

**“Curiosity and Binoculars”**  
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**September 16, 2007**

There, high overhead, was that a vulture, I wondered? Or was that some bird that I had never seen before? One day in 1977, in Managua, Nicaragua, I raised binoculars to my eyes in the sweltering heat. I noted the shape and the angle of the wings. I was a college student a long way from home, scanning the skies, the trees, and the ground. I was looking for movement, color, and sound -- three facets of beauty bound together in the feathers, talons, beaks, and songs of birds. .

This morning, I will share with you some of the beliefs that are most important to me, and I will share how they came to be so important. (In the days, months, and years to come, I hope to find out what beliefs are most important to you, and how they came to be so important.) I had developed an interest in birding at age 16 in Waukesha, Wisconsin. With the first paycheck from my first job, I bought a pair of binoculars. Believe it or not, my interest in birding was even responsible for my decision to study journalism. In a naïve version of career planning, I figured that I could study journalism, then get a job as a foreign newspaper correspondent in Brazil. I would write newspaper stories during the week, then go birding in the Amazon rain forest on weekends! I realized that Nicaragua was not Brazil, but begging students could not be choosy. Brazilian and Nicaraguan habitats were similar, I imagined, so when a chance to spend a summer in Nicaragua came my way, I jumped at it.

That summer was a time of transformation from a personal, political, and religious point of view. As it happened, I was able to tag along with *La Prensa* newspaper reporters as they went about their work. At that time, *La Prensa* was one of two daily newspapers in the country. *La Prensa* was the newspaper which opposed the dictator Anastasio Somoza, who would be pushed out of power by the Sandinistas two years later. *La Prensa* was published by Pedro Joachin Chamorro, who would, tragically, be killed by Somoza's men six months later. Little did I know at the beginning of summer 1977 that I was about to become sensitized to issues of privilege and oppression in a manner quite foreign to a white, middle-class, educated young woman from the suburbs of Milwaukee. I had no inkling of what was to come as I watched that bird wheel about in wide circles in the sky.

As I was watching the bird, something happened. My inner world shifted. Consciousness shifted. In a remarkable instant, I became fully aware of *all* the movements, colors, and sounds around me, not just the movements, colors, and sounds of birds. “*What is all the rest of this?*” I wondered, and my focus

broadened. I lowered the binoculars from my eyes and began looking and listening, taking in everything that had been previously outside my field of vision. *People*, as well as birds, come into bright relief. Contrasts of wealth and poverty caught my eye. A personal, political, and religious conversion had begun. Expansion of consciousness can be expressed in many ways, and a person does not need to literally *see* in order to experience insight. However, in that moment, for me, insight meant lowering the binoculars from my eyes. Through binoculars, it is true, I could watch birds. However, through binoculars, I could not watch *humanity* very well.

I have always been skeptical about “conversion.” How is it possible, I wondered, that anyone’s life could change in an instant? Is not lasting, significant change more likely to be messy and confusing? In fact, I do believe that lasting, significant change is likely to be messy and confusing. However, I also believe that anyone’s life *can* change in an instant. “Conversion” is possible. Sustaining the conversion . . . ah, that is where the discipline of curiosity comes in.

We enter into serious religious inquiry from many starting points. Sometimes we are tickled into the entrance, teased into the entrance. Other times, it may feel as though a ton of bricks has fallen on our head. At those times, serious religious inquiry begins as a crawl through the rubble of what we thought we knew, a crawl through the rubble of what we used to believe. I used to believe that it was enough to appreciate beauty and to create beauty. However, I now believe that beauty is incomplete without social justice, and social justice is incomplete without beauty. Why do I believe this? The most politically active, compassionate, and resilient people I met in Nicaragua were also active in a community of artists. They were poets, painters, and musicians expressing their politics through art and expressing their love of beauty through politics. Their example has stayed with me over 30 years, showing me what is possible. They were human, with human quirks and limitations. At times they felt discouraged. They did not “succeed” over the long term by many measures. Yet, whatever good I do in life and in ministry, I do, in part, because they inspired me. Their quest for a way to combine politics and art, social justice and beauty, continues to inspire me. Was their vision possible? They did not know, and they were curious to find out.

Serious religious inquiry is surrender to the discipline of responding with curiosity to life. It may seem strange to think of curiosity as a discipline, but really, it is, or else curiosity is selective and merely reinforces our prejudices. Selective curiosity merely reinforces our tendencies to prioritize social justice over beauty or to prioritize beauty over social justice. Only the cultivated discipline of impartial curiosity

stands a chance to tickle us, to tease us, to lure us by whatever means through the rubble of what we thought we knew, through the rubble of what we used to believe.

Unitarian Universalism draws attention to what is outside our present field of vision. Congregational life is a place to nurture curiosity. Unitarian Universalism encourages our commitment to be *disciplined* in our curiosity. Sometimes I hear people say, “I love my Unitarian Universalist congregation. That is where I meet like-minded people.” Ummm . . . I hope not! If we are only around like-minded people, disciplined curiosity is likely to be stunted. Instead, I hope we meet like-minded people *and* differently minded people *and* confused people *and* confusing people in this congregation.

Disciplined curiosity is the approach of scientists, at their best. Disciplined curiosity is the approach of mystics, at their best. Disciplined curiosity is the approach of humanists, at their best. Disciplined curiosity is the approach of theists, at their best. Twenty-first century scientists, mystics, humanists, and theists differ from each other in many ways, but I argue that they agree in their approach to truth: *Allow disciplined curiosity to guide us.* We do not expect 21<sup>st</sup> century scientists to operate the way scientists did in earlier centuries. Neither should we expect 21<sup>st</sup> century mystics, humanists, or theists to operate the way *their* predecessors did in earlier centuries.

Disciplined curiosity is a spiritual practice which supports both beauty and social justice. If curiosity about the world exposes us to depressing news that threatens to overwhelm us, we had better increase the beauty we appreciate and increase the beauty we create. If, on the other hand, our creative well runs dry, and we are feeling parched, we had better open ourselves again and more deeply to be touched by world events. Either social justice or beauty can be points of entry into caring more about both of them.

I was very moved and very inspired by the September 2 service. About 15 people shared their dreams for the future of the congregation! I came away from that service with many thoughts and feelings, as you might imagine. Distilling the various messages from that service into a single essence, I came away with this: Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation is not a social club for religious and political liberals. Its members understand themselves to be a religious *congregation*, with hopes, dreams, and accomplishments that distinguish it from a social club. This congregation is the one I want to serve. I want to be *here* because of who you are, as a congregation shaped by your own dynamics and shaped by the loving care and exceptional ministry of your minister emerita, my esteemed colleague, the Rev. Ellen Livingston.

Earlier this month, I learned something new about the religious cousins of Unitarian Universalists; that is, those who are today members of the United Church of Christ. (In the past, they would have called themselves “Congregationalists.”) On banners outside United Church of Christ churches today, you are likely to see a punctuation mark. Not just any punctuation mark, but a specific punctuation mark -- a comma. The comma is the United Church of Christ shorthand way of saying, “Never put a period where God intended a comma.” Other liberal Christians might put it this way: “Revelation is not sealed.”

The comma on the banner is eye catching. It is visible from quite a distance. Of course, it is not possible to reduce a religious movement to a single punctuation mark, but it is an interesting exercise. If Unitarian Universalists had to choose a punctuation mark to express their religious tradition, what would it be? The all-too-easy answer would be the question mark, but a question mark as our religious symbol is not adequate for Unitarian Universalism. I do not believe that Unitarian Universalists value questions over answers. Instead, I believe that Unitarian Universalists value answers so much that we ask many questions, and we listen to others ask many questions. If we did not care so deeply about answers, we would not bother with questions.

A glance at the calendar reminds us of the importance of the season. These are the Jewish High Holy Days. This is the month of Ramadan, where Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. The Muslim Sufi poet Rumi was born 800 years ago, and he wrote, “There’s hidden sweetness in the stomach’s emptiness. We are lutes, no more, no less. If the soundbox is stuffed full of anything, no music. If the brain and belly are burning clean with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.” We are in the days approaching the autumnal equinox, a time of special meaning for those whose spirituality aligns with the rhythms of the earth. Religious traditions of all kinds remind us to be careful about the punctuation marks we use to shape the future. A period? A comma?

If the question mark is not adequate as a symbol for Unitarian Universalism, then what? Call me a chauvinist and a partisan, call me a zealot. I say that Unitarian Universalism uses, requires, and demands *all* the punctuation marks, the full range – comma, period, question mark, colon, semicolon, exclamation mark, and accents. Let us not forget the accents -- accents in familiar languages and accents in unfamiliar languages. Why do we need the full range of punctuation marks? We shape the future, and shaping the future requires finesse. Shaping the future requires more than one punctuation mark. If all we have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. If all we have is a comma (or a question mark), every sentence is tentative. The world does not need more tentative people.

May we care about answers so much that we ache. As a group of scientific, mystical, humanistic, and theistic participant-observers, may we shape the future. May social justice and beauty inspire us, and may our lives inspire beauty and social justice. May it be so!