

The Morning Reading: These words are from Ursula Goodenough, Professor of Biology at Washington University, contemplating the tapestry of religion...

The tapestry maker first strings the warp, long strong fibers anchored firmly to the loom, and then interweaves the weft, the patterns, the color, the art. The Epic of Evolution is our warp, destined to endure, commanding our universal gratitude and reverence and commitment. And then, after that, we are all free to be artists, to render in language and painting and song and dance our ultimate hopes and concerns and understandings of human nature.

Throughout the ages, the weaving of our religious weft has been the province of our prophets and gurus and liturgists and poets. The texts and art and ritual that come to us from these revered ancestors include claims about Nature and Agency that are no longer plausible. They use a different warp. But for me at least, this is just one of those historical facts, something that can be absorbed, appreciated, and then put aside as I encounter the deep wisdom embedded in these traditions and the abundant opportunities that they offer to experience transcendence and clarity¹.

When Julie & Josh and I were in Salt Lake last month attending the UUA General Assembly, I saw an ad for something called the “Temporary Museum of Permanent Change”. I was immediately hooked; I could not *wait* to go look this up. I learned that it’s a *virtual* museum-- a website and a series of temporary public art projects-- that depict all the changes that are going on in downtown Salt Lake City right now as part of a massive building project there. Those who were at GA can attest that there are construction cranes everywhere you look, and the streets downtown are all torn up with various infrastructure projects. It turns out the Temporary Museum is meant to help Salt Lakers understand that while their downtown is being permanently changed, the change is in many ways continuous with Salt Lake’s history.² After all, this is a city that’s been growing by leaps and bounds ever since Brigham Young’s small band crossed the salt flats and pulled up at the base of the mountains in 1847. In Salt Lake, the past begets the future in a continuous evolving process.

But here’s the kicker. If you go deeper into the website, you’ll find that the \$1 billion downtown redevelopment project at the center of all this activity is actually a project of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints-- the Mormons. So here is the Mormon Church, itself a uniquely American innovation, physically reinventing its founding city.

What’s so ironic to me about this is that you have, on the one hand, a Mormon belief system that is so wildly fanciful in its particulars that it takes huge leaps of faith to understand it in any contemporary context, yet, on the other, a church that is so visionary, and so well supported, that it can virtually rebuild it’s home community for the 21st Century.

Consider that this is a church that believes the Garden of Eden was actually located somewhere outside of Independence, Missouri and that Jesus reappeared in North America *after* the resurrection. Mormonism began when 14 year old Joseph Smith, who had a parallel career using divining rods and seer stones to find buried treasure, was visited by the personages of both God

¹ Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 172.

² The Temporary Museum of Permanent Change. <http://www.museumofchange.org>, (accessed July 15, 2009).

and Jesus in the woods outside Palmyra, New York. Later the angel Moroni appeared to Joseph and told him where the golden tablets containing the book of Mormon were buried, and gave him a pair of magic bejeweled spectacles which enabled him, and him alone, to translate the golden tablets, after which they were hidden in a barrel of beans and eventually lost to eternity. This is a greatly abbreviated history, but suffice it to say that in later revelations, Joseph and his successors were visited by John the Baptist, Moses, Elijah and Jesus, for the second time, and were bequeathed sole power to interpret divine meaning and set church policy.³

It may surprise you that I find this hard to believe.

But for me, the more amazing thing is that, despite the theology, I have nothing but admiration and respect for all the Mormons I've known. To a person, I've found them to be well-educated, grounded, highly principled, family-focused, community-minded, nurturing and loving. I don't begrudge them their faith; it's obviously a source of great strength and spiritual nourishment. But I've struggled to reconcile this unbelievable theology with a faith that is actually *practiced* in a down-to-earth and dynamic way, and that's thriving. In case you're not aware, the Mormon Church was founded in 1830, 50 years *after* the founding of Universalism in America⁴, and now has 13.5 million members worldwide. Over the last ten years it's grown 19% in North America and 43% in the rest of the world.⁵

It's possible that the success of Mormonism comes from offering some really great deals in the belief department. If you convert, for example, you can not only save *yourself* for eternity but all your ancestors too. That's a bargain that's hard to pass up.

But I surmise that the success of the Mormons really lies in the fact that their strong, enduring values trump the particulars of their theology. What the Mormon faith offers is a value system that they actually *live* by-- one that emphasizes family, mutual support, generosity and a kind of social safety net. These values could *not* be more timely; and the support the church offers at a *practical* level resonates with people who are alienated and confronting unprecedented change.

When Barack Obama selected "Change We Can Believe In" as his campaign theme, he brilliantly tapped a raw political nerve. A majority of Americans said, "Boy Howdy, are we ready for that! We need change *now*, and we *really* want it to be in a different direction." But the phrase also carries a deeper meaning-- it implies that change *itself* is something we should believe in. That's a harder idea for most of us to warm up to. As the journalist Sydney Harris once said, "What we really want is for things to remain the same but get better." We have no choice but to accept change as the only permanent feature of our living, but we also have a deep need to live in accord with a larger, enduring sense of what really matters.

It occurs to me that just as President Obama captured the *political* sentiment of this moment, right now there's an equally pervasive *religious* sentiment yearning to be tapped. It's the need to reaffirm what's of ultimate importance, and to hold it as an enduring beacon for our lives, while

³ "The Mormons" on PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/timeline/> (accessed July 17, 2009).

⁴ John Murray founded the first Universalist church in Gloucester, MA in 1779.

⁵ "Editor: Statistics Show Mormon Church Growth" in *AZCentral.com*. (April 10, 2009), <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2009/04/10/20090410mormon-growth0410-ON.html> (accessed July 17, 2009).

also acknowledging that the very essence of life is constant change. *Politically*, we need “change we can believe in”. But *religiously*, we need “belief we can change in”.

This came home to me last spring when I was taking a survey course on world religions. I noticed how some ancient religions are able to stay vital and useful to their adherents, even in rapidly changing circumstances, while others become so rigid and calcified they can only be sustained through coercion. And, just as in the Mormon example, the capacity of various religions to adapt seems to have less to do with the particulars of theology, and more to do with their focus on timeless human values, their ability to evolve practices, and their emphasis on supporting their own members as societies change.

Judaism, for example, has survived for over 4000 years of history partly because the *Midrash*, the centuries-old wisdom of learned Rabbis, is understood to be a legitimate source of ongoing revelation. Judaism has, for the most part, developed the capacity within itself to parse the enduring truths and values from the literal events of the scriptures, to hold them up, and to practice them in a close-knit, supportive community.

Of course, the history of Christianity is different. The early church was a profusion of small congregations professing a wide spectrum of beliefs. Many concluded that Jesus was a divinely inspired human with a radical message about overcoming the priesthood and Roman oppression to restore the Jewish covenanted community. These groups weren't particularly interested in the mythical aspects of Christology, and they definitely weren't interested in a church patriarchy.

Unfortunately, the turning point came when Emperor Constantine summoned the bishops to the Council of Nicea in 325. Constantine was having a hard time holding together an empire spanning dozens of nationalities, several languages and a cacophony of religions. As a matter of political expediency, he wanted to make Christianity the single religion of the empire but was stymied by divergent Christian beliefs, particularly regarding the divinity of Jesus. He needed a single, codified doctrine that could be applied across the Empire. Not surprisingly, the Bishops concluded that the best way to do that was to proclaim the everlasting divinity of Jesus, to anoint themselves as his sole intermediaries on earth, and to spell that all out clearly in the Nicene Creed. In one swift political move, Constantine got a unifying doctrine, but the unholy alliance of Church and Empire effectively froze Christian belief and practice for 1200 years until the Protestant Reformation.

For Roman Catholicism, the price of unchanging doctrine is a church that's grown increasingly out of step with its own members on a practical level. Today those European countries with the highest numbers of self-identified Catholics—Italy, France and Spain- are also those with the highest use of birth control, the highest rates of single parenting, and the lowest church attendance. And the Church's intransigence on social issues like gender equality and human sexuality, has left its leadership barely able to sustain itself.

Islam is a particularly interesting case because here you have a tradition that's 2600 years younger than Judaism and 600 years younger than Christianity. Yet, in many parts of the world, its practices have been frozen in a medieval time warp. The particular problem for Islam is that Muhammad declared himself to be the last prophet and declared that henceforth revelation would be sealed. In fact, there's a concept in Islam called *bid'ah*, which is a prohibition against innovating the religion. Despite that, the early Caliphs, the immediate successors to Muhammad,

were the first to see that the Qur'an couldn't literally be applied to all circumstances because it didn't deal with many of them. So they began slowly adapting the *Shari'a*, or holy law, to changing situations. And over time, different schools of scholars sprung up who *independently* evolved the law.

But just like Constantine at Nicea, it was the Ottoman Empire that wanted to consolidate the competing versions of Islam. By codifying the practical parts of the *Shari'a* into the *civil law* for the first time, the Ottomans made state-sponsored Islam the dominant model that it remains today. The *tragedy* is that Islam has within itself the capacity to evolve; it's just been consistently subverted for political purposes. That's all too clear in Iran right now. By emphasizing belief over values and proscribing arcane practices by law, Islamic states have denied millions of Muslims a tradition that can adapt to meet their changing circumstances.

Hinduism, by contrast, has never been a centralized religion. It's more an amalgam of ancient beliefs and practices that operate on all different levels of community, and are woven through the fabric of daily life. There are personal Gods and family gods and village gods and temples built to specific gods. There are widely worshipped gods like Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, and uniting all of it is the universal power of Brahman, a transcending divinity that pervades all of existence. Hinduism is a rich tapestry of belief, but none of the details are really proscriptive. All of it, even Karma and caste, are open to wide interpretation. The result is that Hinduism continues to thrive even as India modernizes. Software engineers and biomedical scientists have no difficulty being devout Hindus because beliefs are individualized, and because it's really a cultural practice that expresses enduring values and draws families and communities together.

My former boss, Indra Nooyi, is a native-born Indian woman who is now Chairman of PepsiCo. On the day she was elected to that post, she loaded her whole family on the corporate jet and flew to a Hindu temple in Pittsburgh so they could pray to her family's deity. This is a woman with a Bachelors in math and chemistry and two Masters degrees in business; she's a Yale University trustee. She's maybe the brightest analytical mind I've ever known, and yet she is a devout practicing Hindu and a follower of astrology. When I talk to her about this, I realize she's not so much concerned with the literal efficacy of Hindu beliefs; she's concerned with practicing a way of life that's her cultural inheritance and an enormous source of meaning for her family.

You know, the Chinese have a saying: "You can stand on a hillside a very long time with your mouth open before a roast duck will fly in." (Isn't that a great image?) Some of the world's largest religions have erected permanent temples on the hillsides of belief, and are finding that fewer and fewer roast ducks are flying by. Others, like the Mormons, may have some exotic beliefs, but they're engaged in the actual practice of roasting ducks, and they're thriving.

In the passage I read earlier, the biologist Ursula Goodenough talks about the *warp* and *weft* of religion. She suggests that we humans have a deeply ingrained need for the weft—the rich colors, patterns and textures of religious practice which carry forward timeless values and enrich our lives. We need them in order to remain centered and hopeful as the winds of change whip around us. While those practices can be woven onto many different kinds of underlying warp, or belief systems, the most important and enduring values will always derive from a warp that reflects our best knowledge of existence and links most directly to the living practices that can sustain us.

In her book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Goodenough expands on this by saying that religion is about two fundamental human concerns—How Things Are, or the *cosmology* of existence; and Which Things Matter, or the *ethos* of existence. *Cosmology* concerns how the universe came to be, how *we* came to be, what happens after way we die, the origins of evil, etc. And the *Ethos*, or the moral understanding which springs from it, is codified in religious tenets like the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the Five Pillars of Islam, or the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. The great irony of the world’s religions is that while the specific *cosmologies* are wildly divergent and contradictory, the *ethos* are not. Instead of being in conflict, the *ethos* more often affirm and inform one another, because they’re derived from our common lived experience. The trouble is that we often can’t get past the differences in cosmology. We have no common religious warp.

But what if we did? What if we developed a global consensus, independent of culture or tradition, as to how things really are? For Goodenough, that’s the easy part. “How things are”, she says, “is, well, how things are: our scientific account of nature, an account that can be called The Epic of Evolution. The Big Bang, the formation of stars and planets, the origin and evolution of life on this planet, the advent of human consciousness and the resultant evolution of cultures—this is the story, *the one story*, that has the potential to unite us, because it happens to be true.”⁶

If you stop to think about it, this cosmology, which Goodenough calls Religious Naturalism, is inherently a belief in the creative potential of *change itself*. Moreover, as the most highly evolved part of creation, it casts *us* as the key change agents in the universe. And because this “warp” is true to reality, it will also accommodate much of the religious weft that has been derived from our millennia of lived experience together. We don’t have to lose the color and texture or enduring values, to gain the strength. We don’t have to deny our cultural inheritance. In fact we can revitalize it with new energy and purpose.

This is where Unitarian Universalism comes in. We’ve already embraced much of the weft of religious tradition. You can find Passover Seders, Christian vespers, Pagan circles and Buddhist Sanghas all happening in our congregations. These practices are out there, sort of free floating and un-tethered. But when it comes to a conversation about the *warp*, the belief systems, we can become passive-aggressive. We really want to be tolerant; but when we’re pushed we sometimes get so aggressive we want to throw out the whole carpet-- myth, poetry, language and all.

What if instead we embraced Religious Naturalism as our warp? What if we built upon it as a common foundation from which to promote the life-affirming values that we so passionately share? What if Religious Naturalism were our basis for weaving together all those threads of our religious inheritance into a beautiful, coherent tapestry for living?

On the cover of your order of service is a picture we took at Bryce Canyon National Park, not far from Salt Lake City. If you haven’t been there, Bryce is a breathtaking place in which the story of change is told in magnificent, intricate formations created over eons as wind and water have continuously reshaped the landscape. If you ever want to experience Religious Naturalism, this is the place. And there, perched way atop a barren rock outcropping, hundreds of feet above the floor of the canyon, is this one little tree. A truly improbable little tree; it stands as proof positive

⁶ Goodenough, xvi.

that life will adapt. From where it's rooted it has one mighty spectacular view, but out there all by itself it doesn't have much opportunity to create a different future.

You and I are like that tree in some ways. Our very existence here is utterly improbable. Our lives testify to the fact that, even in the face of unceasing change, trial and tribulation, we *do* adapt. And ours is a spectacular vantage point from which to marvel at the evolving wonder of creation.

But unlike the tree, we've been bestowed with extraordinary gifts. We are the eyes and ears and hands of the universe. And, as far as we know, we're also its mind-- the only part of the universe capable of reflecting back on itself. We are empowered with all we need to not only *survive* change, but to *create* it. And especially now, the universe depends on *us* to instigate the change that will make the future possible.

What can you and I do? Well, we can do the Mormon's one better. We can be a religious community that not only honors its inheritance, supports its members, and lives out its values, as theirs does. But we can also build a whole, integrated faith-- warp, weft and all-- that reflects how things *really* are, that affirms the *magnificence* of this existence, and that promotes our collective responsibility to be the agents of change. Grounded in reality, embracing change, celebrating our enormous human potential to make it better, we can be a hopeful example to the world. An example of belief we can change in.