

## Hymnal Theology 4: *We Laugh, We Cry*

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Today is the fourth installment of our series on hymnal theology. I recently came across a humorous piece that suggested hymns appropriate to particular professions or occupations. Here are a few of them:

- For dentists: *Crown Him with Many Crowns*
- For weathermen: *There Shall Be Showers of Blessings*
- For building contractors: *The Church's One Foundation*
- For tailors: *Holy, Holy, Holy*
- For optometrists: *Open My Eyes that I Might See*
- For politicians: *Standing on the Promises*

Well, I would add to that list one that seems to me very appropriate for . . . human beings: *We Laugh, We Cry, We Live, We Die*. And in fact, that is the hymn that we are paying special attention to this morning.

Shelley Jackson Denham, another Unitarian Universalist treasure, wrote the words and music to this song, as well as a number of others in our hymnal, including *Dark of Winter* and *Blessed Spirit of My Life*, which we sing occasionally. If you look at the bottom right corner of the first page of *We Laugh, We Cry*, you find that the title of the tune is “Credo”, which I think may have been the song’s original title. A credo is, of course, a statement of belief. Thus the inclusion of readings earlier in the service on the topic of beliefs.

The very first sermon I ever preached from this pulpit was called “Deeds, Not Creeds,” and made the point that it’s not our beliefs that really matter, but rather our actions. Some describe Unitarian Universalism as a religious movement with an emphasis not on “orthodoxy” (right belief), but rather on “orthopraxis” (right practice or action). We look not so much at how our beliefs line up with those prescribed by some religious authority, as at how our behavior – our actions – affect ourselves, those around us, and the world.

So what role, if any, do our beliefs play? Well, first of all, if our deeds are what’s important, what distinguishes good deeds from bad? By what criteria do we determine our actions? There must be some kind of belief structure, or world view, to provide those criteria. Our beliefs, our attitudes, and our values help to shape our behavior, and provide a basis for evaluating the appropriateness of that behavior. One of the points I’m trying to make this morning is that the beliefs that matter are those that have a direct link to how we are in the world. That help to give shape and meaning to our lives, and that guide us in experiencing and affecting the world in a positive way. I mentioned a moment ago the idea of underlying values as criteria for our actions in the world. Well, I think those underlying values also provide useful criteria for evaluating particular beliefs. That is, our core values provide a set of what I would call meta-beliefs, which provide the underpinnings of more explicit, specific beliefs.

This is what Sophia Fahs was talking about in the reading I shared as our opening words this morning. That is, we value expansiveness over exclusiveness; light and warmth over shadows and fear; appreciation of diversity over divisiveness; pliability over rigidity. It is these qualities, that characterize some beliefs but not others, that make it matter what we believe. And I consider that last one perhaps the most important. That is, I am partial to beliefs that “are

pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life,” as opposed to those that “are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.” That is, I seek to embrace that which will enhance and promote my continuing spiritual growth and understanding, not inhibit and stifle them. In an essay called “What I Believe,” Emma Goldman wrote, “‘What I believe’ is a process rather than a finality. Finalities are for gods and governments, not for the human intellect.”

Another way this idea is often expressed in Unitarian Universalist circles is in the notion that “revelation is not sealed.” The truth was not engraved in stone once and for all two thousand years ago, or two hundred years ago or two years ago. What I accept today as Truth is subject to revision when warranted by new facts or new experiences. This particular “meta-belief” has serious implications for how I hold my current beliefs, whatever they are. That is, I must hold those beliefs with humility as opposed to certainty, acknowledging my human limitations and the fact that I might be wrong, or at best incomplete. My beliefs must be held up to continual scrutiny, and I must stand ready to adapt when that is what experience requires.

In that context, I’d like to say a little bit about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, as adopted by a General Assembly nearly twenty-five years ago. I embrace those principles, and I think they have held up well so far. Part of what I admire about them is their broad scope – from the inherent worth and dignity of each individual person, all the way to the interdependent web of all existence. Also, part of what makes them work within a community of diverse theological perspectives is that they are an expression of common core values, and not of specific theological assertions. They are also open-ended enough to encourage interpretation through reflection and discussion. I like to think of the seven principles not as a final statement of beliefs, but rather as the start of a conversation.

So what do I believe in? For starters, there are three things from my Christian heritage that I still believe in. In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Yes, I believe in faith, hope, and love.

When I say faith, however, I don’t mean blindly believing doctrines in the absence of evidence, simply because some religious authority says I should. I mean something more basic, more fundamental, something of universal human concern. In his book on faith development, “Stages of Faith,” James Fowler encourages this broader understanding of what faith is. He writes:

Faith is a person’s or group’s way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person’s way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. . .

Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions.

So faith, understood in this way, is more like a general world view than a collection of particular beliefs. As such, we all have it, in some form or other. And just as an unexamined life is not worth living, so is an unexamined faith not worth holding. Fowler, in fact, suggests some questions which can help the process of examination:

- What are you spending and being spent for? What commands and receives your best time, your best energy?
- What causes, dreams, goals, or institutions are you pouring out your life for?
- To what or whom are you committed in life?
- What are the most sacred hopes, the most compelling goals and purposes in your life?

Respond to these and similar questions, and you will be articulating your own personal faith. Some of the elements of my faith are as follows: Faith that the Universe is a reliable and orderly place. Faith that meaning can be found or made. Faith that what I do matters. Faith that hope is an appropriate attitude toward life.

That brings me to hope. “I Know This Rose Will Open” is one of my favorite songs in our hymnal. [“I know this rose will open. I know my fears will burn away. I know my soul will unfurl its wings. I know this rose will open.”] The image of the rose reliably reopening each spring captures for me the hope inherent in the regeneration, the re-emergence of life out of a state of dormancy or stagnation. And that helps me hang on to my own hope of further unfurling my wings as I continue to grow, seeking to move beyond any temporary fear and despair, to a reaffirmation of the beauty and wonder and value that is possible in this life.

That brings me to love, the greatest of these. I believe in the power of love. Love is powerful. But the kind of love that is powerful is not simply a static state of mind or being. As with all the beliefs I embrace, there must be a direct connection to life, to action. There’s a story told about an old married couple who lived on a farm in the midwest. The wife was starved for affection. Her husband never gave her any signs of love, and her need to be appreciated went unfulfilled. At her wit’s end, she finally blurted out, “Why don’t you ever tell me that you love me?” He stoically responded, “When we got married I told you that I loved you, and if I ever change my mind I’ll let you know.”

Love must live within our hearts. But if it’s locked there and not expressed through words and deeds, what good is it? Love must be lived and shared. And that brings me to the final belief I wish to share with you this morning. That is the central importance of relationship in giving life meaning. Our own definition and understanding of who we are have little meaning outside the context of human relationship. To be totally isolated is to miss nearly all of the wondrous possibilities inherent in life. Life is too big an undertaking to just keep to ourselves. We’re all in this together, and we can help each other make it through.

It is only through collective action that we can hope to have a positive impact on the world. It is only when we join our hearts and our hands that we can begin to give life the shape of justice. May we nurture the love within us and put it to work in the world.

So what about our hymn of the week, *We Laugh, We Cry*? There’s a lot in this song, and at its core is the sort of belief that I’ve been talking about this morning, and that Sophia Fahs talked about in her writings. Right in the middle of every verse is that key assertion of belief: “We believe in life, and in the strength of love.” That is the heart of the matter.

The life we believe in is not life as an abstract concept, but life in its fullness and complexity. The beginning of each verse enumerates some of the myriad aspects of life that we acknowledge and celebrate. There is laughter and crying. There is living and dying. There is a need for belonging, for freedom, for solitude, and most of all, for close friends - relationship.

There is the miraculous birth of new children, and the reminder of the spirit of childhood as we watch them grow and unfold into their own human potential. And then there is the acknowledgment that life is altogether too brief. When one among us dies – and of course we all

must die – we must bear the pain and grief. But those are eased by the lingering memories shared by those of us left behind.

Another aspect of life we must deal with are the endless questions, many of whose answers elude us. How to put an end to human strife? How to foster truth, equality, and peace of mind?

Another central message of the song is the importance of being together, in loving, supportive community. That fourth verse, after speaking of our search for those elusive answers, says, “And then, we come together here, to make sense of what we find.” We’re in it together, and comparing notes occasionally can be very helpful. The last lines of each verse enumerate aspects of that togetherness, and some of the answers it provides that we can believe in.

We find a need to be together, and in being together, giving to and receiving from each other, we come to believe that sharing is an answer. We find time to be together, to grow together, and in so doing we believe that growing is an answer. We have found this place to be together, a place of caring and peace, giving us the gift of believing that peace within our living is an answer. And finally, we have found joy in being together. And in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that not every question of life has a neat, satisfying answer, we finally come to understand, together, that even to question, truly is an answer.

What I would like to ask of each of you this morning is to spend some time – as we sing the final two verses of this hymn, and through the coming hours, days, and weeks – spend some time reflecting on, and examining, your own faith and beliefs – your deepest convictions. And as you reflect on those beliefs and convictions that you hold most dear, I invite you to share some of the fruits of those reflections. Over the coming months, there will be opportunities within the Sunday morning service for individuals to speak for three to five minutes on the topic: “This I Believe.” If you’re interested, please speak to me. Emily Reddy, a member of our congregation who couldn’t be here this morning, coordinates the “This I Believe” segments that are aired locally on WPSU radio, and she will be interested in hearing what you have to say as well. Your sharings here have the potential of reaching a much wider audience.

Here are some brief guidelines for putting together a statement to share:

- Tell a story, being specific, grounding your belief in the events of your life.
- Focus on one core belief; this doesn’t have to be an all-encompassing credo.
- Be positive. Say what you do believe, not what you don’t believe.
- Be personal; make your statement about you. Share something of yourself.

In this process, may each of our sharings be part of our collective answer.

So may it be.