

# The UU Trap

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*If the deep spirit of our age is new awareness of life's essential oneness...then what are we to make of the deep fragmentations of the world today? What is it that is driving humanity to the precipitous edge of self-destruction, more dangerous than anything history has witnessed? At the heart of our fragmentations, whether as nations and wisdom traditions or as races and societies, are various forms of fundamentalism...*

*By fundamentalism, I mean any system that perceives reality in hard-edged terms, that boxes in truth with four fixed walls of definition. Fundamentalism says that what the rest of humanity needs is our religious dogma. What all nations need is our ideal of democracy. What the world needs is the supremacy of our race. What people in committed relationship need is our pattern of sexual orientation. And the list goes on and on.*

John Phillip Newell, *A New Harmony: The Spirit, The Earth, and The Human Soul*, excerpt from prologue

My sermon title, *The UU Trap*, is from an All Souls *Roots and Wings* class discussion this last spring. This small group experience is a great place to converse about individual spiritual journeys, and the joys and challenges of Unitarian Universalism. I used the phrase for the first time there, and a participant later told me he remembered it and thought about it. So thanks to this group for asking me to explain more about what I meant by, *The UU Trap*. This sermon also continues our summer-long theme of what it means to be Beloved Community. So I've been thinking about

fundamentalism, and how this hazard exists across the religious, political, and global map. Not just in conservative circles, but in liberal and progressive places too. Fundamentalism is harder to perceive and name here.

Let me start with a story. My good friend visits All Souls regularly, an Irish Catholic man who considers faith part of ethnic identity and family culture. He is left wing politically, and socially inclusive, yet he also relates to a traditional Mass. He enjoys the familiar liturgy, and appreciates the atmosphere of his heritage. Catholic spiritual practice feels authentic to him, and so, he is a progressive gay man who crosses himself after praying. People are complex! We say we welcome that in Unitarian Universalism, right? A few years ago, an All Souls member asked him whether he was joining this church. He replied that he really enjoyed our worship, but still considered himself Catholic, even as he struggled with the faith. Our dear member replied with, "Oh, aren't you *over* being Catholic yet?" Ouch. Patronizing, disrespectful, and kind of clueless. Her question showed her UU fundamentalism, a system of reality which boxes in the truth with four fixed walls of definition, as John Philip Newell put it. Four very liberal walls, of course!

She may as well have said, "What you need is *our* religious dogma," which we sometimes disguise as the dogma of non-dogma. Our liberal idea is that the *best* way to do religion is to draw from many sources. We tend towards a somewhat self-satisfied eclecticism that looks down the nose at going deep in one spiritual place for life. What made matters worse was that this was someone on our Membership and Welcoming Committee! Not so welcoming, really.

How do we think about people in other faith traditions? My own view was shaped in the *Seminarians Interacting* program of NCCJ for eight years. As divinity school student and then facilitator, I visited other schools, worship, and classrooms, and participated in intense annual spring conferences. We learned about a very wide range of perspectives among Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim students preparing to be religious professionals. One of the most complicated lessons was that the central issues of my faith might not even be on the radar in

another tradition, and vice versa. What was important in Greek Orthodoxy, or the evangelical Gordon Conwell seminary, or the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School was up to those communities to decide.

We were asked to consider and hold this bottom line: interfaith dialogue might *not* be finding the lowest common denominator, the territory where we overlap and sing the same happy song. It was instead about coming up against the hard places where we differ wildly. From distinct islands, we attempted to build bridges. We were free to visit foreign lands, without taking up permanent residence. We might scratch our heads, or express appreciation or confusion, or ask the simple questions of beginners. But without the bottom line, a basic respect for each island, dialogue was impossible, and there was no bridge built.

What might it mean to enter into challenging conversations about religious or any other difference with respect, instead of skepticism and dismissal? With open minds and hearts, instead of closed ears? Might we watch for the fundamentalism of liberal religion and worldview, in our own house? This would be the idea that I am more evolved than you because I have moved past being exclusively Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. The arrogant feeling that I represent a higher human being, one more open to religious truth or ethical experience, because I eat from a buffet. You, on the other hand, stay in that one narrow faith sandwich, and your take it so seriously. I wish you could be more like me, but too bad you haven't yet grown to my superior place. This is an example of the UU fundamentalist trap, and folks, it is not pretty.

Let me give you another example of the hubris hazard, in the words of a secular organizational consultant, from the Wash Post Saturday section *On Faith* yesterday. This woman is not Unitarian, but I have personally witnessed this line of thinking in UU ministers' meetings and congregational dialogue, so maybe it's useful to hear out loud. The writer commented on what she called "*the scandal of prayer*" in these words: "*There is no magic friend. There is only us... No amount of wailing to an empty sky is going to solve a thing.*" She asks would-be political leaders not to "*simply sacrifice our futures to the imagined whims of fictional ghosts and goblins, myths and*

*magic, spells and potions, demons and deities. It is time to grow up.*” Wow. That’s her take on prayer, all prayer.

Now granted, she was directing this commentary towards Texas Gov. Rick Perry and the big prayer rally he attended. I wasn’t a fan of that event either, for quite different reasons. Still, this is a very, very broad brush that secular humanists sometimes use. It paints across *all* world religions, *all* indigenous cultures, and many communities of color, by the way. That is a lot of diverse human experience to summarily dismiss from a self-centric perspective. The essential message is that you are immature and psychologically needy if you attempt to pray. Your desire for the coherent meaning of a religious system is superstitious and child-like. I’m further along than you, thank goodness, or thank someone, or thank myself. Certainly not “thank God.” Who doesn’t exist, you foolish idiot. Ouch again. Without basic respect, dialogue is impossible.

Here’s my belief: when we inquire into unfamiliar places with an open mind, lovely things often happen. I find that grace comes in ways I did not expect. This summer, I experienced two interesting ecumenical communities, one in northern New Mexico for a week, and the other in West Virginia for a long retreat day. They had some very striking similarities. Each engaged in worship and ritual multiple times daily as a method of remembering Oneness and connecting to Spirit. They made lots of music, especially repetitive chanting, in order to create an atmosphere of reverence and peace. Both drew on sources from Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, as well as Christianity, yet defined themselves as part of the household of Jesus. However, they focused on the radical and loving *way* of Jesus, not the imperial Lordship of Christ. Each community sprang from Earth-based Celtic spirituality, which names all of Creation, including humans, as full of original blessing not original sin. It is not just UU’s who claim these influences and theological concepts---we have true companions on the road to inclusion.

Rev. John Philip Newell, who wrote the book I read from today, was one of our leaders in New Mexico. A Church of Scotland minister, he was co-director of the

Scottish Iona Abbey, along with his wife Rev. Alison Newell. At the Ghost Ranch Casa del Sol retreat house, we used a re-visioning of the traditional Lord's Prayer he wrote. I found it evocative, powerful, and well, kind of Unitarian.

We sang it daily outside, as the sun rose over the high desert cliffs. The hauntingly beautiful melody was by David Poole, minister of music from a Presbyterian church in Albuquerque. In this prayer, I sense the Oneness of who we are, in the humility of respect for many points of entry. I've made a commitment to continue the practice, in order to explore the deep words and the spiritual discipline of daily liturgy. My hope is this helps me more often avoid our own hazardous kind of liberal fundamentalism, the UU trap.

I invite you to meditate or pray with me this morning.

*Ground of all being, Mother of life, Father of the universe, your name is sacred, beyond speaking. May we know your presence, may your longings be our longings in heart and action.*

*May there be food for the human family today, and for the whole earth community. Forgive us the falseness of what we have done, as we forgive those who are untrue to us. Do not forsake us in our time of conflict, but lead us into new beginnings.*

*For the light of life, the vitality of life, the glory of life, are yours now and forever.*

May it be so. Amen.