

Sources of Pride: A Queer Appreciation of the Six UU Sources

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This year, for the first time in a long time, I was in New York City on Pride weekend. I'd planned to attend the parade though I wound up spending the day with my mother instead. But, having missed the parade, I was curious: what organizations and floats and fabulous drag queens would I have seen had I gone? Once home I went to the Pride website, which had a list of participants. And as I was scrolling around the website, I was amazed at how many religious organizations there were. Mormons participated, as did Jews, Orthodox Christians, liberal Protestants, Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians, Mennonites, mainline Christians, evangelicals, Quakers, even Seventh-Day Adventists. I could not help but be moved by this religious blessing of Pride.

But there's something else I'm almost sure I would have seen had I marched in the parade itself: protestors. With large signs filled with violent homophobic language cursing us as sinners and abominations and hell-bound and evil.

There's no denying religion's power to heal or to harm, to help or to hinder, to bless or to curse. Today I would like us to think together about how a particular aspect of our liberal religion serves as a blessing to us, namely our six sources. Because it's Pride weekend in Colorado Springs, I'll focus on the sources as a blessing to LGBTQ Unitarian Universalists and to those straight UUs who love and support us.

First, though, I should say something about what I mean by the word "blessing" in this context. It's often used in ways that imply the existence of God but I don't think that's necessary. A blessing can be understood as a gift, something that we receive from someone or somewhere else that benefits us. A kind word on a hard day is a blessing. Music that fills us with gratitude and awe is a blessing. A conversation that plants an idea that in turn sparks our creativity is a blessing. And just as others bless us, so too can we bless them with kindness, compassion, friendship or in sharing our particular talents. In this way, the six UU sources have gifts for us, both generally as UUs and perhaps particularly as queer or queer-friendly UUs. Let's see what we can find.

The first source is direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. We might call this the spirit of life, God, the holy, the power of love, or any of a hundred other names. There are only three things we know for sure about this phenomenon: first, it's something other than our ego, second, we've experienced it directly and no one can ever take away our experience of it, and third, it is available to anyone willing to lay down their ego for even a few minutes.

These realities about the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder are a great blessing for queer folks and our allies because they each speak to and heal something damaging about homophobia, especially religious homophobia. Take the first reality, that transcendent mystery and wonder is not my ego. I can't speak for anyone else but my ego has taken many

years of bruising from antigay religion and it is not always trustworthy regarding my value and worth. It kind of undervalues me, truth be told. In contrast, the spirit of life and love, which goes beyond my ego, has nothing but love and acceptance to offer me, along with encouragement for my healing and growth. It invites me to return to the home of my soul, to who and what I am, to where I am born and reborn, to where faith, hope and love abide, blessing me and supporting my striving for wholeness.

How do I know this? Because, and here's the second reality, I have experienced it. I have found it in liberal religious community and in music and in the support of those who care for me and in a quiet sense that there is something deeper than my brokenness, available to me whenever I need it. As the postlude says, the truth in our hearts is our guide. And that is all I need to remember when the tapes start playing, when an old memory or a new moment of spiritual violence threatens to dislodge my love of self and others.

So far, I've just been talking about myself. But the spirit of life and love is absolutely, unquenchably, utterly available to everyone. Regardless of our past. Regardless of our values. Regardless of anything anyone else might think about us. Here's the third reality: that spirit is for all of us, and for those of us who have faced devaluation for who we love or our gender identity the presence of that spirit is a great gift of love. The first source reminds those of us who are queer and you our allies that all those harmful church or synagogue teachings, all those experiences of being judged and shunned, all that fear of a God who made us to be defective for some reason and now loathes us – all of that is dust before the capacity for love and acceptance that is available to us if we turn to it.

The second source is words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. In some ways this may be the easiest source to see as a blessing for LGBTQ people and our supporters, since it speaks directly to homophobia and heterosexism as powers and structures of evil, and it invites all of us who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people to confront homophobia and heterosexism with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. It is easy enough to find prophets in the past, whether the distant biblical past or the past hundred and fifty years of life in this country. It is harder for us to become the next generation of prophets, but this is the challenge before us.

We work for justice, for LGBTQ people and for so many other devalued, targeted people, seeking that bright new day when neither love nor any other difference between us will divide us. We develop and offer compassion to people mistreated for generations, learning to take up their struggles as the pain in their hearts becomes ours. We also develop compassion for those whose privilege and power keeps inequality going on a day-to-day basis, since we know that inequality eventually diminishes all people. And this work is fueled by love, love that transforms our hearts and souls and minds and hands so that we can transform society. When we take up the work of the second source, we bless both ourselves and others; in fact, we bless the whole world.

The third source is wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life. Here, while I could speak of some gifts I've gotten from Hinduism and Islam I'll honor our time limitations and stick with the world religion that has most deeply influenced my life, which is Buddhism. If you were here last week, you heard Julia Mesnikoff's wonderful

message about the power of Buddhist self-affirmation through loving-kindness practices. I've had a loving-kindness practice on and off through my adult life. Wishing ourselves and others loving-kindness, wellness, peace and ease, and wholeness is a powerful blessing. Blessing myself is a strong response to the curses of others, those protesters at pride parades and those politicians who really want me to have fewer rights than many of you and those who attack face-to-face with words and weapons. Blessing those who love me is a step toward building beloved community and a work of gratitude for my allies. Blessing those I do not know and never will is a powerful affirmation that, unlike the messages sent by the homophobes, I have spiritual gifts to offer the world, as do all other people regardless of what devalued identities they might bear. And blessing those who wish me ill is perhaps the most meaningful of all, since it responds to hatred and fear with love and welcome, and thus denies hatred and fear their ultimate power. So hard to do, but what a gift!

My sense is that all major world religions, and some that are not so major, have blessings for those who explore them seriously and find them moving. Perhaps many of you have already found a source of blessing in some religious tradition beyond UUism as such. If not, I wish you happy searching if such is your desire.

The fourth source is Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Now, we have to be somewhat careful with this source. For many LGBTQ people and those who love us, Jewish and Christian teachings have been experienced as calling us to respond to God's homophobia by devaluing people with the wrong sexuality or gender identity. It's not surprising, therefore, that it may take extra work for some UUs to be comfortable with this source. But for those of us who find it possible to understand God as love – not as a judgmental old white guy on a throne with lots of hair but as the love we offer ourselves and share with others – this source can be a deep blessing indeed. Here's a rephrasing that might help some people: The third source is Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to the love within and around and beyond us by loving ourselves utterly and loving our neighbors extravagantly. If we love ourselves utterly, we give the lie to those whose fear and disgust and hatred has harmed us in the past, regardless of the reason for their response. If we love our neighbors, and yes, that means everyone, extravagantly, we gift the world with our commitment and care. We also invite others to love us back, something that we all need but that offers special grace to queer people and other devalued people in particular.

Our opening hymn re-envisioned God as love in the way I've just described. "Love knocks and waits for us to hear, to open and invite. Love longs to quiet every fear and seeks to set things right. Love offers life in spite of foes who threaten and condemn. Embracing enemies, Love goes the second mile with them. Love comes to heal the broken heart, to ease the troubled mind. Without a word Love bids us start to ask and seek and find. Love knocks and enters at the sound of welcome from within. Love sings and dances all around and feels new life begin." These images of love wash away some of the harsher understandings of God thrown at me by well-meaning but judgmental street evangelists over the years. As a queer person seeking to live a whole life I can appreciate this kind of love, and even seek it as a blessing. And I suspect anyone who has ever had the word love wielded against them as a weapon can find value in this way of thinking about love.

The fifth source is humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. Now I can gush on as well as anyone about what is beautiful in religion, but I am profoundly grateful for this source which reminds me that religion can be as dangerous as it can be lovely and which teaches me not to forget the blessings of science and reason.

I can't speak to what the authors of the sources meant by "idolatries of the mind and spirit" but I have a personal definition of idolatry. Idolatry is putting all of our trust in anything that is not worth it, treating as God that which simply can't deliver, asking for blessings where they are not possible. I would say that all forms of social inequality, homophobia and heterosexism included, are idolatries. Social inequality does not bless anyone, even if some people get more status and goodies than others. And while I have found much of value in the Bible, treating the Bible as God is as idolatrous as bowing down to Baal would have been for the Israelites. The blessing of the fifth source is partly a blessing of caution, but this very caution is liberation for LGBTQ folks who are far too used to having the handful of apparently antigay verses in the Bible be used to justify the idea that God hates us.

Our closing hymn asks, How could anyone ever tell you [that] you were anything less than beautiful, less than whole? How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? In the hymn, these questions are rhetorical, but in reality, the answer is idolatry. Too many people, including sometimes ourselves in the past, have put their faith in the idea that some people are not beautiful, not whole, not able to love. This is nothing other than a complete failure of compassion and understanding and our rejection of these ideas, our understandings of ourselves and each other as beautiful, whole, and able to love is a great blessing to ourselves and the world. It may be particularly healing for queer people, but it is also a gift for our allies and all who support a world of flourishing for all.

What about the "guidance of reason and the results of science" part? Reason suggests that there is no logic by which a bigot's definition of my life should supersede my own definition. Reason assures me that my marriage is no different from many of your marriages. Reason reminds us that if your sexual and romantic attractions were not a choice for you, they are not a choice for me. As for science, a recent study out of Australia confirmed that children raised by same-sex couples are perfectly happy and healthy, no less so than children raised by opposite-sex parents. One of the blessings of the fifth source is the reassurance that reason used properly and science done correctly are on the side of LGBTQ people, now and always.

The sixth source is spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. Here, the blessing most powerful for me is the importance of embodiment as natural, of my body as one of many bodies on this great body of blessing we call the earth. For anyone whose body has been treated poorly, which is true of most members of socially devalued groups, earth-centered traditions remind us how necessary and good bodies are while rejecting body hierarchies. By the logic of earth-centered traditions, what matters about our bodies is not who we love but how well we respect the earth forever turning, the circle of life, and the rhythms of nature. All of us can strive to do better protecting our "Blue Boat Home" but none of us needs to judge or be judged about what our bodies are like or how they intermingle with other bodies in joy and love.

Thinking about the earth and her many gifts of embodiment and sustenance I was reminded of a Setswana word I learned while Phoebe was in Africa. The word “pula” has three meanings: money, rain, and blessing. I was particularly struck by the connection between the latter two meanings. In Botswana, rain is scarce due to the proportion of the country taken up by the Kalahari Desert. Being scarce, rain is a blessing when it comes. Sometimes I think of the UU and liberal Christian churches in Colorado Springs as rain in a country dry with the harshness of homophobia, as Colorado Springs can be. Last year the mayor changed both our parade route and Pridefest location with the result that they are now less visible and harder to get to, and fertilizer was dumped on America the Beautiful Park right before Pridefest so it stank and we had to struggle not to sink into mud as we visited the booths. Was this intentional? I don’t know. I do know that the change was infuriating and humiliating. But in moments like that I can remember my sources of pride and find peace. I can remember the endless, boundless welcome of that transcendent mystery, the prophetic invitation to work for a world healed and whole, the deep wisdom and compassion of world religions, the love that is the true heart of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the cautions and demands of humanism, and the embodied grace of earth-centered traditions. And I can be grateful and joyful yet again. May all of us reap these blessings all the days of our lives. Amen, and blessed be.