

## Cross Cringe: Healing Religious Wounds

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We're going to start today's sermon with an opportunity for audience participation. I want to gather some data, and you all have the answers. Here's what I want to know:

- How many of you are life-long Unitarian Universalists? In other words, you come from a family that was UU and you attended a UU church as a child?

That's about \_\_\_\_ people here today.

- How many of you started in another religious tradition as a child or young person?

That looks to be about \_\_\_\_ percent of those of us here today.

- Lastly, how many of you would describe yourself as not starting from any particular religious background to speak of or at all?

And, that makes up about \_\_\_\_\_ of the group.

I imagine that if we took that survey in any UU congregation today, we'd see roughly the same percentages.

There are all kinds of people in life, and a sampling of all of those kinds ends up in UU congregations. Some of us found Unitarian Universalism because we were running toward our own vision of what it means to search for truth and meaning, and Unitarian Universalism represents to us the best way to pursue that journey. Others of us found our way into this faith community because we were running away from a set of beliefs, practices, or theological perspectives that no longer were a healthy or comfortable fit for us, emotionally, mentally, physically, or spiritually.

While both of those journeys can bring us here, they represent two very different points of view about "religion" – and I'm using that term – religion – in the sense of the consideration of the meaning of life, our consideration of the questions that for us have ultimate meaning and inform our understanding of what life is all about.

Unitarian Universalism, in its modern manifestation, is a denomination made up of people from a wide variety of beliefs and positions on the issue of "religion." There are even those who would say that UU isn't a "religion" at all, per se. Throw in words like "faith" or "belief" and we could be here all day discussing, and perhaps even arguing, about whether Unitarian Universalism is, in fact, a religion.

But that's not the issue I want us to focus on today. Rather, I want us to consider how we arrive at Unitarian Universalism as our religious home, and what it is we do with ourselves once we get here.

Unitarian Universalism is, theologically, a "big tent" – and we proudly open our doors to people who describe themselves as religious and those who want nothing to do with the term. Among us we include pagans, atheists, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and former-whatevers. It is a treasure to be a place where so many, of so many different persuasions

and beliefs, can find community, support, encouragement, and welcome. The joy of our diversity is the opportunity to learn from and experience so many points of view.

And, it is a challenge to sustain a community that tries to be that open, that embracing, that diverse, when we live in a world that tries to reduce, specialize, limit, and constrict. Unfortunately, it is often true in our UU congregations that those who enjoy a love of their Christian heritage and embrace of Christian values feel that they should not speak up. That concerns me. While I don't personally identify as a Christian, I value many of the teachings of the Christian tradition. I don't want to shut out that part of my religious heritage, nor eliminate it as a source of inspiration and connection with the sacred in my life.

The "cross cringe" in today's sermon title refers to the reaction that some of those who come into UU bring with them about Christianity, about either Catholic or Protestant churches. While our Unitarian Universalist sources remind us that we draw inspiration from our history in the teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, there are those who would be more comfortable if we focused on only FIVE sources and became the "ABC" church – Anything BUT Christ.

In relationship to this phenomena of "cross cringe" the Rev. Kit Ketchum says that one of the challenges in our UU congregations is "the attitude of some UUs that their early Christian upbringing or the shenanigans of the religious right, entitle them to look down their noses at "those people," people who revere the teachings of the church and Jesus, and actually try to practice them in their lives."

It is particularly challenging when some of us feel that aspects of our early experience in churches were so painful that we no longer are open to any of the possible positives of that experience, but have pushed it aside and want to avoid contact with it now. Since most of us are products of Western culture, the majority of us who have moved away from our earlier religious community have usually rejected the teachings of Christianity. However, the experience of leaving one's childhood faith community happens in other traditions, as well.

I know that for some people, the hurts of those early experiences are very real, and I am most definitely not discounting that experience. There are so many examples of unconscionable things done in the name of religion, of every persuasion, and that is unfortunately also true even within our own denomination's history. And I know that it can be genuinely mystifying to ponder the seeming loyalty of Christians, in particular, to a belief system that seems based on the supernatural and non-rational. We who so value our freedom of inquiry and independence of belief can be baffled by what we see as rigid dogmas and limiting creeds. My goal in talking about this today isn't to convince you to move to "cross cling," but rather to consider a life that is "cross compatible."

So, how do we develop spiritually over a lifetime? How is it that we can find a set of beliefs and practices satisfying and meaningful at one point in our life, but not find it a good fit for us at another? If you look at the literature, there are several models of spiritual development, but I find the model articulated by psychiatrist M. Scott Peck to be

accessible, so I'd like to share it with you today. There's an excellent discussion of Peck's model in this book by David Schmelzer, titled "Not the Religious Type."

Schmelzer talks about Peck's model of spiritual development and offers the observation that spiritual development is similar to maturational growth, and happens in stages. I prefer to think of them as potential stopping places along the life journey. As we move through our life, we have the opportunity to stop at any of these "stations" or stages of spiritual development, or move on to others.

The first stage he correlates to toddlerhood, where the person is primarily focused on themselves. Toddlers are in need of good boundaries and clear behavioral parameters to deal with a life that can feel chaotic.

The second stage in this model correlates to the development of children that happens around age seven or so and might be called "rules-based." The importance of boundaries is still there, along with a set of rules. In Peck's understanding, he says that most churches are focused at stage two – they exist to tell people the rules and to set the boundaries of life.

Understand that Peck is not saying this in judgement and he acknowledges that the religious experiences of people in this stage are real and sincere. These are good people who get things done and raise strong families. He acknowledges that the heart and soul of America and most countries are right here in this stage of spiritual development.

The challenge is how this stage interacts with the next stage – the third stage of spiritual development in Peck's model. This he correlates to the teen years, and is characterized by rebellion – the need to question the rules learned in stage 2. In this stage, we want to know what's behind those rules and why they are so important. Author Schmelzer says that universities are a great support to stage 3 – a place to learn and explore and question.

The important consideration for Peck in this model is the interaction between the stages. Schmelzer explains it this way: "Stage 2 is an important, but often embattled stage. On the one hand, in stage 2 religious communities, there's the assumption that anyone outside of the community is stage 1, a lawbreaker who needs to find God and keep the rules of life. Stage 3 is especially threatening to stage 2, because stage 3 folks are seen as unique kinds of lawbreakers – they're liberal religious libertines! Stage 3 folks sometimes look at stage 2 with contempt for how they could be so ignorant." It seems you can look "downstream" in this model and see the stations you've passed, but it's almost impossible to look "upstream" and appreciate the spiritual possibilities outside of your understanding.

Our Unitarian Universalist values call on us to honor the worth and dignity of every person, regardless of their personal qualities, including the stage at which they are spiritually developed. We could get caught up in the dynamic cycle of stage 2's insistence on rules and stage 3's rebellion, but there is an alternative. There is a fourth

station in Peck's model of spiritual development. We could open ourselves to the possibility of moving to the next stage.

Stage 4 is called the "mystical" stage, where one realizes that much of what one learned as spiritual truths in stage 2 may actually be true, but in a much richer, deeper, and more mysterious sense that one could have, or would have imagined. Stage 4 is about questions – stage 2 is about answers. In this way of thinking, according to Schmelzer, stage 2 looks at truth from the outside, as if it were a book that can and must be mastered. Stage 4 looks at truth from right in the middle of it, as if truth is everywhere and takes a lifetime to explore. Stage 4 is about life transformation. It is moving into this next level of spiritual development that we have the opportunity to heal our religious wounds, to claim a new vision of faith.

What moves us between these stages and facilitates our spiritual development? Remember, Peck thinks we can stay at any of the stages along the way. While some change may inevitably occur as we mature and grow as people, probably the most important factor in creating an ability to move into the next stage of spiritual development is our own willingness to consider allowing changes in our viewpoint. We open ourselves to this occurring when we engage in interaction with and consideration of other points of view, other people, other ideas, and other traditions. Being open to being transformed by sharing with others our stories and experiences, thoughts and learning is a profoundly moving and potentially life-changing opportunity. Creating that opportunity is one of the reasons we choose to affiliate in faith communities in addition to pursuing our spiritual practice on our own.

We facilitate our own possibility for change when we gather information by engaging in reading and study. This, too, is a pursuit we can engage in on our own, but it's a richer experience when we do it with others. In the fall we will be presenting the UU curriculum "Building Your Own Theology." This is a program designed to offer the opportunity to explore and articulate your personal theological views, drawing from knowledge and experience in all of the Six Sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. I urge you to consider participating as a way to continue your own search.

An aspect of this curriculum is another important factor in continuing to develop spiritually, and that is using our abilities to question and listen in order to consider what we learn through the filter of our doubts and the use of our powers of reason. Nothing about being a Unitarian Universalist asks us to check our mind at the door. We are not encouraged to be irrational or unthinking in this faith, but rather to treasure our doubts, explore them fully, and trust our right of conscience and reason to show us the truth and meaning we seek.

One of the joys of being a minister is the privilege of being invited into people's lives, to share with them the joys and sorrows of journey and to walk with them along the path between birth and death. One of the joys of being a Unitarian Universalist minister is being able to offer people a new vision of salvation, especially those who find themselves questioning their experience of more fundamentalist or dogmatic traditions.

Not sure you consider Unitarian Universalism a “salvific” faith? Yet, I bet there are those among us today, maybe even you, who would say that finding UU “saved your life.” I know people for whom that is quite literally true; for example, folks who are gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer who feel condemned by conservative theological interpretations of the Bible, or those who are liberated from fear, guilt, or shame when they find our faith community that shares a message of universal acceptance and love. I have counseled people caught in fear and confusion because they find themselves no longer able to believe the “truths” of their stage 2 faith community, and they are scared that if they give up that, there’s nothing else out there for them spiritually. Their despair is heart-breaking. UU offers them something else.

That is why it’s important for us to continue to pursue our own spiritual growth and development, so that we offer a welcoming presence to those who seek us out and need the kind of embracing, affirming faith community we can offer. We need to heal our own religious hurts not only to save our own life, but to allow us to be there for others who would like to find a place where their life can be saved, too. A place where all of our diversity, including our theology, is welcome.

May it be so.