

“Some Assembly Required”

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Some of you will remember this scene: it's Christmas Eve and the bicycle you bought for the kids is in the box. You notice for the first time the small lettering on the side of the box which warns: "Some assembly required". You open it to discover one million separate bicycle pieces (you didn't know a bike had a million pieces!) and an instruction sheet explaining how to put it all together.

Undeterred, you begin the process and three or four hours later, your creation sort of looks like a bike, albeit with mysteriously odd configurations. Plus, you have several pieces left over and several pieces missing. All the while, the words ring in your mind, "Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus, right down Santa Claus lane." And you are sad. On Christmas Eve. Or maybe it's Christmas morning by now. And maybe you remember you actually have *two* bicycles to put together, one for each of your kids.

Surely you know that I am proposing this scene as a metaphor—actually as an analogy—for how we put together our personal religious belief system. Actually, it's *one* way to put it together, and it turns out to be the Unitarian Universalist way. When you walk into the doors of this church, you immediately hear the message: as you put together your own theology, there is *some assembly required*.

Not all churches or religious organizations do it that way. When you walk into some places, someone in authority will greet you with a fully assembled theological package, all the pieces perfectly put together, bright and shiny and ready. There are no missing parts (to hear them tell it) and all the parts are connected in complete order. All you got to do is get on the bicycle and ride!

We know there are millions of people who want exactly that: a religion that is assembled so well that it answers all the questions we are asking. Questions about meaning, about truth, about the unknown, about God.

What those millions of searchers don't want is a religion which offers even more questions and very few answers. Which, of course, is what we do here. Our signature motto is, "the questions are the answers".

Researchers who study human behavior have discovered that searching for some kind of spirituality is a fundamental element of our wiring. We seem to long for that which is beyond ourselves, something which connects us somehow with the universe.

Because of that need, humans have created thousands of possible pathways, what we call religions. The religions have become entities of themselves which have established great power amid human affairs. Some say that power is greater than any other.

Now, we know that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We have certainly seen that aphorism manifested in the world of institutionalized religion.

Let us note that word absolute, for it is at the core of the situation. The religions which have camera-ready answers to everything are the very groups which insist that they are absolutely correct. It's called absolutism, and it claims that underneath all the messiness of humanity is fundamental, absolute truth. They are the holders of this truth and they guard it with great force, often to the denigration of humanity itself. Thus we have the great wars of all human history, wars that are almost always, in some way, about religion—or, we should say, about absolutes.

Religion, after all, takes many forms and sometimes it has nothing to do with God or theology or even morality. Sometimes it's about ideology, as in fascism, totalitarian communism or even capitalism, all of which manifest exactly the same kind of fervor and certainty of any religion on earth.

There are some other threads in history which counter absolutism. One is the idea of freedom. I am talking about the remarkable human ability to choose. In a political sense, it's about choosing how we want to be governed and this is manifest in the development of democracy as a form of government.

Believe it or not, there are also *religions* whose very existence rests on freedom of belief. Our Unitarian Universalist history is grounded in devotion to the right of choice. Three hundred years ago as we emerged onto the American religious scene, we were identified immediately with the theological notion of human freedom.

Our Protestant cousins, the Calvinists, believed that human history was pre-ordained, or predestined by God and that human beings were selected or "elected," as they said, from the beginning of time as the only ones to be saved. For the Calvinists, this idea was *absolutely* true.

On the other hand, we Unitarians and Universalists made the claim that human beings could choose and, in fact, were created to be "free moral agents." In this way, we said, human beings were created in God's own image, since God, we believed, is the source of all freedom.

Human freedom and its enormous implications became central to our theology, and, in fact, became associated with us. We were even called nasty names like "free-thinkers" along with others in the "free-will" movement in American religion.

I believe all of human history is, to varying degrees, a history of humanity's long and hard fight for the right to choose. As Hegel wrote: "The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom." The essential element of the concept of democracy is nothing other than the vigilant guarantee of the right of the people to choose.

And what an incredibly precious privilege this is. For me, it comes directly out of the recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. If you are worthy, you are able to decide things for yourself. And that's why it is a religious issue.

No longer is a "higher-up" needed to make decisions for you. No longer is the authority for your life and for your choices to be found outside of you, in some other person's pocket, or even in some mysterious force of the universe.

Like other aspects of Unitarian Universalism I have spoken of, this freedom issue has its frustrations. The primary one is that when I make choices and when I make decisions about my life and my actions, I must be prepared for the consequences which proceed directly out of them. We know, and we are assured, that for every action, there appears a reaction.

We also know that when we take on the privilege of choosing, we assume a profound *responsibility* for our acts. We often misunderstand or underestimate this, and we often regret our shortcomings. But the responsibility is also the gift which comes from our act, for it allows for change, for growth, for a new moment of life.

Life itself, as we have always known, is simply the ongoing process of change, from one moment to the next, from one picture, from one circumstance, from one life to the next. And all along the way, we believe that human beings are free to make choices.

This is truly a religious realm. Freedom. Responsibility. Change. New life. What else can there be?

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We must remember why we wanted to assemble that bicycle in the first place. We wanted to give a gift of joy to our child, the gift of freedom, really. It is a gift which allows for and even encourages the child to get on it and ride out into the world. It represents one of the first examples of freedom a child experiences, and that brings joy to the child and, perhaps just as importantly, to the giver of the gift.

The metaphor holds for us as we seek to find meaning and truth in our lives, for in the end, it's about the joy of freedom.

So, I would offer another metaphor beyond the bicycle as something to be assembled. One of the neatest gifts I ever received at Christmas was a set of Tinkertoys and a set of Lincoln Logs. (Nowadays, we give the kids Legos.) The underlying principle of these kinds of toys is not the thing you end up with, the Ferris wheel or the windmill or whatever, but the *joy of the assembling* itself.

I remember spending countless hours putting together my great projects with Tinkertoys. I would assemble a certain part of it, and then realized it could be better by doing it a different way, so I took it apart and started over and on and on it went: the creation of my Tinkertoy world.

So it is with our liberal religion. In this church, you are given some interesting parts and pieces and are challenged to put it all together. And, the most delightful part of the process is the community which accompanies you, works with you, gives advice and takes advice, all the while caring about each other.

And as we construct this magnificent creation, which is the theology of our personal lives, we remember Dr. Rebecca Parker's advice: "Choose to bless the world".

Your gifts, she says, whatever you discover them to be, can be used to bless or curse the world. The gift of your mind's power; the gift of the strength of the hands; even the reaches of the heart. You can bless the world with your gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting, and any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, do the work of justice, or offer love.

Choose to bless the world! And that Yes will draw you into community. Here where we share the endeavor as we pass our heritage on. Where we struggle, yet with companions in whom we believe and trust.

None of us alone can do it. Alone we cannot save the world. But *together*—that is another possibility waiting.

To these words of wisdom I say, *May They Be So!*