

**“MY RELIGION IN A NUTSHELL”  
Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
November 17, 2024**

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Musicians: Harmony Rutter, LeRoy Davidson, Jean Pratschner  
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**Greeting, Opening Words, Introduction of Theme**

Thank you, Cynthia, for opening today’s service, and greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

Our Opening Words are from the Rev. Tim Haley:

Amid all the noise in our lives, we take this moment to sit in silence –  
to give thanks for another day;  
to give thanks for all those in our lives who have brought us warmth and love;  
to give thanks for the gift of life.  
We know we are on our pilgrimage here but a brief moment in time.  
Let us open ourselves, here, now, to the process of becoming more whole –  
of living more fully;  
of giving and forgiving more freely;  
of understanding more completely the meaning of our lives here on this earth.

For this morning’s service, I will be putting before you in summary form the values, ideals, and concepts that are my personal responses to what I regard as religion’s most basic questions:

What should we value?  
How should we live?  
How are we sustained and anchored?

I do this as an invitation and as an encouragement for you to consider and respond to the same, basic questions:

What are your deepest values?  
How do you think you ought to conduct your life?  
What anchors you in all kinds of weather?

I’d like to begin with a responsive reading from a ministerial mentor of mine – the minister, actually, who gave a chance in the liberal ministry. His name is the Rev. Dr. Duncan Littlefair, who served the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan for 38 years (1944-1982). He opened a place for me as a ministerial intern in 1978, and I stayed on as an associate minister until 2001. The statements in this responsive reading are from a sermon he once gave.

## **Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: The function of religion is not to educate people, though religion has done a great deal of educating.

CONGREGATION: The function of religion is not to direct and control the individual and society, though certainly religion has done this.

MINISTER: The function of religion is not to guarantee success, though religion has based its claim to importance on its assumed and presumed capacity for such guarantees.

CONGREGATION: The function of religion is not to promise salvation, though in the practice of religion people may and should find gratification, justification, and reward.

MINISTER: The function of religion is not to inspire, though religion may and should and does inspire.

CONGREGATION: The function of religion is not to console and comfort, though religion through the ages has been a notable source of comfort and consolation.

MINISTER: Religion at its core is the attempt to make sense out of life, to sort out meaning, and to answer its fundamental questions: What is the nature of life? Who am I? What is the good?

CONGREGATION: By raising such questions and seeking answers to them, religion functions to cultivate meaning, depth, richness, and fulfillment in our individual lives and society.

(“The Function of Religion,” Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, adapted)

## **“My Religion in a Nutshell”**

### **Introduction**

As I mentioned earlier in the service, this morning I will be sharing with you in a more direct way than usual my personal responses to what I regard as religion’s most basic questions and purposes ... and I do this as an invitation to you to consider your own responses to what you regard as the religious enterprise in its essential forms and functions.

In a sense, this is where I’ve come out after some forty-five years in the ministry, and a great deal of preparation prior to that.

Religion for me has always involved a combination of heart and head – the distinction the two, and the relationship between the two.

And that's the first of four distinctions and their relationships that I'll put before you this morning ... which will get at my approach to religion ... and which will also structure this morning's message.

So, in a nutshell, in condensed form – condensed for my, you understand – my religion can be summarized with four distinctions and their relationships.

(As usual, I will provide a print version of what I will say this morning, as the eye and the ear often take in things in different and yet, hopefully, complementary ways.)

1) First, the distinction between religion and philosophy, valuing and thinking, the heart and the head.

2) Secondly, the distinction between religion as an organized institution and religion as a way of life.

3) Thirdly, the distinction between two centers of the human psyche, a smaller center and a larger center.

4) Fourthly, the distinction between the One and the two, the Whole and its parts.

### **1) Religion and philosophy, valuing and thinking, the heart and the head**

So, first, religion and philosophy, valuing and thinking, the heart and the head:

Way back in theological school at the beginning of the 1970s, I came across a distinction between religion and philosophy offered by a philosopher of religion named Frederick Ferre. It was a distinction that made sense to me then – and still does. Ferre wrote that:

“Religion is one's way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively.”

*(Frederick Ferre, Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion, p. 69)*

In other words, whatever one values most comprehensively and intensively, that is that person's religion, whether or not it is connected to any organized religion. (I'll get to that distinction in a minute.)

And Professor Ferre defined philosophy as follows:

“Philosophy is one's way of thinking most comprehensively and critically.”

*(Frederick Ferre, Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion, p. 14)*

I like to put the two together: valuing and thinking, religion and philosophy.

And here are what I see as the quintessential questions to this religious/philosophical enterprise, questions which I've mentioned to you before, namely:

Who are we in this vast universe in which we find ourselves, and what sense, if any, are we to make of it?

What meaning and purpose, if any, may be ascribed to our lives, and how should we live our lives? What ought we to be about?

To what or to whom should we ultimately devote ourselves, and what is worthy of our devotion?

To what or to whom should we give our allegiance, and what is worthy of our allegiance?

What is it that inspires my deepest reverence, and what is worthy of my deepest reverence?

As I said, I like to put religion and philosophy together, but ultimately, as I approach it, one's thinking serves one's valuing and reverencing ... because this has to do with how we live our lives and what we give ourselves to.

In this way, religion has priority over philosophy; the heart has priority over the head.

BUT: without thinking/reflecting/questioning/and doubting, one's valuing and reverencing can go awfully awry.

The head must always accompany the heart on its journey through life.

## **2) Religion as an organized institution and religion as a way of life**

Now, these quintessential questions of religion I've enumerated delineate us as a "religious species" ... which brings me to my second distinction, namely, the distinction between religion as an organized institution and religion as a way of life.

As I've said here before, a common way of understanding the word "religious" – perhaps the most common way – is to say that individuals are "religious" if they belong to a given religious organization ...

... and "really religious" persons – because there are degrees of religiosity in this understanding – are individuals who are very *dedicated* in this regard, practicing their religion "religiously," you might say ...

... which is a clue to the understanding of the word "religious" that I prefer, which has to do with the quintessential questions I just mentioned ... questions we humans face as a species, whether or not we are connected to a particular religious organization or institution.

Biologically, genetically, we, as members of the human species, have evolved and are structured as beings who must question the meaning and value of our lives, beings who must orient ourselves within this vast cosmos and make some determination as to how we will live our lives and what we will give ourselves to and serve.

And, so, religions and religious organizations of many kinds emerge as a way of responding to and dealing with these “religious” needs and concerns, both reflecting our religious nature and as attempts to deal with that nature.

But we are not religious beings because we belong to some organized religion or another. It’s the other way around: We create religious organizations *because* we are religious beings. Our questions of highest and deepest value *precede* the formation and founding of religion and religions.

Suppose you don’t belong to any particular religious organization. Are you therefore non-religious?

I answer: By no means, not in this broader and more basic understanding of what it is to be religious. Rather, one is religious by virtue of belonging to a species that asks questions about how we should live and what we should value.

Or: Suppose your answers to some “religious” questions change. Suppose for example you are no longer theistic in the traditional sense. Are you, therefore, no longer religious?

Again, I answer – sometimes, perhaps, too emphatically, “No!” It’s the questions that define the religious enterprise, not the particular answers of the moment.

For example, did I become “non-religious” when I moved from a traditional theistic understanding of God to a more naturalistic understanding of God and Being? Give me a break!

### **The Dalai Lama**

In terms of this distinction between religion as an institution and religion as a way of life related to one’s deepest values, I like to quote the Dalai Lama, the leader of the Tibetan Buddhism, when he says, “Kindness is my true religion!” Not Buddhism, but kindness.

Presumably, his religious organization assists him in the contemplation and practice of kindness. But the point here is that the religious organization serves one’s real religion, which in the case of the Dalai Lama is the value of kindness.

Personally, I would slightly adjust the Dalai Lama’s highest value to make it “lovingkindness” ... which I would place as the value at the center of my religion.

And, as an aside, one of the things I like about the recent revision of our Unitarian Universalist Association's statements of purpose is that we have put the value of "love" at the center of our religion ...

... which, again, I would adjust to "lovingkindness," since the word "love" has so many meanings, a subject on which I have given multiple sermons over the years.

### **Interlude Hymn #: "Love Will Guide Us"**

Let's take a musical break to sing the hymn, "Love Will Guide Us."

1. Love will guide us, peace has tried us,  
hope inside us will lead the way  
on the road from greed to giving.  
Love will guide us through the hard night.

2. If you cannot sing like angels,  
if you cannot speak before thousands,  
you can give from deep within you.  
You can change the world with your love.

3. Love will guide us, peace has tried us,  
hope inside us will lead the way  
on the road from greed to giving.  
Love will guide us through the hard night.

(Words, Sally Rogers; traditional music, arr. by Betty A. Wylder)

### **3) Distinguishing two centers of the human psyche, a smaller center and a larger center**

For the second part of this sermon, I turn more inward, focusing less on questions relating to how to live our lives in the outer world to examining the nature of the one asking the questions. I turn, as I were, from philosophy and theology to psychology ...

... which is how it happened in my own life ... because I found in my mid-to-late thirties the interest – the need – to receive, what I think of, an "inner education," having spent plenty of time involved in the "outer education" of schools and being fed from outside, as it were.

So it was, starting somewhere in my mid-to-late thirties, that I worked for about seven years with a Jungian Analyst

And this corresponded, then, with finding a strong connection between religion and depth psychology ... and, in particular, with the depth psychology of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung ...

... who identified two centers of the human psyche, a smaller center, which he named the “ego” and a larger center, which he called the “Self” with a capital “S.”

The “ego,” the smaller center, begins to develop in us humans at about the age of two and has to do with our sense of being an individual and having self-conscious awareness ... which involves a sense of differentiation, division, and separation.

### **The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**

In mythological terms, this development of self-consciousness and self-identity in the human species is related to eating of the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil ...

... which is not an apple tree, folks, but rather a “Tree” yielding the polarities of “yes” and “no,” right and wrong, good and bad, “yang” and “yin,” this and that, up and down, heaven and earth, heaven and hell, I and you, us and them.

In this evolution of the “ego,” we leave behind the world of “dreaming innocence” and the wholeness of that world ... and we experience a sense of exile ... as if being thrown out of a Garden of Paradise ...

... and the question, then, of whether we can again find the “wholeness” we previously and unselfconsciously experienced ... the exuberance and spiritedness we see, for example, in young children ... whom we often envy.

That’s a quick description of the “ego,” which, to Carl Jung, is the smaller center of the human psyche.

### **The larger center of the psyche**

The larger center of the psyche, as I said, Jung named the “Self,” with a capital “S” ... which, as I think of it, has to do with the larger powers of Nature within us ... from which we are never *actually* separated or in exile, though so often it may feel like we are.

I think of this larger center of the psyche as the “cosmic Creativity *within*,” the “divine creative energy *within*” – the Creativity, the Energy, the Power of Being that has birthed us and all things ... and which continually calls to us from within, propels us forward, urges us on.

For Jung, the appropriate role of the “ego,” the smaller center of our psyche, is to keep in touch with the larger center and serve it ...

... not go wandering off by itself, which it so easily tends to do, acting as if it is center of the universe and the master of its own fate ...

... instead of humbly attending to the larger Self, the powers of Nature within, bringing forth its possibilities and potentialities ...

... the light or lamp of conscious awareness in which the Creation comes to know itself through us humans ... humble servants of the mysterious creative Powers of which we ourselves are an infinitesimally small part.

### **The relationship between the smaller and larger centers of the psyche**

In terms of the relationship of the “ego” and the “Self,” the smaller and larger centers of the psyche, there’s a poem that’s been important for me. It’s a poem by the Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jimenez titled “I Am Not I,” translated by Robert Bly.

#### **I Am Not I**

I am not I.  
I am this one,  
Walking beside me whom I do not see,  
Whom at times I manage to visit,  
And whom at other times I forget;  
The one who remains silent when I talk,  
The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,  
The one who takes a walk where I am not,  
The one who will remain standing when I die.

(“I Am Not I,” Juan Ramon Jimenez, tr., Robert Bly, in *The Soul Is Here for Its Own Joy*, p. 246)

To emphasize the distinction between the “Larger ‘I’ and the “little ‘i’,” here’s how I would present this poem, using the upper case and lower case in the text where appropriate.

#### **I Am Not i**

I am not i.  
I am this One  
Walking beside me whom i do not see,  
Whom at times i manage to visit,  
And whom at other times i forget;  
The One who remains silent when i talk,  
The One who forgives, sweet, when i hate,  
The One who takes a walk where i am not,  
The One who will remain standing when i die.

When the ego-self confuses matters, as it so often does, and starts to puff itself up, believing somehow that it is master not servant, this is called “egotism” ... with all its related disruptions and disasters. But when it, the ego, serves the Larger Self, then there is health and greater wholeness and vitality.

My favorite Unitarian is Ralph Waldo Emerson. He didn't have the terms of Carl Jung related to smaller and larger centers of the human psyche, but he understood the idea ... and he understood the appropriate relationship of the smaller center to the Larger Center.

Here are some statements from Emerson's magnificent essay titled "The Over-Soul. Like poet Juan Ramon Jiminez, who so often doesn't see the One walking beside him, Emerson says:

### **The Over-Soul (excerpts)**

Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet, there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.

We are a stream whose source is hidden. Always our being is descending into us from we know not whence.

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.

When it breaks through the intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through the will, it is virtue; when it flows through the affections, it is love.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it, is memorable. The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, excerpts from "The Over-Soul," *Essential Writings*, p. 236ff)

#### **4) The distinction between the One and the two, the Whole and the parts.**

In these quotes, Emerson speaks of the part in relation to the Whole, the "eternal One," as he puts it.

This is a final distinction that is important for my religion, which may be referred to as the One and the two, the Whole and the parts.

In this regard, another set of quintessential questions related to religion are these:

How am I, the part, related to the Whole?

How am I part of the Whole? How is the Whole part of me?

How do I attend to the Whole? How do I attend to the part?

## A red lapel pin

Some of you may have noticed this little red and gold, circular lapel pin that I wear when I speak here.

Within this little red and gold circle – though you can't see it – is a Greek cross, which is a cross composed of equal horizontal and vertical arms.

These arms represent the “twoness” of things, the polarities of life as perceived by our ego – the fruit picked from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Like a car battery with positive and negative, plus and minus, poles, the Energy of life is found in the relationship and connection of these poles.

The golden circle within which these horizontal and vertical polarities operate represents the Oneness and Wholeness that embraces and transcends the polarities of life.

Another mentor of mine – both mentor and friend – was author and Jungian Analyst Robert A. Johnson, who died in the fall of 2018.

In terms of this Greek cross, says Robert Johnson, we humans are placed squarely in the middle of this cross, pinned right where the horizontal and vertical arms cross each other. And what is it we should do there? What is our task?

Johnson's answer: To embrace and to endure the tension of these “double pairs of opposites.”

Here's how he puts it in some statements from his compelling and consequential little book *Owning Your Own Shadow*: Johnson says:

If we endure the collision of opposing elements in full consciousness, we embrace paradox.

The religious faculty is the art of taking the opposites and binding them back together again, surmounting the split that has been causing so much suffering.

To heal, to bond, to join, to bridge, to put back together again – these are our sacred faculties.

To stay loyal to paradox is to earn the right to unity.

Conflict to paradox to revelation: that is the divine progression.

(Statements from *Owning Your Own Shadow*, Robert A. Johnson)

My religion, then, has, ultimately, to do with connecting with, identifying with, and experiencing the Oneness of Being by means of embracing the “twoness” of Being:

birth AND death,  
joy AND sorrow,  
laughter AND mourning,  
pleasure AND pain,  
light AND darkness.

Through this embrace, the focus is on the transcending oneness and “organic wholeness” of things. Says the poet Robinson Jeffers:

Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is  
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the  
universe. Love that, not man[kind]  
Apart from that, or else you will share man[kind's] pitiful confusions, or drown  
in despair when his days darken.

(Robinson Jeffers, excerpt from “The Answer,” *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, p. 594)

### **Concluding poems on embracing “organic wholeness”**

Along with so many others, in order to engage and experience the “organic wholeness of things” and to connect with the Oneness of things, I often repair to nature. I’d like to conclude by sharing with you through three short poems that speak to this aspect of my religion.

I begin with some lines from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, naturalistic American poet Robinson Jeffers, whom I just quoted:

(And let me, parenthetically, say that poetry has been a primary source for me in terms of my religion, uniting head and heart, both expressing my sense of the oneness, wholeness, and beauty of things and ushering me into that oneness, wholeness, and beauty.)

#### **Monument (excerpt)**

Erase the lines: I pray you not to love classifications:  
The thing is like a river, from source to sea-mouth  
One flowing life. We that have the honor and hardship of being human  
Are one flesh with the beasts, and the beasts with the plants  
One streaming sap, and certainly the plants and algae and the earth they spring from  
Are one flesh with the stars. The classifications [the divisions]  
Are mostly a kind of *memoria technica*, [a technical aid] use it but don’t be fooled.  
It is all truly one life, red blood and tree-sap,  
Animal, mineral, sidereal [star stuff], one stream, one organism, one God.  
There is nothing to be despised nor hated nor feared.

(Robinson Jeffers, excerpt from “Monument,” *The Beginning and the End*, p. 25)

And in a similar vein, here’s a poem titled “Boundaries” by Lynn Unger, a Unitarian Universalist minister who has often spoken here at OUUF.

## Boundaries

The universe does not  
revolve around you.  
The stars and planets spinning  
through the ballroom of space  
dance with one another  
quite outside of your small life.  
You cannot hold gravity  
or seasons; even air and water  
inevitably evade your grasp.  
Why not, then, let go?

You could move through time  
like a shark through water,  
neither restless nor ceasing,  
absorbed in and absorbing  
the native element.  
Why pretend you can do otherwise?  
The world comes in at every pore,  
mixes in your blood before  
breath releases you into  
the world again. Did you think  
the fragile boundary of your skin  
could build a wall?

Listen. Every molecule is humming  
its particular pitch.  
Of course you are a symphony.  
Whose tune do you think  
the planets are singing  
as they dance? ("Boundaries" by Lynn Ungar, from *Blessing the Bread: Meditations*)

And, finally, this poem by Wendell Berry titled "The Peace of Wild Things."

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free. ("The Peace of Wild Things," Wendell Berry)

## **Closing Hymn #1068: “Rising Green”**

Our Closing Hymn is, currently, my favorite hymn in both our hymn books. It’s titled “Rising Green,” composed by Carolyn McDade, who is also the composer of what is typically considered the UU anthem, namely, “Spirit of Life.”

1. My blood doth rise in the roots of yon oak, her sap doth run in my veins.  
Boundless my soul like the open sky where the stars forever have lain.  
Where the stars, where the stars, where the stars forever have lain.
2. My hands hold the weavings of time without end, my sight as deep as the sea.  
Beating, my heart sounds the measures of old, that of love’s eternity.  
That of love, that of love, that of love’s eternity.
3. I feel the tides as they answer the moon, rushing on a far distant sand.  
Winging my song is the wind of my breast and my love blows over the land.  
And my love, and my love, and my love blows over the land.
4. My foot carries days of the old into new, our dreaming shows us the way.  
Wondrous our faith settles deep in the earth, rising green to bring a new day.  
Rising green, rising green, rising green to bring a new day.

(Words & music: Carolyn McDade; arr. Jim Scott)

## **Closing Words of Benediction**

Our Closing Words of Benediction are drawn from the preface to William Saroyan’s book *The Time of Your Life*:

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time  
There shall be no ugliness or death  
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found  
Bring it out of its hiding-place  
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart  
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow  
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time  
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,  
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Adaptation of Preface to *The Time Of Your Life* by William Saroyan)

## **Extinguishing the Chalice**

We extinguish this chalice,  
But not the Light of Truth,  
The Warmth of Community,  
The Fire of Commitment,  
Or the Power of Transformation;  
These we carry in our hearts  
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, November 17, 2024. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus there.)