



Transforming Times



*The Journal of the
Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson*

November 2009

Religious Authority

By Rev. Diane Dowgiert, Minister

The issue of religious authority can be a thorny one for Unitarian Universalists. Cars in our parking lots often sport “Question Authority” bumper stickers. Too often, though, what we do is reject authority, even our own. Or we reject all authority other than our own, sometimes holding onto erroneous beliefs in the process. Or worse yet, we go through life not knowing who or what to trust.

The topic of religious authority can conjure up images of popes and gurus, especially for people who come out of rigidly dogmatic and highly authoritarian religions. Unitarian Universalists hold the principle of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In a sense, each of us is his or her own authority. For us, the idea of religious authority gets at the question, “How do I know what I know?” Each individual is responsible for searching out his or her own answers to the big questions of life. The answers do not come out of a vacuum. There are trusted sources we can turn to in our search.

Consider the concept of authority. Each of us has trusted sources we turn to when questions arise in our lives. We take legal questions to a lawyer and medical questions to a doctor. We trust their accumulated knowledge and expertise in their area of practice. For current events and a deeper understanding of the issues of the day, we all have our trusted news sources. Be it the Washington Post or Time magazine or National Public Radio, there are sources we have come to depend on because they have demonstrated themselves to be reliable and trustworthy.

When religious questions arise, like – Who am I? Where did I come from? Why do bad things happen? How should I best live my life? What happens when I die? – you just ask your minister, right? Well, yes, ordained clergy are one source of religious authority. A minister doing the job well will likely entertain the questions *with* you, not offering up answers, rather teasing out what you already know and providing guidance for where to search further. There are many other sources we can turn to for answers.

Unitarian Universalism lists six sources that have developed over the long course of our history as a movement. They are listed elsewhere in this issue of the Transforming Times. Each has stood the test of time and proven to be a valuable source of wisdom. Not every source will resonate with every person. We each will bring our personal and religious histories to the encounter with these sources, as well as our individual personalities and preferences.

Taking the time to consider how you know what you know and what sources of authority are worthy of your trust may lead to a less anxious and more satisfying way of living.

Faithfully yours,
Diane

Transforming Times is organized around theological themes. Each theme plays a part in the development of a well-grounded religious and spiritual life. The church's offerings are by no means limited to the themes. They do provide common ground for community conversation, a way to gain more meaning and depth. We want to hear many perspectives on each theme. You are invited to submit your original poetry, artwork, or short essays of 350 words or less. Be warned: seriously engaging these themes could transform your life!

September: Freedom
October: Covenant
November: Religious Authority
December: Concepts of God
January: Evil
February: Love
March: Brokenness
April: Forgiveness
May: Transformation



Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources:

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;

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;

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

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;

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.