

The words of the anthem, roughly rendered into English:
On three things the world depends.
on the Torah,
on service,
and on kindness.

These words aren't easy to translate.
They have deep meanings and resonances.
The Torah can refer to particular Jewish spiritual scripture:
the Bible and the Commentary,
or it can mean, more generally, wisdom and tradition.
You could even call it Truth.

On truth the world depends.

Avodah, service – this, too, can mean many things.
It can mean “work” – your job, what you do.

It often means that today,
but it has a resonance of agricultural work –
planting, tending, harvesting,
and, before that, the ritual acts of worship of the ancient religious cultus;
the word “work” in the Catholic sense, then, as ritual,
is a good approximation,
but service – service to God, service to others –
this is the sense in implied.

On service the world depends.

Kindness – Gemilut Chasadim –
is often rendered “loving kindness” –
when I first saw that, I thought,
that's a Buddhist word, that can't be right.
But no, loving kindness is right –
it is a kind of peaceful companionship –
visiting the sick, comforting those who mourn –
living in peace with others.

On kindness the world depends.

Judaism is not the only religion to posit this kind of three-fold schema
for right living:
something to do with truth and wisdom – the head, if you will.
something to do with service, with work and duty – the hands, if you will.
something to do with love, with kindness – the heart, if you will.

Theodore Parker, the Unitarian minister, abolitionist, transcendentalist,
said that we should have a religion for the whole person:
truth for the mind, love for the heart, and good works for the hands,
a religion which, like lightening in the clouds, shines brightest when elsewhere it is most dark.

We're talking today about the third of Stephen Prothero's questions
about each religious path.
Each path identified a problem in the world,

and a solution to that problem.

They each describe a technique to resolve the problem and move toward the solution, and they each name exemplars, those we can follow on the path.

I have argued in the last two weeks that modern Unitarian Universalism sees the problem as division –
the division between people based on sex, race, class, or creed,
the division within ourselves,
the division between faith and science,
the division between people and the earth,
the division between ourselves and divinity,
and so on.

Last week I argued that our solution is “unity in diversity” –
the bringing together of diverse humans, diverse parts of ourselves,
diverse sources of wisdom, into a symphony –
or a delicious soup –
where the individual and various ways of being
enhance and dance with each other,
where pluralism creates a stronger community,
and gives a better glimpse of the whole.

Today, then, the technique. The how.
If that’s our vision, how do we propose that we should live to achieve the vision?

First, let me say that I found Prothero’s use of the word “technique” to be interesting.
We often denigrate “technique” –
oh, let’s not get bogged down in the details, we say.
We say, if you are clear about the vision, every thing else will fall into place.
Socrates was famous for his critique of technique –
the ancient Greek word *techne* is the root of our modern technique,
and Socrates thought that *techne* was trouble.
Useless, dangerous even, he said;
you an master the technique to persuade people,
but if you don’t have a love of wisdom (literally, philosophy),
then your technique is just smoke and mirrors.

Technique sounds like it belongs in the appendix,
or like a footnote to the big soaring address.

Part of me agrees with Socrates –
being good at technique isn’t worth very much if you don’t have a firm grasp on the why – on the purpose and direction.

And I also know how easy it is to talk about vision,
and talk, and talk, and talk, and do nothing.
I know that it is about method, means,
where we often find the greatest debate –
we all agree we want everyone to be prosperous and happy and healthy,
but political parties and movements have pretty different ideas about how,
to say the least.

It is on the question of how that the early Unitarians first separated themselves
from other Christians –
while Catholics spoke of works and Protestants spoke of faith,
we said that we were saved by Character –
by living in a particular kind of way.
These Unitarians meant by character a kind of upright life –
a life of piety, and culture, of reason and science,

a life of compassion and service and civic good.

Thus, we have long considered ourselves an “ethical religion” – that we admit of many varieties of belief, and instead of focusing on creeds, we care more about how we live.

Salvation, said Francis David, must be accomplished here on earth.

We have concurred with the sentiment of Alice Walker:

“Love is not concerned with whom you pray . . .

Love is concerned that the beating of your heart should kill no one.”

So technique is important to us.

How we live is important to us: it is the proof of our religion.

We agree with the words of Jesus: there are good prophets and bad ones, and you will know them by their fruits.

That is why, whatever your or anyone else’s religious path, whether Evangelical Christianity, secular atheism, Yoruba, Zen Buddhism, the newest of the new cultus, or anything at all: if it helps you live a life of more justice, more peace, more compassion, and more dignity – then do that. Good for you. I approve.

Techne matters.

Vision comes first, the sense of why, the what for –

this comes first,

and we did put it first: a vision of diversity brought together in unity.

But tenche matters, how you live it matters.

So what’s our method?

Truth for the mind, love for the heart, good works for the hands.

Sounds good.

Wisdom, Work, and Loving Kindness?

I like it.

Our technique, our method, is about everyday life.

It isn’t about the rituals we do, or whatever propositions we hold to be true in our head, though those things can help us, sometimes.

It is about everyday life.

This very life.

It is about every moment and every decision.

How do we talk to that person we don’t know, or do know but disagree with?

What kinds of things do we teach our kids?

What choices do we make about what we eat or buy?

When evaluating a matter of public policy, what questions do we ask?

How do we face challenge and adversity?

Can we embrace joy and thanksgiving?

Can we be decent?

If we fail, can we try again?

Whether motivated, in the moment, by rage or joy, insight, respect, sorrow, or love, whatever the wellspring, we strive to be decent.

To be wise, to be of service, to be kind.

We could make a list of the essential virtues of the Unitarian Universalist life.

The pieces that go into something larger that is our method:

call it character, call it decentism, call it integrated living.

We've made that list many times in our faith, and the same words and ideas always come up:

follow your conscience; use your reason; heed the results of science

love one another and the earth; work for justice; show mercy

be honest; be curious; take risks; ask for and offer forgiveness.

Think of the five verses of our opening hymn this morning:

wake now my senses, wake now my reason, compassion, my conscience, my vision. Body, head, heart, hands.

It's a good list of virtues.

And they are our method, our technique:

we overcome the problem of division and move towards unity by living a unified life – an integrated life,

where our head, heart, and hands work together for the sake of our vision.

An integrated life.

Well, ok. But how do we get that?

This is where the homemade bread and the pie comes in.

We get there by living by heart.

We learn it by heart.

It's a process.

You don't get to check off a box that says "unity!"

and, voila, you have conquered division.

Don't work like that.

It's a process.

How long does it take?

Well, living the integrated life takes a whole lifetime.

Some people might experience that as bad news –

no easy fix, no quick solution.

But me, I'll tell you, I find it a great relief.

A huge relief.

This has been a tough week for me –

I've got a car falling apart and no money to fix it,

I went to a community meeting and got pissed off by a blowivating know-it-all,

I didn't quite keep to my resolution to not eat fast food,

and, well, it was just that kind of week.

Short-tempered, grumpy.

Ever have a week like that?

Oh, yes you do.

But life is a process, and it goes on, and we figure it out, a little at a time.

How do we learn to live an integrated life?

By heart.

We are en-cultured into a life of justice-making when we spend time with other justice-makers.

We are taught how to respect others by those who respect us.

We learn to be compassionate by watching others be compassionate.

We learn to give thanks when others give thanks for things that we both share.

We learn to use, critique, and strengthen our reason by being part of a learning community that values reason.

Life is a process. We overcome our perceptions of who we think we are in favor of who we can yet be.
We think we're a terrible monster,
we learn to be a wonderful friend.
And how?
By literally crossing the division between us –
by giving a hug, holding hands.
Life is a process.

We're not perfect, and we should be under no illusions:
we will never be perfect. The world we live in will never be perfect.
We won't ever have perfect "unity in diversity."
But you know what? We get better at it.
Racial discrimination used be not just legal but required by law.
It still happens, but it's against the law.
People change.
I've seen it with my own eyes:
folks go from hubris to humility,
from ignorance to wisdom,
from despair to hope.

We still fight wars in this world, but far less than we used as a species.

Life is finite and the world isn't perfect,
but there is joy, and love, and good company,
and we can try, every day, to integrate our head, our heart, our hands.

We learn our techne by heart.

We try each day, and then wake up and try again.
We place ourselves in communities where our values,
and the values we seek for our children, are affirmed.
We come to worship, we sing, we experience these values time and time again.
We place ourselves into small groups,
we make ourselves accountable to others, with whom we can tell the truth.
We make friends.
We ask questions, entertain doubts,
and we seek to hear, to follow, and to cultivate our conscience –
to make the voice of our tradition, the voice of our community, the voice of truth,
into our voice, our own guide.

How do we move away from division and toward unity?
Through every day life.
Through habit.
Through living by heart.

I've said before and I'll say again:
part of our method, part of how we learn to give an integrated life,
a life of character, is through participation in religious community.
Through worship – through singing – through conversation.
By being together.
Our goal is unity in diversity,
and that takes community –
young and old and middle-aged together, many races together,
many lives together,
making of their voices one song;
people willing to encounter, to love, to care, to listen.
Sometimes to disagree.
To restore our sense of purpose and possibility

to experience again, what it is to be alive.

Our lives are what we have,
and the living of them,
day in and day out,
in the everyday habits and choices we make,
in this living do we reveal and shape ourselves;
in this living do we build, moment by moment, day by day,
the world we seek as our goal.

So let us live well,
let us live with truth, with good works, and with heart.
Let us live with wisdom, with service, and with kindness.
And let us sing together.
Sing for our lives.

