

Unitarian minister is saddened by religion's divisions



Highland Views
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Columnist

Women's rights pioneer and Quaker preacher, Lucretia Mott, had a motto: "Truth for authority, not authority for truth." When we want to know what is true or truthful, are there authorities we turn to — a person, a book, a tradition?

For Mott and her rebels for equal rights, truth is what each person brings to the table from their own experience, their own thoughts, to be integrated with the common challenges of human community.

I picked up on this thread while talking with Rev. Mark Ward, lead minister at Asheville's Unitarian Universalist Congregation. He told me, "I'm saddened by all the ways that religion divides us. I don't feel that any faith tradition has found the one and only answer or has a lock on the truth."

I find that refreshing and unusual in the world of faith. It is sad indeed to see the division caused by some religion, yet Mark is positive and hopeful:

"We each offer a perspective that can inform and inspire people to live well and learn to love their fellow creatures and the Earth. ... I think religion is a positive force when it invites us all to examine our deepest hopes and find the grounding for how each and all of us may one day live at peace."

The UU congregation in Asheville revised their mission statement recently to state: "Our open and welcoming congregation connects hearts, challenges minds, and nurtures spirits, while serving and transforming our community

and the world."

Mark feels that "open and welcoming" commitment is central. "We draw no boundaries around beliefs."

We might wonder what that looks like. Is this just a mishmash of whatever people want to think and believe? Unitarians are sometimes criticized for this, but here's the way Mark explains their broadmindedness:

"We understand that each person arrives at our church with a certain personal sense of faith, of that in which they trust, that helps them make sense of the world and guides how they act with other people, a way of feeling at home in the universe."

He continues, "Some use traditional religious language to address this; some don't. Often, in fact, I'll find that traditional religious language tends to tie people up in knots. These are words that they were once taught but never really grasped or the words never made sense to them.

"We say, bring your questions, your quandaries, your hopes, your passions and let's talk about how [they] inform your life and help you find meaning and inspire you to service."

As a secular person I was curious if this welcoming extends to nonbelievers. Mark responded, "There are many nontheists in our congregation, probably a majority, though it's hard to say. It's not a litmus test either way for us. The whole notion of what we call God, the divine, the holy, to my mind, is a lot more subtle and complicated than most people acknowledge."

Those in his congregation who don't call themselves theists still have "a sense of a greater power in their lives." Among them are members who may call

themselves religious naturalists or humanists who "have a strong sense of the world in which we live as holy."

Rev. Ward feels that "the split between 'believers' and 'secular' is one that frankly I think is pretty dated." He sees good things coming from small group discussions which are "the best vehicle for spiritual growth." Some hearing the conversational interactions might say those perspectives were secular while Mark would call them "profoundly religious."

Mark grew up as a Unitarian Universalist and spent 25 years in journalism before entering ministry. He graduated from seminary in 2004 and moved to Asheville. His own beliefs have "shifted over time."

Here's how he describes his faith journey: "I first identified as religious humanist, though I think I've shifted to religious naturalist. So, yes, I'm among those who identify as nontheist, but in my ministry I have used God language at times, since for me the notion of God

really only makes sense in the context of love.

"The force of love is mysterious and amazing and has changed my life more than anything else. But I don't view it as a force breaking in from outside the world, but as a tide moving in all of us, that central wholeness, goodness, oneness within every person."

My own membership in The Clergy Project helps me understand how a religious leader could be a non-theist and still serve in ministry. Unitarians seem to be comfortable with the unlocked doors of the mind.

There is a profound, natural humanity in Mark's outlook. Secular or spiritual — or a weaving of both — we might find courage for life and community.

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