

Opening Words

Welcome everyone. Today marks the first of five weeks of services led by the Religious Services Committee. Beginning next week, RSC will offer a series under the rubric of “Sacred Journeys/Sacred places”, exploring different types of journey, visiting different sacred spaces and inviting you to travel with our RSC service leaders on an expedition through the world of ideas.

Today’s service is a journey as well, though I hesitate to include it in the series of sacred journeys. I actually look at it as a transition point, perfectly placed between Mary’s last service and the RSC July program. So, rather than a part of our summer main course, let’s consider today’s journey a glass of wine between courses, or perhaps a spicy taste of ginger between two very different pieces of sushi.

Today we will use art to explore the unique qualities that make Unitarian Universalism a chosen faith, a questioning faith and a personal faith. The music today will progress with us, from early liturgical music to modern jazz, the readings bring in the theme of perspectivism and the underlying unity of truth, and the reflection will use Spanish art from the medieval to the modern to highlight different ways to describe and understand religious expression.

So, for the next hour, consider me your guide through a special exhibition on the topic of Art and Faith, here in our very own, very chi chi, but never exclusive, gallery of ideas and beliefs. As we begin, I invite you to slip on your imaginary beret and your best hand-on-chin contemplative gaze.

Let us begin with the lighting of the chalice, representing the light of reason, the fire of passion and the beacon of hope we wish this community to share.

Reflection

When someone asks you what Unitarian Universalism is all about, what do you say? Do you speak about our guiding principles? Do you distinguish between creedal and noncreedal religion? Do you give a history of the different traditions found in this unique faith community or do you use a prepared elevator speech to try to sum it all up quickly? It is a difficult task, regardless of the strategy you use. We are a complex and diverse community, hard to pin down and harder still to define. So today I want to give you a new way to explain our unique religious community. When someone asks, tell them directly, and with full confidence that they will understand that we are... a cubist faith.

It's a trap of course. You haven't told them anything. Most people who hear this will be instantly confused and dumbfounded. But, they will want you to explain. You have your chance to give them more than the 1 sentence answer they originally expected. Hopefully, you will have intrigued them.

When I say to you that ours is a cubist faith, I expect you, like them, will have some odd images in your head. Are we a congregation of artists? Maybe. Do we all have both our eyes on one side of our face, with our noses off to the side? Not usually. Do we believe in cubes? Yes, we do. Cubes do exist, so we believe in them, but that is not the point.

We are a cubist faith because we are about interpretation, about perspectives, about taking traditions and beliefs and seeing them from as many angles as we can, we are about an active participation in our beliefs, one which demands that we think and feel, but that we also fully recognize that each of us possesses a different viewpoint, a different angle on the world and a different

truth which, when combined, can lead us to a better understanding of ourselves and each other. Our faith, like an abstract, cubist painting, is an active dialogue between tradition and innovation, expression and interpretation.

Do I have you so far? Good. But I feel I need to do a little groundwork to make my point, so let's step back from this idea and I will use some images to build towards it. Let's talk about art and faith.

SLIDE ONE—CAVE ART

Some of the first examples of human innovation are artistic works, and even in the earliest of these, art has been a spiritual act. The first cave painters tried to capture the spirits of the world in which they lived, depicting the hunt and the beasts they pursue. They saw artistic creation as a path towards the sacred and towards wholeness with the world.

I certainly do not have to tell you that there are countless points of intersection between Art and Religion. For the greater part of human history the two have been almost inseparable, the former forming a visual language for the latter. Whether it is the intricate weaving of verses from the Koran into geometric forms, the creation of altars, temples and shrines, or the illumination of Bible pages by early monks, art has been a spiritual act, as well as an educational one. This is particularly true within the Christian tradition, where artwork was the tool of choice to reach the masses of faithful.

SLIDE TWO – MEDIEVAL ART

In an age where entire populations were illiterate, and religious services were held in a language understood only by an educated minority, the art of the churches and cathedrals of medieval Europe was instructive, prescriptive art, designed to educate and elucidate its audience. The paintings of saints, Bible stories and principles of faith found in churches throughout Europe parallel, for me, with those first lessons of religion many of us receive in childhood. These paintings tell us what to believe, they reveal the stories and symbols which define a faith and give it rigidity. They are very much like many religious storybooks for children today, filled with images of animals marching two-by-two into Noah's Ark, of David spinning his stone sling, or Daniel calmly entering the Lion's Den. These visual stories are effective tools of instruction, and effective focal points for a structured faith.

SLIDE THREE—MEDIEVAL ART

In my youth I was fortunate to spend a year studying in Spain, an amazing year which included a 9 month long course of Art of the Prado Museum. Weekly trips to one of the world's great art museums began with a solid six weeks of Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine church art. The early tableaux and triptychs reveal images of the Trinity, the suffering of Christ, the devotion of Mary or the seemingly endless panoply of saints, each with their symbols: Peter's keys to the gates of heaven, Michael's flaming sword, Christopher's stone weight or the pauper's robes and rope belt of St. Francis of Assisi.

This art is a textbook, a study guide, a set of truths unquestionable and beliefs unwavering. It is prescriptive and directive. And for me, both as a student in the galleries of the Prado, and as a young adult seeking answers to questions of faith, they were tough pieces to enjoy. I can tell you, the first few weeks of my time at the Prado, when medieval art was our focus, was not exactly my favorite part of the course. I had serious thoughts of perhaps switching to something else, maybe Sociology or Advanced Grammar. These paintings did not speak to me, or if they did, they told me that I needed to tow the line, to follow the canon, to think inside the box. While I certainly understood the value of these pieces, I simply did not care for the intention behind them. There are faiths today, all around us, which we can see in these medieval paintings. One correct story, with one clear message to be learned and repeated. Interpretation is limited and the power of the observer or parishioner to reimagine or personalize the message is restricted.

SLIDE FOUR—CHRIST IMAGE

In this piece, for example, We can see the four apostles represented by the eagle, bull, lion and angel, and, of course, the figure of Christ as king, complete with a golden throne, an orb of power and a gesture of grace. These are symbols which are meant to be learned, but they are not answers to questions of faith. This work, by its very nature, wishes that we not ask certain questions. We should know the answers, they are here before us, coded in a singular truth and laid out for us to repeat and recognize, not to question or doubt. This image might work well in some churches even today, but would be a horrible representation of Unitarian Universalism.

SLIDE FIVE – EL GRECO

Not all art is the same, of course, and as we move from the medieval to the renaissance and beyond the styles change, though very often the message does not. For much of Spain's history the church was the primary source of art, the sponsor for artists such as El Greco, seen here. And though the techniques and aesthetics changed over time, the use of art as a tool to regulate and direct belief remained. We see here the Holy Trinity, a difficult concept for even trained theologians, and one which our Unitarian predecessors rejected as untenable. This image, as beautiful as it is rendered by the artist, does not differ greatly from medieval images in the singularity of its mission or the scope of its interpretation.

El Greco is, of course, an absolutely amazing artist, able to capture human expressions and emotions in a way that can take your breath away. And yet, when the themes are overtly religious, I cannot fully connect with his subjects. The prescriptive messaging diminishes my ability to participate in the artistic process, to use my mind to explore and question the piece.

SLIDE SIX –EL GRECO --BOY W/CANDLE

However, when El Greco steps away from overtly religious images, when he is free to paint with a little more self-expression, his work, to me, seems even more powerful. In this simple image of a boy blowing out a candle, El Greco highlights the human, what is right before him, rather than the imagined or symbolic biblical concept. This painting, as opposed to the Trinity, asks me to participate. It creates more questions and engages me as a partner in the artistic process.

In this image I find a lot more solace and a lot more spirituality than in so many of El Greco's images of saints or the life of Christ. In this paintings portrayal of the human we find the spiritual.

Tuck that thought away. It is in the human that we find the spiritual. That is a nice lesson for a UU congregation to keep hold of, even if El Greco does not serve as a great model for our faith.

SLIDE SEVEN – VELAZQUEZ—The Forge of Vulcan

This is a work by Diego Velazquez, Spain's greatest Baroque artist. Velazquez painted very few religious works. As the court painter for the kings it simply was not part of his duties. More often we see portraits and scenes of court. We also see quite a few scenes based on Greek and Latin mythology, such as this image of the roman god Vulcan, working in the forge, at the very moment when he learns of his wife, Venus's infidelity.

When I look at a Velazquez painting I cannot help but focus on the complexity, the intellectual effort needed to gain the full force of his works. Velázquez is known as one of the most technically adept painters of the Baroque. We can see this in his efforts to demonstrate skills in depicting different materials, from the shiny metal armor to the draped cloth togas to the skin of the blacksmith and his assistants. But the quality of realism and detail alone does not make Velázquez a master. It is the depth of ideas within his works. Here depending on his audience's knowledge of ancient mythology, as well as his own manipulations of the story to humanize the gods. Velázquez paintings are rarely felt, they are thought. He is a painter ideal for the rational mind, the questioner and the technician.

SLIDE EIGHT—las meninas

No example of this is more certain than *Las Meninas*, a painting whose seeming simple subject matter, a court painting of the king's daughter, belies an amazing depth of meaning. I could talk about *Las Meninas* for hours, as my instructors in Spain did, but for today, let me just highlight that this is a piece which at the same time asks us to consider the complexity of royal life, the commonality between kings and servants, the innocence of youth, the structure of a royal court, and the role of art itself.

SLIDE NINE—las meninas detail

Unlike so many other court paintings, this piece, with Velázquez and his canvas dominating its left third and servants the right third, is a painting about courtly life not about royal power. It is a reflective piece, asking the viewers to consider the process of artistic creation and the power of the artist, here dwarfing the king and queen who are only seen in the mirror behind Velázquez.

Were I to try to describe our faith as a Velazquez painting, I would be forced to focus on our intellectual goals, the importance of reason, our acceptance of science, and our reflective, self examining side. This would be a partial image of who we are, but there is so much which is left out, that I would not feel I had done us justice to call us the *Las Meninas* of religions. I love the intellectual side of Velazquez, and he paints a good dog too,

SLIDE TEN—meninas dog

which is nice, but despite his genius, Velazquez often seems to lack emotion, which I hope we cannot say about our faith. So we move on.

SLIDE ELEVEN—GOYA, 2 de mayo

The counterpoint to Velazquez is Francisco Goya. Goya at his best is raw emotion. All passion and fury, fear and rage. Goya, painting at the time of the Napoleonic Wars and the first Romantics, is an artist whose style is perfectly suited to create an emotional response. In this painting we can feel the terror as the people of Madrid rise up against the occupying French troops.

SLIDE 12—3 de mayo

While this example, highlighting the French retaliation, the very next day, shows us the fear of the prisoners and the machine-like coldness of their executioners. Goya is an emotional powerhouse, a revival tent preacher of passion, violent emotion and condemnation. In Goya we see the emotion that often seems lacking in Velázquez or the earlier paintings. His art is one of feeling, not dogma or intellect. There are many faiths which seem to focus upon feeling, on guilt or sadness, or on hope and messages of comfort. Like a Goya painting they can make us feel better or fill us with fear of a vengeful God.

SLIDE 13 – Saturno

Saturn, the god of time, eats his young, just as time eats away at human lives. Goya is an old man when he paints this, sick and persecuted for his beliefs. He paints on the walls of his modest home outside of Madrid. And his works reflect his fears. A faith based on fear, of our own inadequacies or of eternal damnation for our sins, this is a common message in churches, but it is certainly not one which defines our UU faith.

SLIDE 14—Dog

Neither is this Goya image. This is one of my favorite Goya works, and Laurie's least favorite. It is called the half-buried or half-drowned dog. It can be read many ways, but I have always seen it, and I think Laurie sees it, as a portrait of desperation. This dog, seen only from the shoulders up, trapped and helpless looks to the heavens for help.

SLIDE 15—dog closeup

In his eyes you can see him reaching out. Where is his master? Is he standing just off frame? Why has no help been offered? If his master is present, why isn't he rescuing this dog? If not, who can help? In the portrait of this dog we can see so many who reach out for help, who look to the church, to God for answers, guidance or for faith in something to save them. This simple image of a dog can mean so much, and like so many Goya works, it speaks through expression and emotion. We feel this painting, in a way that we rarely feel a Velazquez and almost never feel one of the medieval works.

And yet, it too does not serve us well as an image of who we are as a faith. Ours is not a faith of feeling alone. A UU is not best defined by emotion, or by reason, or by dogma. None of these is appropriate.

We are, as I hope to demonstrate not a medieval faith, nor a baroque one, nor even a modern, romantic one, ours is a cubist faith.

SLIDE 16—PICASSO

Let's be honest. When I say we are a cubist faith, and I show you this Picasso image, you hesitate to jump on board. However I think we all have seen the first time visitors after one service, and perhaps there are some today. Who leave here with the same expression on their faces that many of you have when you look at this painting.

Perplexed, not sure of what to say or how to read it, maybe intrigued but definitely not ready to commit to a solid opinion. Like a Picasso, sometimes it takes a while to feel like you know where you stand or even whether you like what you see.

We are complex. That is a good place to start. We have all experienced that, as I mentioned, when we try to sum up who we are to others. No creed, no sacred text, no liturgy, a blending of traditions and beliefs, a free community of seekers who don't always see eye to eye, and whose only binding characteristic seems to be that they all want a second cup of coffee. We can be as muddied and indecipherable as this painting.

But, sit with it a while and something starts to happen. You start to see some lines, some shapes, some contrasting colors and interesting highlights. We grow on you.

Why is that?

Firstly, because we are complex. Unitarian Universalism is a complex belief system. We demand interpretation and participation, just as this painting does. Each of us must step forward, peer into our beliefs, walk around them, scratch our heads, ask the person next to us what they see, but eventually come to a conclusion ourselves. We are creators of this art, or this faith, as much as any minister, any holy book, any Picasso. We define what we see and what makes this church work for us.

Secondly, and perhaps most clearly linked to the cubist theme, we are all about perspective. Let me try to explain with an example I use when I talk about Cubism to my students, the guitar.

SLIDE 17—GUITAR

We see here a variety of guitars. But we see them from different angles, at different distances, etc. We recognize each as a guitar, though each image is different. No one image here is more of a guitar or less of a guitar than the other. They are different, but they each represent “guitar” to us.

SLIDE 18—GUITAR DRAWING

As drawings, the same is true. Each represents a guitar, none necessarily more or less accurately, though some are harder to decipher than others.

SLIDE 19—ODD GUITAR

Even a very new image, from a very odd angle, can still be recognized and still has validity as a guitar. Yet can we really say that any one image truly captures the essence of this object. Wouldn't an image that includes all these angles, all these perspectives be better able to convey a truer expression of what a guitar is?

SLIDE 20--- combined guitar

OK, I am clearly no Picasso. I threw this together from the images before, somewhat hastily, but the idea is here. By using multiple perspectives, multiple texts or sources, I can create something, which is perhaps unique, but which attempts to get past the surface and reveal something essential about the guitar. I have not limited myself to one source to one truth about the guitar, I have chosen those angles and perspectives which mean something to me and combined them to create a new vision of a guitar. Something that is both personal and universal.

SLIDE 21--- picasso guitar

Picasso, of course, does it much better. He captures simple objects, even traditional artistic themes like the portrait or the still life, but refuses to capture them at their simple, imitative qualities. He seeks out multiple perspectives, reimagines and recombines them and finds a singular image which is not literal, but which attempts to capture that which is essential and eternal about his subject.

Picasso's guitar is a composite of angles, perspectives, shapes, colors and lines. Our faith, too, is a composite, and for each of us it is different. We find that

which speaks to us, which helps us see more clearly and we create a personal faith, a credo, which is not prescriptive or dogmatic, not wholly intellectual or emotional, and which demands active participation.

SLIDE 22—GLASS

Participation is a key to understanding this faith. No one tells us what our beliefs should be and no one can tell us that what we see is wrong. We each have a different angle and a different interpretation, and we value our right and the right of each of us to see what we see and to read into it what we might read into it. Sometimes we come together and say “It is a glass on a table” and sometimes we wonder how the person next to us cannot see what we see, but we are a cubist faith because we understand that it is not about finding common meaning, but about respecting the process of seeking meaning.

We value the process, we enjoy the challenge and we cherish the opportunity to share our beliefs with others and have them share theirs with us. We stand before the great masterpiece of the universe and we interpret it, sometimes confused and sometimes in awe, we analyze, we feel, we focus here or there, or we stand back and wonder. Unitarian Universalists are cubists because we offer each other the chance to structure a faith from different perspectives, and because we allow ourselves a chance to interpret our own image of truth.

And we are at our best when we take our diverse perspectives and unique journeys and use them to reach out to a greater good.

SLIDE 23—GUERNICA

This is Guernica, it is cubism removed from the isolation of art for art's sake and transformed into a work of social justice. Picasso's masterpiece, a reaction to the bombing of a Basque city by Nazi warplanes during the Spanish Civil War, is a work which continues to move people. It takes all the intellectual rigor of Velazquez and the raw emotion of Goya and transforms it into a cubist call to arms. Picasso, in this work, demonstrates the full power of his art, just as we demonstrate the full power of our faith when we point it at the world's needs.

SLIDE 24—GUERNICA

When we feel the suffering of those around us, the need for assistance or the pain of injustice we are at our best

SLIDE 25—GUERNICA

When we act as witness, shining a light on those who go unseen or testifying for those who cannot speak, we are at our best.

SLIDE 26 – GUERNICA

A cubist faith that does little more than self-portraits or still-lives is a hollow faith, despite its complexity and its unique perspectives.

SLIDE 27—GUERNICA

But a cubist faith at its best can reveal truths and open hearts in a way that others cannot. It can join reason to emotion and understanding to belief. It can be a tool to understand the world or to make it better.

So, the next time you are asked what Unitarian Universalism is, tell them it is a cubist faith. A faith of multiple perspectives, a faith that asks each of its adherents to think, to feel, to seek answers and to ask questions, to interpret tradition and welcome novelty, but that it is also a faith that deeply cares about the world, about justice and about the value of every person.

Tell them it is Guernica.

It is an answer that will only bring more questions, and isn't that a really good place to start?