



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Future Stories

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May 18, 2014

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In 1962, the historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn penned a book that rocked the intellectual world. Entitled, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, it introduced the term “paradigm” to describe the internal mental models, the constellation of concepts, that shape almost everything scientists think and do. Since that time Kuhn’s paradigm idea has been applied to scores of other disciplines, from business to the arts, and has stood the test of time.

In short, Kuhn says that we experience our lives the way we do because of the paradigm we have internalized. And he called the scientific enterprise that takes place within such boundaries, “normal science.” Not only does normal science—or the “normal” in any field—not question the paradigm, but those working within it don’t realize it’s there. Because it operates largely outside of conscious awareness, people become convinced that their world view is not a product of cultural and educational conditioning or the structure of their social institutions, but rather that the world they perceive is the only “real” one—and we then build institutions and societies based on that perceptual blueprint.

But when that paradigm consistently starts coming up short with solutions to problems—and even when such problems reach crisis proportions—these “paradigm blind” practitioners can’t see any alternatives. A revolution is being called for... but what happens first is that, to paraphrase Kuhn’s far more scholarly idiom, everybody freaks out. Even Einstein, no stranger to innovation, said of the revolution erupting in physics that “It was as if the ground had been pulled out from under one, with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere, upon which one could have built.”

Happily, due to what Kuhn calls “extraordinary science”—ground-breaking movements that are often spearheaded by extraordinary thought leaders like Einstein—eventually the need for revolutionary thinking can no longer be denied, and in time creative shifts do take hold in different fields... and thus a new paradigm is born.

Why do I bring all this up? My reason lies in a portion of what I shared from Thomas Berry in our first reading:

“The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story [the paradigm] becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation. Such, it seems to me, is the situation we must deal with [now]. ...For the first time the planet has become capable of self-destruction in many of its major life systems through human agency.... In our present context, failure in creativity would be an absolute failure. A present failure at this order of magnitude cannot be remedied later by a larger success. In this context a completely new type of creativity is needed. This creativity must have as its primary concern the survival of the earth in its functional integrity.”

I'll spare you the latest statistics. Suffice to say that the troubling predictions of climatologists and other environmental scientists over the past several decades are now being shown to have not been bleak enough. If our weathercasters told the whole truth, they'd inform us that the forecast for each new day is "Mostly sunny and dire." A revolution is called for—and I would say that first and foremost this needs to be a revolution in human consciousness. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn expressed it well in the conclusion of his 1978 Harvard commencement address, *A World Split Apart*:

"If the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will demand from us a spiritual blaze; we shall have to rise to a new height of vision... where our physical nature will not be cursed, as in the Middle Ages, but even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon, as in the Modern Era. The ascension is similar to climbing onto the next anthropological stage. No one on earth has any other way left but – upward."

Stressing the move to a higher stage brings to mind the work of "Integral" philosopher Ken Wilber. Among others, Wilber has outlined such stages in painstaking detail, but also boils these down to just three. He states that "...moral development tends to move from 'me' (egocentric) to 'us' (ethnocentric) to 'all of us' (worldcentric)...." He ties this to the ecological crisis by saying that "The basic idea is simple: anything less than an integral or comprehensive approach to environmental issues is doomed to failure. ...Exterior environmental sustainability is clearly needed; but without a growth... in the interior domains to worldcentric levels of values and consciousness, then the environment remains gravely at risk."

In large part this risk comes from powerful people and interests who, like Thomas Kuhn's "normal" scientists, are freaking out big time. And often "le freak" is strongly informed by old—and I mean *old*—paradigm religion. For instance, in 1992 Rush Limbaugh decried people who have, "replaced religion with secular environmentalism," and wrote that "my views on the environment are rooted in my belief in Creation." These views include his belief that efforts to save owl species were not worth humans enduring any deprivation, because "we could even survive without any owls. So what if they are no longer around to kill the mice. We'll just build more traps." I so wish I was making this up.

And Tom Hayden describes how this "humans vs. nature" mindset is also seen in the so-called Wise Use Movement, a coalition with ties to the National Rifle Association and to mining and timber interests. It has called environmentalism "the new paganism," in which, quote, "trees are worshipped and humans sacrificed at its altar. It is evil. And we intend to destroy it." The 1993 Wise Use Leadership Conference went so far as to declare "spiritual war" against environmentalists.

But fifteen years before this declaration, American feminist scholar and Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether perceptively criticized this supposed dichotomy as not recognizing that the environmental crisis has emerged within a specific economic system.

Gary Larsen once did a Far Side cartoon in which a pack of dogs are crowded into a lifeboat, watching the ship they were on sinking into the sea. And the lead dog says to the others, “OK – all those in favor of eating all the food at once, raise your paws.” That’s our current economic system in a nutshell.

And Ruether correctly points out that the self-appointed border guards of the reigning paradigm “Never deal with the question of eco-justice; namely, the reordering of access to and use of natural resources within a just economy.” Then she poses the key question: “How can ecological harmony become part of a system of economic justice?”

I don’t have an answer—though I’m trying to educate myself on the subject. But I want to underscore that connecting the dots between our rapacious economic system and its ecological and social consequences is vital to the viability of any future story. And this means that our economic schools need to break out of the accepted wisdom of their “normal science” constraints and engage in some extraordinary, revolutionary, worldcentric thinking.

For echoing Solzhenitsyn and Wilber, no less a mind than Immanuel Kant declared that, “For peace to reign on Earth, humans must evolve into new beings who have learned to see the whole first.” Kant’s claim inverts and undermines our current paradigm, which fairly shouts that the individual is primary and the whole is secondary—and by extension, that in our autonomy we have no ultimate responsibility to that whole. But that view is flawed... a grand and tragic illusion born from an obsolete stage of consciousness.

Recalling our second reading, that illusion fell away abruptly for Tony Hsieh [pr. Shay] at the rave dance he attended. Remember that Emile Durkheim called such movement-centered ecstatic states “collective effervescence,” and Jonathan Haidt describing Durkheim’s conviction that “...These collective emotions pull humans fully but temporarily into the higher of our two realms, the realm of the sacred, where the self disappears and collective interests predominate.” In other words, suddenly the whole, just like for Kant, comes first. This is the essence of the paradigm shift, the new meta-story, that’s needed today. And I shared Hsieh’s experience of heightened consciousness that forever altered him for a reason.

Because another future story is emerging as we speak—the story of Neighborhood Church as this community searches for a new senior minister. In considering this future, I want to refer to Haidt’s discussion of Barbara Ehrenreich’s book, *Dancing in the Streets: A Collective History of Joy*. He describes how over the past three centuries or so, traveling Europeans reacted with nothing less than “disgust” to the untamed ritual dances of aboriginal peoples, which most of those observers found “degrading, grotesque, and thoroughly ‘savage’.” But as Haidt says of these drum-driven ecstatic dances—of which raves are one modern reclamation:

“The Europeans were unprepared to understand what they were seeing. As Ehrenreich argues, collective and ecstatic dancing is a nearly universal ‘biotechnology’ for binding groups together. ...It fosters love, trust and equality. It was common in ancient Greece

(think of Dionysus and his cult) and in early Christianity (which she says was a 'danced' religion until dancing in the church was suppressed in the Middle Ages)."

Haidt states that Ehrenreich's explanation of why many (though not all) Europeans gave up such practices is "too nuanced" to adequately summarize, but that key contributing factors included—surprise!—"the rise of individualism and more refined notions of the self beginning in the sixteenth century... cultural changes [that] accelerated during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution."

And I suggest that if UU congregations—including this one—are to become forceful catalysts for the paradigm shift required, they would do well to consider regularly incorporating ecstatic, bodily ritual practices that pump up the level of collective effervescence among churchgoers. Why? Because heightened states of consciousness such as those experienced in ecstatic religious ritual, while temporary, facilitate the eventual movement to higher *stages* of consciousness, which are enduring. As Ken Wilber phrases it, "*Passing states* have been converted to *permanent traits*." While this wouldn't be the case for everyone who might attend a rave-like worship service, such is the potential of embodied ritual to make the new, holistic paradigm available to folks, not just intellectually but in our blood and bones.

This isn't to suggest that this become the chief liturgical form or means of connecting with the sacred in UU circles. It's not suitable for everyone, and could be one offering among several. But since the inception of both Unitarianism and Universalism in Europe, the perceptual prejudice that Ehrenreich names has dominated our worship style—in my view to the current detriment of both UUism's agency, and its appeal. I believe this is especially applicable to younger people in our culture, who by and large are starved for positive, chemical-free experiences of transcendent connection. But perhaps now, in comprehending the origins of this long-standing (or perhaps more accurately, long-sitting) bias, we can attempt to push past our liturgical comfort zones with some confidence, perhaps even with anticipation.

Such a "move" also has ramifications for multiculturalism in our congregations. In the Beloved Conversations Antiracism/Multiculturalism program that was held here this spring, one of the group exercises reviewed what people of color had given up when they joined a UU church—and one of these was a more physically expressive style of worship. Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, writing in the Spring 2010 issue of *UU World* magazine, says that while UUs rightly value reason and a critical stance toward religious—and other—truth claims:

"...[T]his legacy encourages us to keep our religious commitments largely in our heads, where we can hold them at a comfortable arm's length. ...It allows us to feel spiritually safe. Multiculturalism threatens this sense of safety. ...At one level it is the fear of change, and the fear of difference that change always represents. At a deeper level, it is a fear of losing control. ...Our move toward becoming a multiracial and multicultural faith challenges our safe and tidy [that is, I would add, our Euro-centric] way of being religious. In this sense, multiculturalism might represent for some a threat not simply to

our illusion of control, but to our very identity.”

Expanding any individual’s or institution’s sense of identity is always challenging. But offering ecstatic ritual can ease this challenge because it makes accessible a collective identity that transcends even long-established mental constraints. And as I stated, it might also broaden UUism’s appeal and welcome, including its appeal to at least some persons of color.

But like the larger paradigmatic changes that must take place, such expansion may also bring some initial discomfort—and that’s quite all right. To state my view plainly, it might not hurt “God’s frozen chosen,” on both the physical and metaphorical levels, to sweat a little.

So, just hypothetically, could this be a part of Neighborhood’s future story? Whether or not a new minister cares a whit about something like this, as a congregation can we even envision that prospect? Reverend Nelson titled last week’s Mother’s Day sermon, “Dancing Beneath the Desk,” referring to the times his mom got scolded in high school for practicing the Charlestown while seated in class. “No dancing under the desk” her teachers commanded... but, as Jim reported, “her feet would not stop moving.” Of course not! Her body’s desire to dance, to move, to pulsate with the life energy coursing through her, was irrepressible. Jim then said this reminded him of a saying attributed to the great suffragette Emma Goldman: “If I can’t dance to it, it’s not my revolution.” Amen, sister. And if you want to dance beneath your chair, go on with your bad self.

And so we’re back to revolutionary change—and Thomas Kuhn. Now terminology gets tricky here, because Neighborhood church is already an extraordinary place. But I suggest that the degree to which we can entertain alternative ways of worship, of celebrating, is the degree to which, while still honoring the past, this church will be future oriented—and in the Kuhnian sense of helping to birth a new paradigm consciousness, extraordinary. Revolutionary. And that orientation might then in turn influence considerations of who your new senior minister may be.

Offering rituals of this type does not mean that UUism’s intellectual rigor would be deemphasized. In his book, *Spiritual Evolution*, Harvard med school professor and director of psychiatric research George Vaillant fervently states the need for both aspects: “...Drumming and emotion are not better than prose and ideas; they simply arise from different parts of the brain. Only connect the prose and the passion; only connect the limbic and the neocortical brain! That is what twenty-first-century neuroscience is all about”.

As I view it, this is also what twenty-first-century religion and spirituality as a source of a worldcentric moral orientation is all about. For in surveying how different parts of the prefrontal lobes of the neocortex affect social and moral awareness, Vaillant concludes that, “Our morality exists both in the realm of ideas and in the realm of emotion.” Ritually activating both of these realms therefore results in symbiotic integration. It affects the whole—the whole brain, the whole person. And as Jonathan Haidt says of such transcendent integration, “It’s not

just a capacity; it's the portal to many of life's most cherished experiences." It's also one portal to cultural transformation.

That emerging paradigm, our future story, is also affected by our dawning awareness of a larger whole. Because as Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker describe in their book, *Journey of the Universe*, we are all part and parcel of a singular wholeness that has been developing for over thirteen billion years. "The great discovery of contemporary science," the authors write, "is that the universe is not simply a place but a story—a story in which we are immersed, to which we belong, and out of which we arose."

So a person might pose the question: "Okay, I'm a part of this immense cosmic wholeness. And I know that the earthly expression of this wholeness, its integrity and its beauty, is under siege. So, what's my part in our future story?" I'm so glad you asked.

William Blake said this: "Threads of genius and purpose are present in everyone, but only become visible when something creative is attempted." Genius is a Latin word with origins in North Africa, where it was pronounced, "Genie." And what it originally meant was, "The spirit that's there." The spirit that's there. The fable of a genie streaming out of a bottle is the story of your creative spirit coming alive to your life's purpose. And make no mistake—you have one.

Someone once asked the great Swing Era composer Duke Ellington what his greatest song was. He replied, "I haven't written it yet." I'll wager that neither have many of you. And while I can't offer specific answers to our question about your part in things, if you're searching, I want to suggest that discernment might be hastened by reflecting on some other questions... such as: What is the song in your soul that most longs to be sung into being? What dance is in your jittery legs and your fluttering heart that cannot be suppressed? What is the vision burning in your mind that will help construct a wiser world?

Thomas Berry said that entirely new levels of creativity are required if we're going to make it. And wherever you chose to put your creative efforts, your "extraordinary" energy, the great German playwright, poet and statesman Goethe offers spiritual support for your endeavor: Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!

Your offering doesn't need to be grand. It just needs to be deeply yours. Because millions of other folks all over the globe are also awakening to the "revolution of relatedness." And the recently deceased troubadour prophet and activist Pete Seeger, whom we celebrated at our April Soulful Sundown service, recognized the enormous collective power of each person giving their unique gift:

"If there's a world here in a hundred years, it's going to be saved by tens of millions of little things. The powers-that-be can break up any big thing they want. They can corrupt it or co-opt it from the inside, or they can attack it from the outside. [Witness the Occupy movement.] But what are they going to do about ten million little things?"

They break up two of them, and three more like them spring up!”

Like other sages and shamans through the ages, Pete also knew the power of rhythm, of dance, of singing together to heighten consciousness, strengthen bonds, and fortify hope. It seems he always had a song on his lips... new paradigm anthems of justice, freedom and love. Here's one. Blessed Be.