

Cultural Sharing or Reckless Borrowing?

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In my welcoming words this morning I listed those sources from which our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism explicitly draws. Among those sources are other religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, earth-centered traditions, and the world's religions in general. The document that lists those sources goes on to state: "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision."

In fact, I have always felt that it is one of the strengths of our tradition that it does recognize and draw on the wisdom of other religions and cultures in trying to develop a comprehensive understanding of and approach to religious life. But this morning I would like to reflect on the question of what it means to draw from the wisdom of another tradition, and whether that sometimes crosses the line to reckless borrowing when we appropriate rituals, artifacts, and other elements of the spiritual traditions of other religions.

This has been an ongoing issue and source of struggle for Unitarian Universalists. There is an inherent tension between our drawing from other traditions on the one hand, and our commitment to principles of justice, equity, and the inherent dignity of every person on the other. As Jacqui James, who has worked on Anti-Oppression programs for the Unitarian Universalist Association, puts it: "we must look at how the integration of rituals, symbols, and ideas of other traditions may be affecting those whose traditions are being 'borrowed'." She then quotes an unknown author who writes: "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we find ourselves treading on another's dream."

As with any complex issue, there are many different positions that various people have staked out on the matter of cultural appropriation. At one extreme are those who feel that we need to be extremely sensitive and respectful of other traditions, and that it is better to err on the side of avoiding rather than including elements of other religious traditions.

At the other extreme are those who point out that religions and cultures have always borrowed from each other, and assert that there is really no such thing as "misappropriation." For them, the idea that any religion or culture might claim ownership of this or that expression of the universal or divine makes no sense.

And then, of course, there are the rest of us who try and figure out the most appropriate place to come down along the continuum between the extremes. For us – or at least for me – it is important to be able to draw on the wisdom, and sometimes even the practice, of other traditions, while at the same time being respectful of those who authentically embrace and practice those traditions.

I'll mention right now that there will be a time immediately after the sermon for Congregational Response. I'll look forward then to hearing your thoughts on this difficult topic.

For me, the primary consideration in deciding whether an instance of borrowing is appropriate is whether it is done respectfully, and not mockingly or superficially. And

since one of my motivations for borrowing is to enhance understanding, another important element is the inclusion of as much context as possible. When I include chants or songs in Hebrew, or Arabic, or even Latin, I feel obligated to translate the words into English, because the meaning being expressed is an important part of the song. To simply pass over it is to be overly superficial.

Before I move on to consider some specific cases of borrowing from other traditions, I want to mention one other kind of situation that I consider clearly over the line of appropriateness. That is exploitation of another tradition for one's own benefit. That would include European-Americans who take on Native-American names and peddle Native-American spirituality through vision quests or sweat lodges or other borrowed or made up rituals, with no relationship or accountability to authentic Native-American practitioners. Some may write them off as harmless pretenders catering to other wannabes, but I agree with the many Native Americans who consider this inappropriate cultural exploitation. For those genuinely interested in and curious about Native American traditions, I recommend going to the source by taking advantage of events like the Annual American Indian Powwow that's going on at Mt. Nittany Middle School this weekend. Not only is it authentic, it's also free and open to the public.

One way that I draw on other traditions in the context of our weekly worship services is by using readings from those traditions. I have drawn from Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Taoist, and Christian writings among others. Sometimes, as in my sermon series on World Religions, I do so as a way of educating about a tradition by going straight to its own sources. Other times I do so simply because the writings express ideas that I consider of value.

I would hesitate to use rituals or ceremonies drawn directly from another tradition, because I would not feel authentically equipped to do so. But ideas, I agree, cannot be claimed by any particular tradition. Once an idea has been loosed on the world, it's fair game for consideration by anyone. The middle ground is when I ask you to participate in songs or chants from another tradition, as I mentioned earlier. And then, the key is to try and put it into context, and to understand that we are using those cultural elements as outsiders exploring the tradition, trying to understand it more deeply. We need to be aware, and remember, that reciting a Hindu chant does not make us Hindus, and almost certainly does not carry the same meaning or produce the same experience as it would for a Hindu.

Another example of borrowing is our annual Freedom Seder, which we celebrated the night before last. Why would a non-Jewish congregation adapt and celebrate this traditional Jewish observance? For one thing, Unitarian Universalism recognizes Jewish teachings as one of the sources of our tradition. Also, several members of our congregation have both past and present ties with their own Jewish heritage. Furthermore, the celebration of freedom and the struggle against oppression cuts across all national, cultural, and religious boundaries. The values embraced in the Seder celebration are an integral part of our own religious tradition. Every culture and country has known cruel oppression of its people. And so we challenge ourselves to make our own ancestral links to times of oppression and the struggle for survival. For me, the appropriateness of our celebration of the Seder is in direct proportion to the extent to which we experience it as an authentic expression of our own deeply-held values, and not

as imitating someone else's. For me it becomes a way of expressing solidarity with others, and not exploiting them.

Speaking of Seders, the Christian communion service is, in fact, a borrowed and transformed Seder. But the idea of serving communion in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is often more controversial than having a Seder. Perhaps because, for many of us, it's a little closer to home in the sense of belonging to a tradition that we have intentionally left behind. But the real question is, if we are to celebrate communion, how do we do it in a way that is both meaningful for us, and respectful of the tradition from which it comes? Communion services using non-traditional food and drink are sometimes more palatable to those sensitive about explicit Christian ritual. But others consider it a form of disrespect of the original tradition, or of making light of the whole tradition, trivializing it.

Unitarian Universalist minister and author, Robert Fulghum, in his book, *From Beginning to End*, tells of his struggle with this issue, and his congregation's attempts to reclaim the ritual of communion. Communion, at its core, is an act of community in spiritual fellowship. That's what Fulghum wanted to create. But because many Unitarian Universalists are uncomfortable with the doctrine of transubstantiation (bread becoming flesh, and wine becoming blood), he looked for some different form for his communion. The first thing he tried was tangerines. Tangerines were passed around. Some members of the congregation were to peel the tangerines, others to break them up and distribute the pieces, and yet others to clean up the peelings and seeds. People fed each other sections of tangerine. This was fun and had some good symbolism, but it didn't catch on.

Other times, they tried Gummi Bears, jelly beans, and M&Ms. But nothing seemed to work. Fulghum observes that it's really a mystery, what catches on and what doesn't. But, he notes that all these attempts produced laughter – in his words, *holy* laughter. He writes:

That shared laughter – mixed with shared purpose and longing – *that* was the act of community. We had communion, after all. We were looking for something important together, and in the search we found the spirit of companionship.

Some people may find this whimsical approach disrespectful, and consider those *faux* communions a mockery of the real thing. But others may take the position that what really matters is that this congregation experienced something that they found to be meaningful, and perhaps even profound.

Before I close, I want to return to Jacqui James, whom I quoted earlier. In her article, "Reckless Borrowing or Appropriate Cultural Sharing?" (from which I shamelessly borrowed for my sermon title) she poses a number of questions that "borrowers" should ask themselves. I offer them for your consideration:

- How much do I know about this particular tradition? How do I respect it and not misrepresent it?
- What do I know of the history and experience of the people from whom I am borrowing?

- Is this borrowing distorting, watering down, or misinterpreting the tradition?
- Is the meaning changed?
- Is this overgeneralizing this culture or taking pieces of it out of context?
- What is the motivation for cultural borrowing? What is being sought and why?
- How do the “owners” of the tradition feel about pieces of the tradition being borrowed?
- If artifacts and/or rituals are being sold, where does the money go?
- How can we acknowledge rather than exploit the contributions of all people?

Those are some good questions to keep in mind. My feeling is that religious expression is all about metaphor, because we're dealing with truths and wisdom that are beyond access by direct language. If borrowing metaphors – or even elements of symbolic ritual – from another tradition can help us to experience and explore religious wisdom or truth more deeply, then I think that is appropriate borrowing. Even if our experience or our understanding is not precisely the same as that of practitioners of the original tradition. We should feel free to embrace anything that can help us approach more nearly the universal or the transcendent. If that is done in the spirit of sincere religious exploration, then I think we can avoid the pitfalls of disrespect and exploitation.

So may it be.