessness. I imagine that people can live indefinitely *without* a sense of meaning in their lives. But my experience also shows me that folks live happier, healthier lives if they perceive of themselves as part of a meaningful world.

People sometimes exhibit the lack of meaning in their lives by depression. When people are depressed, their motivation decreases, their social interactions decrease, their ability to network with others decreases and finally, their ability to physically cope with the world around them decreases. I believe that we humans have a basic orientation toward meaning and without it we are more likely to be confused and unhappy.

These observations convey something very important about meaning: meaning is NOT just something abstract or rational, although occasionally that may be the case. When I use the word "meaning" I am not talking about the nature of something or the essence of something. The meaning of something is not IN anything. *Meaning is moaning*. Moaning is often associated with pain but we moan also with joy and with ecstasy. If you have an opportunity, check the Oxford English Dictionary and you will find that until the end of the 18th century the words "meaning" and "moaning" were used interchangeably in the English language.

Why did it change? What great event happened between 1650 and 1800 to encourage English-speaking people to separate out meaning and moaning and make them into two separate words? Remember that in the middle of the 18th Century the Enlightenment was in full swing. From the middle of the 17th century onward, more and more of the writers of that day were becoming increasingly fascinated by concepts, by ideas, by other verbal tools of abstraction.

As we began thinking of language as a tool of thought, we began losing track of the languaging we lived within. We began focusing more and more on knowledge and less and less on understanding. Knowledge gave us power to control the environment and eventually the world. Understanding was just an emotional muddle. During the Enlightenment, meaning got separated from moaning.

No one wrote an essay advocating this; it was just one of those minor episodes of cultural evolution. Day by day, people in their everyday usage over the course of several generations began using these two words in slightly different ways than they had been used before. By the early decades of the 19th Century, the new distinction became common usage.

By listening to the word "meaning" with the word "moaning" hovering in the background, however, we can hear again how our thinkings and our feelings are still intertwined.

I speak theology here, not psychology -- although Carl Jung tells us that the two might be closely related. I speak about talking and listening, about prayer and liturgy, about the satisfaction of a productive day at work, about the joy of finding a new friend, about music and poetry, about the blues and the need to sing the blues, about art and sculpture, and movies and radio and television.

Ministry is an art, or a profession, or a vocation, which does its work through the human languaging experience, working to help people live with their anxiety for meaning and to help them see that their anxiety for meaning can be an empowering force in their lives. In our counseling and in our visitations, in our committee participation and in our liturgies and sermons, ministers help people feel better about themselves while at the same time challenging them, or reminding them, to respond to certain larger values in their lives.

When you live your life in such a way as to increase the opportunities for meaningfulness for your life and for the lives of others around you, you are living the spiritual life whatever your tradition of worship or tradition of spirituality.

I encourage you to think of Unitarian Universalism as a faith tradition, but in doing so, I am encouraging you to reunderstand faith. If we understand faith as a concern for meaning in life, we see a fuller, richer, and more wholistic sense of faith than if we limit ourselves to *trust* or *certainty*.

Faith is not trust alone. Tillich went beyond that in his writings and I think we should follow his lead in that regard.

Just as importantly, perhaps more importantly, faith has almost nothing to do with certainty. Doubt is just as much an expression of your concern for meaning in life as affirmation. Doubt is one of those behaviours that keep faith alive. Without doubt, faith becomes brittle, it becomes mere ideology. Certainty, like the Absolute, is beyond the limit of human experience.

I have been encouraging you to think of faith as a concern for meaning and meaning is often understood in the context of the use of signs to refer to things and thus we equate meaning with intention or reference, or we equate meaning with the object intended or the thing being referred to. But it is also important to remember that meaning is moaning.

If someone starts talking to me about the tree outside the window, he may indeed have something interesting to tell me about the tree. He may refer to qualities of the tree I hadn't noticed, but there is another dimension to his speaking. Along with the referential sense of meaning, there is also the reverential sense of meaning: the moaning. Why is he telling me about this tree now? Is this a political conversation? Are we dealing with psychological issues? Whenever we speak -- *whenever* we speak -- we are also laughing or crying or doing all sorts of other things in between. Whenever you speak *you* speak, you in all your emotional, political, and stylistic particularities.

FAITH, LANGUAGE, AND CONVERSATION:

If meaning is always moaning, then meaning is very much wrapped up in our languaging experience. A religion which understands itself as a concern for meaning in life will, at some point have to digress into the human experience of meaning. Philosophers really didn't take languaging seriously until the middle of the 20th century. We hear about this development in a complaint from Stephen Hawking.

In his book, *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking writes:

In the 18th Century, philosophers considered the whole of human knowledge, including Science, to be their field and discussed questions such as: Did the universe have a beginning? However, in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Science became too technical and mathematical for the philosophers, or anyone else except a few specialists. Philosophers reduced the scope of their inquiry so much that Ludwig Wittgenstein, the most famous philosopher of this century, said: "the sole remaining task of philosophy is the analysis of language." What a come-down from the great tradition of philosophy from Aristotle to Kant!

Stephen Hawking is one of my favorite scientists. More than anyone else in the English-speaking world, he has raised the general public's respect for those who do esoteric forms of research.

Hawking is one of those rare people who does esoteric research. He does what he deeply loves to do and still manages to become an instantly recognizable icon for millions of people. And yet, in those four sentences of his that I quoted above, Hawking shows us how profoundly he misunderstood the conversation of philosophy over the centuries, and even more importantly, in those four sentences, he shows us how profoundly he misunderstands what the conversation of science has become.

He tells that what makes science what it is necessarily brings with it higher and higher degrees of specialization so that fewer and fewer can participate. He then tells us that what makes philosophy what it is is the limitless breadth of its subject-matter, the *things* philosophers talk about. He is concerned that philosophers no longer exhibit this breadth of subject-matter, they no longer try to tie together everything in the universe into an understandable overview as the philosophers of the past used to do. Instead, contemporary philosophers have come to focus very narrowly on the analysis of language.

When he wrote *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking did not understand science as a conversation, a conversation with its own peculiar characteristics and expectations for participation. But we have known for more than a generation that science IS a conversation. What makes science *science* and not metaphysics is that the work of the scientist must be reproduceable in detail by others. In other words, the work of any given scientist becomes science when others respond to it. Science is a conversation, a languaging event, a sharing of the *possibility* of meaning.

Werner Heisenberg is famous for his demonstration that there are limits to what can be determined, or known, in certain important circumstances of scientific investigation. But Heisenberg makes another contribution which I find equally or perhaps more important. In the introduction to his 1971 book, *Physics and Beyond*, Heisenberg points out that

Science rests on experiments; its results are attained through talks among those who work in it and who consult one another about their interpretation of those experiments. [In this book I hope] to demonstrate that science is rooted in conversations.

Science is rooted in conversations: that is both an observation of the behaviour of scientists and a metaphor. It is a very powerful metaphor and, I suggest a very fruitful one. It is powerful because it helps us to understand science in a way which reinforces the need for ethical awareness on the part of each scientist, and it is fruitful because it helps us to see how science is still very much a part of our humanity, even though in its drive to be impartial, impersonal and unbiased, science often appears to be inhuman.

"Science is rooted in conversations". This is a relatively recent shift in the study of philosophy. It has occurred within my lifetime, although I didn't become aware of it until I was in my mid-20s. The relationship of philosophy and literature went unnoticed in the Western world for roughly 2500 years.

Why? because those who were doing philosophy did not consider philosophy to be a conversation; they did not think that philosophy was literature. They were not cognizant of the physicality of their own behaviour. Philosophers spend hours and days and months and years writing things on paper — how could they think it is NOT literature?

Philosophy has always been a conversation. Even when Plato and Aristotle wrote, they were responding to remarks made by other philosophers or earlier philosophers or they were generating new remarks of their own. Philosophy has always been a languaging activity, but not until the days of Wittgenstein in the middle of the 20th Century, did philosophers begin to take a closer look at what they themselves were actually, physically doing. They were so busy attending to what they were speaking *about* that they overlooked their own speaking.

And that is one of the important characteristics of languaging. This is where literalism comes from. And we all do it, not just the fundamentalists. Our usual attitude toward languaging sees it only according to its utility. We are so concerned with what we are talking about that we only notice language when it doesn't work: language works best when we don't notice it. When I am trying to convey information about the tree outside our window, I do not want you to be distracted by my words, I want your attention to be focused on the tree.

Our comfortable experience of language is the transparency of language. When we are with friends and family we very often don't even notice the speaking AS speaking. I am here and you are here, and we are present to each other by the actions that we do together and by the sounds that we share with each other. It's just you and me and the bowling alley and the balls and the pins. You are making me laugh by telling a humorous story and I am teasing you by complimenting you on how sensitive you are to slide the ball past the pins without injuring any of them.

Language is transparent in the sense that we hardly even notice it, even though we are constantly swimming in it. As Wittgenstein said: "The last thing a fish sees is the water."

I'm not making a special effort to say whatever I am saying, I am appreciating that you are with me and I am with you. By way of your words you are present to me and I am enjoying your presence and hoping you are enjoying mine. We identify ourselves with our words so much that we tend to forget that the words are there. It is not so much that you and I are speaking *about* the bowling pins or whatever. What counts is that we are both here as speaking beings, as languaging beings, languaging in whatever

medium is available, but here as articulate beings nonetheless.

Everybody languages. Every scholar who has ever said anything which has survived to influence us today has SAID it, or written it, or his disciples wrote it for him or a disciple wrote it herself and stuck the Great Scholar's name on it instead of her own so that it might be accepted in society.

Languaging is a very central part of what everyone is doing all the time, whether we are talking or writing or gesturing or signing. Therefore, when philosophers turned to the analysis of language in the middle of the 20th Century, their activity became even more universal than it had ever been before -- not more universal in terms of what was being spoken about (which is what Stephen Hawking was listening for) but more universal because they turned to the most universal of all human activities, an activity done by every scientist in every moment of *his or her* existence just as it is done every moment of everyone else's existence.

The American philosopher, Richard Rorty called this redirection of the activity of philosophy the "linguistic turn in philosophy". That's the title of his 1967 book reprinted in 1992. He called it the linguistic turn in philosophy but we might well call it the *humanist* turn in philosophy. When we think of faith as a concern for meaning in life, then we become part of the linguistic turn in *religion*, an understanding which attends more and more to religion as the expression of the human concern for meaning and attends less and less to the qualities or characteristics of God. I call myself a non-theist not because there is no God, but because God is irrelevant to my spirituality. I am a spiritual person whether there is a God or not.

Hawking understood language as a static thing, as a set of accepted spoken or written words, a set of rules of grammar and punctuation, and so forth. Wittgenstein, in contrast, spoke of language in a way that I would call *languaging*; he reminded us that we are dealing with a verb, something which is basically an ongoing action and not just a static thing.

Languaging is words, spoken and written but it is so much more than that. For Wittgenstein, and for just about every philosopher since, languaging is the primal milieu of our humanity.

Languaging is any word or action or gesture -- singing or dancing or reciting or playing an instrument or reading poetry or painting a picture or wearing a hat or not wearing a hat, or buying a house in this neighbourhood and not some other -- any behavior which generates or conveys or *digests* meaning, meaning in the world around you or meaning within you.

And notice that I used the word *digest*. Languaging is at the same time very public and very personal, very open and at the same time very intimate. Languaging is that organ of the body by which we process the world which thrusts itself upon us and into us. Languaging is an internal/external organ. By languaging we take things in, reárrange

them, then put them out in different forms. We take things in and decide how they are to be a part of us; and we also cry out when we are hungry and thus our parents outside of us come to know about the hunger inside of us. By way of languaging we are constantly and forever digesting the world around us, converting what comes in into something meaningful for us while at the same time converting us into something which the rest of the world might find meaningful. Also, by way of languaging, we give parts of ourselves, part of our meaning, to the world.

When we hunger for meaning we become spiritual beings. Whenever I have encountered someone who described to me a spiritual event in their lives, it was always an event which in one way or another contributed to their sense of meaning in life. We don't become spiritual beings until we begin asking questions of meaning in life.

Whence do we humans develop this spiritual hunger? We develop a hunger for meaning from our languaging experience, an experience which begins with the efforts of our parents to teach us the language of the culture in which we were raised.

Your parents taught you your language by reading you a book or telling you a story, not by sitting beside your crib with a dictionary in one hand and a book of grammar in the other. You learned language by trial and error. You learned your first language as much through imitation as through random effort. Not through the measured processes of knowledge but by the trial and error methods of understanding; not just meaning by meaning but, more often, moaning by moaning.

Very early in life we become aware of the meaningfulness that sometimes happens when we exchange sounds and gestures with other people. We want for our lives the meaning which we experience in our languaging. We want the meaning and the moaning; the sense of connectedness and the sense of celebration.

Our hunger for meaning is a by-product of our social development as languaging creatures. In other areas of human endeavor we work with this thing called "meaning" or we build on it, but in our spirituality, in our religious life, we explore and extend our appreciation of meaning. All that is or has been religion is the articulation, the exploration, and the expression of our anxiety for meaning in life.

That anxiety arises from the evolving instability and uncertainty of human languaging. Languaging is the behaviour by which meaning is generated, shared and preserved. Whenever we speak, however, we have no certainty that we will be understood. We experiment with every utterance, trying old words in new circumstances, hoping that those with whom we are talking will pick up on the connection we are trying to make in this context, now. Although we might mature in many ways, part of our languaging always carries with it the uncertainty and the experimentation which marked our original learning of language in our early childhood.

As we go through the stages of learning, learning to be part of the conversations in

which we live, we long to be part of the larger conversation, the generation and transaction of meaning in the world around us.

CONVERSATION AND TRADITION:

Our languaging behaviour acquaints us with meaning/moaning. Our acquaintance with meaning/moaning in our languaging leads us to want it in our lives and as we respond to that hunger, we become spiritual beings. Our hunger for meaning in life leads us to conversation. As we come to each conversation, we come to languaging anew in order to enrich our sense of meaning in life, or to ease us over times when life seems to be less meaningful or completely meaningless.

Religion has always been conversational. In ancient times the gods and goddesses were experienced either as talking with us humans below directly or talking to us by giving us other signs through the stars or through the entrails of chickens or through tea leaves.

Religion has always been conversational; it never occurs in isolation. Even if you were to retreat to the isolation of Walden pond and spend your days pondering nature's simplicity, you carry with you the languaging in which you were raised: the vocabulary, the literature, the art works, the political issues. And with that language comes your understanding of what is spiritual. Your native language, along with other languages you might conscientiously learn later in life, equip you with a myriad of distinctions. Distinctions enable you to recognize the spiritual when you see it or hear it or feel it. Whatever else spirituality might be, our culture has already taught us that it is closer to this and not quite like that and definitely not this other over here at all.

We are always in conversation with others even when others are not physically present. The give and take of the voices in our heads IS the give and take between our thoughts and desires of the moment with that portion of the total culture which we have absorbed thus far into our lives.

As Hannah Arendt said in her book, *The Life of the Mind*, "Thinking without language is inconceivable."

As Paul Tillich says of humankind in his *Systematic Theology*, "[We] could not be spiritual without words..."

But we also know as a matter of evolution that language has not always been with us. Were we not at one time indistinguishable from the other primates? Other primates do not seem to be languaging beings. According to Jane Goodall in her early work, vocal language was the physical transition which separate the humans from the other primates. In other words, it could be said that our language-ability made us human.

Presently Ms. Goodall and her students are paying more attention to the vocalizations chimpanzees make in an attempt to see if there is not among the present chimpanzees a precursor or proto-language which might be closer to the language the first humans spoke. In other words, she and her students are looking for the early stages of human languaging already present in chimpanzees.

If Jane Goodall is right -- and in this respect I think she is at least close -- then all plants and animals are languaging beings. As each living thing goes about surviving in the world, it articulates itself into the world and that articulation becomes a meaning pattern, a pattern which finds its remoter meaning in the survival of the individual animal and, remoter still, in the survival of the species.

Our languaging does not make us qualitatively different from the other animals. Our languaging is more sophisticated in the sense that with our fingers and with our tongue and our vocal chords we can make more distinctions than other animals and finer distinction. And the more distinctions a species can make, the more choices it has in relating to the environment around it.

And in the context of religion, making distinctions itself becomes a behaviour as the student goes through the stages of spiritual discernment, learning more profoundly the dance of the spirit. Religion is not just talk about another world, religion is dancing and singing in this world.

There had to be distinct vocalizations of one kind or another so those vocalizations could become primitive symbols; and there had to be the primitive symbols generated by vocalizations before those symbols could be recombined in the first efforts of thinking; we had to have considerable skill at recombining vocalized primitive symbols in order to learn how to ask questions; and we had to ask many, many questions before we began asking questions of meaning. When we asked about the meaning of the world around us and ourselves, we became spiritual beings.

When we ask questions of meaning we are letting our anxiety show. We are letting others around us know that we are struggling to digest some aspect in the world around us and we may not succeed. As others respond to our joys and our anxieties, the conversation of faith begins. Spirituality does not begin as a gift from the gods, it evolves in us as we evolve. We become spiritual beings as we hunger for meaning.

Over the generations the cacophony of utterances which express our joys and concerns begins to sort itself out into a series of conversations. Over the centuries, one of these conversations would become the tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

How is Unitarian Universalism a faith tradition?

A tradition is a history of practice. A tradition is an action, a behavior, a way of doing something which has persisted over time, usually over several generations.

When I attended seminary, I learned Unitarian Universalism issue by issue. That is, I learned about the issues which were important to Unitarians and Universalists at particular times in history. I don't remember any detail about the liturgy of Unitarianism in the days of Francis David or John Biddle, or the liturgy of Universalism in the days of John Murray. The liturgy we have today has evolved mostly from the congregational tradition of New England -- But what were the stages of the evolution?

My point is that there is more to the conversation of faith than just talk, but talk is something we UU's have a lot of in our tradition. Our religious ancestors were mostly literate and therefore very verbal. So in a very real, almost in a literal sense, our faith is a conversational faith and our faith tradition is a conversation over time.

All religions do this in one way or another. In every religion I have ever seen in practice, members of the religion often discussed with each other various ways of understanding and interpreting their tradition. These discussions, however, were not seen as part of the act of worship. For the most part, the Western religions do not set aside time within the worship service to discuss concerns people have about the faith itself. There might be special meetings called to deal with special issues, but the model of the conversation does NOT apply directly to the corporate act of worship itself.

If we understand faith as a hunger for meaning in life, then we might say that each of the religious traditions has developed a recipe for responding to that hunger. In some cases the recipe is a list of beliefs, in other cases, as in some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, the recipe might be a list of particular practices of daily living or a particular method or style of meditation.

In other words, although most organized religions do celebrate the human concern for meaning in life in some sense or another, mostly they focus on or they celebrate a particular *response* to that concern.

We Unitarians and Universalists also have a recipe or maybe a short list of favoured recipes for responding to the concern for meaning in life. In that sense we are a tradition of faith just like any other.

We are different from other religions in that our celebration of the *concern* for meaning receives just as much emphasis, if not more, as our celebration of the variety of *responses*. We celebrate the hunger as well as the recipe. In our worship services, worship is rarely a matter of adoring the divine, rather is our worship better understood as the expression of our appreciation of the joys and concerns that arise in the search for meaning in life.

This distinguishes us in particular from those religious groups concerned for certainty in matters of faith. In such groups the anxiety or insecurity about meaning in life is so great that their leaders speak in ways which are intended to shut down the conversation of faith. They have the one true answer, no further discussion is

necessary.

Languaging is something that happens in space and time, and because our spirituality is a by-product of our languaging, or better, an in-depth appreciation of our languaging, then we cannot be spiritual without languaging, without being part of the conversation, without *being* in space and time. The spiritual world never ceases to be physical. Whatever else experience might be, there is always within it the tangible and the sensual.

Tradition is the way experience works when we listen to experience and value it. Experience is no guarantee of wisdom, but without experience, there can be no wisdom.

If we have a rational religion, a religion based on sound principles, then there would be no need for wisdom. A rational religion will be true regardless of the particularities of experience. But if we have an experiential religion, then our religion will be based on what we have learned through our experience and what we might learn from the experiences of those who went before, experiences preserved in the various media in which others have participated.

A tradition is an institutional commitment to the world. It is a collection of experiences by a variety of people interacting with each other over the generations. They cannot interact with each other without the structures to support and encourage that interaction, and they cannot interact over the centuries without participating in specific, physical media of one kind or another, media designed for the purpose of facilitating that conversation over the generations.

[[In closing...]]

To understand Unitarian Universalism as a faith tradition also commits us, I believe, to an openness as we appreciate the varieties of media. With all the media we have come to know, however, let us not forget that the older verbal behaviour of "talking about God" may also be an entree into the presence of God. Once we discover the performative aspect of languaging, it would not be wise to dismiss the literalistic or the analogic the other variations of traditional religious language. The gods can speak in the unctious words of a politician just as they can speak in the quivering of a blade of grass; truth dances in the art of a well-posed scientific question as well as in the technical wizardry of the most ecstatic artist. The task of the conversation of faith is to develop our ability to discern more lovingly and caringly the speaking of the gods amidst the cacophony of the everyday.