



Touchstones Project

Touchstones Journal in Word Format

Theological Reflection

Contents

- 1.0: *Introduction to the Theme*
- 2.0: *Theological Reflection & Repairing the World*
- 3.0: *Wisdom Story: Two Mirrors*
- 4.0: *Theology Ablaze* by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle
- 5.0: *Prophetic Theology* by Rev. George Kimmich Beach
- 6.0: *Readings from the Common Bowl*
- 7.0: *Faith And Theology: The Art of Theological Reflection* by Patricia O'Connell Killen & John de Beer
- 8.0: *The Broken Cup & Theological Reflection*
- 9.0: *Family Matters*
 - 9.1: *Windows and Mirrors*
 - 9.2: *Family Activity: Windows & Mirrors*
- 10.0: *Questions for Theological Reflection*
- 11.0: *Questioning Our Questions* by Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs

Articles

1.0: *Introduction to the Theme*

Harvey Cox, a prominent Protestant theologian and a professor at Harvard Divinity School from 1969 to 2009, said that Unitarian Universalism was “thick on ethics, but thin on theology.” Others in regard to Unitarian Universalism have put it more directly by quoting Gertrude Stein: “There is no there, there.” This kind of critique prompted the UUA’s *Commission on Appraisal* to work for four years on the topic of theology. The result was their report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (May 2005). In the report they noted, “One fact has become clear in the course of our conversations with UUs concerning the issue of theology: With rare exceptions, conversations about beliefs and theology are not regular features of our congregational life.”

Still, as Unitarian Universalist Minister Richard Gilbert writes, “If we are living, breathing, hurting, laughing, crying, questing human beings, it is impossible not to be theologians.” Gilbert is the author of the *Building Your Own Theology* series. It was inspired by Angus Maclean who wrote, “It has been said that liberal religion is a ‘do-it-yourself kit.’ But there is a danger that we would make it a kit not only without blueprint but without tools and material.”

The crucible for building your own theology is the congregation. In *What’s Theology Got to Do With It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* Anthony Robinson writes, “Theological reflection is a way to align what we believe with who we are. Such reflection helps a congregation preach what it practices, and practice what it preaches. ... We neglect the responsible use of theology at our own peril.”

While the traditional definition of theology is the study of God, Gilbert suggests that it can also mean a “field of study, thought, and analysis that discusses religious truth.” Research for *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* surfaced interest in theology, but a reticence to engage.

Because theology in our tradition is not prescribed, it is incumbent upon each of us to build our own theology. By doing so, we create a more reliable internal compass that orients us to our true north. By doing so, we are better able to align our actions with our values. This is particularly important since Unitarian Universalism is largely a tradition of “come inners,” those who joined a congregation as an adult, with a minority of “born-inners,” those who grew up within our tradition. The come-inners experience a religious community characterized by “freedom-from,” a freedom of belief that is both refreshing and liberating. This experience feels like the end of a journey, like a homecoming in which individuals who have been spiritual nomads find a religious oasis. For too many, they never imagined that such a place existed. (We do, indeed, manage to keep our light hidden under a bushel.) The image of arriving is so strong that it tends to obscure the more significant reality: beginning. Finding and joining a Unitarian Universalist congregation invites a transition in which we move beyond freedom-from to freedom-for. This is the larger promise of freedom of belief, not what we are freed from, but what we are freed for. Theological reflection is a process that assists us in determining what we believe. As Rev. Charles Stephens wrote, “I wish for you the thrill of knowing, who you are, where you stand, and why. Especially why.”

In Unitarian Universalism, theological reflection must be both an individual and congregational endeavor. As Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams (1901-1994) reminded us, “each generation must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values.” This is the congregational imperative. At the individual level, D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) wrote, “A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it, and one’s religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.”

It is notable that the initial development of liberal theology in America in 1805 was led by Unitarians like William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and Theodore Parker (1810-1860). Apart from James Luther Adams, Unitarian Universalists were then absent from the ongoing theological discourse in America. As Rev. Roberta Finkelstein observed about the merger in 1961: “In fact, we seem to have dealt with the thorny issue of potential theological disharmony by essentially banning all theology from the newly formed movement!” In the mid-to late 1980s Forrest Church launched a new era of theological reflection through his prolific writings. His image of one light shining through countless stained-glass windows throughout the *cathedral of the world* suggested that the richness and diversity of theological reflection and discourse was in service of disclosing this wisdom: one light, many paths. Theological reflection has expanded significantly through the writings of leading Unitarian Universalists like Thandeka, Jerome Stone, Richard Gilbert, William Jones, Sharon Welch, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, Gary Kowalski, Paul Rasor, William Murry, John Buehrens, Rebecca Ann Parker, Galen Guengerich, and many others. Here you will find the “there,” resources to support your own theological reflection.

2.0: Theological Reflection & Repairing the World

We may believe that we know how to repair the world, but the work of repair is far more complex than we imagine. The repair has to do with society writ large, as well as the planet, and any repairs that we propose must be persuasive and effective, both morally and strategically. Per James Luther Adams (p. 2), our work involves constructing and implementing a prophetic theology that is authentic, socially (and ecologically) relevant, and morally grounded. This is a

theology of hope. Rather than running toward answers, we must spend time with questions and live into answers about the nature of repair. In this work, the discipline of theological reflection as a communal exercise will serve us well.

3.0: Wisdom Story: Two Mirrors

Once upon a time there was a troll named Yavo who had a magic mirror with two sides. One side was like any normal mirror. When people looked into it, they saw themselves as they were. The other side was quite different. It had an amazing power to distort what was real and true. If someone was good and beautiful, and most people are, he or she looked evil and ugly in the mirror.

Yavo would invite a person to look into the normal side of the mirror, then he would say, “Let me have you look in the other side of the mirror, for it will give you a much better view.” When he turned the mirror to the magic side, their beauty disappeared and each and every person looked as ugly as a troll. People became afraid, because they thought the mirror was reflecting what they looked like on the inside. When Yavo pointed the mirror at a beautiful flower garden, what was reflected back was an ugly plot filled with weeds.

Yavo traveled from village to village and had every villager look into both mirrors. Eventually, there was not a single village, or a single villager, who had not seen a distorted view of himself or herself, or a distorted view of the world.

Then something happened that was truly terrible. Yavo was thinking of all the people that he had look in the mirror. First he smiled. Then he giggled. This led to a snicker, which was followed by a chuckle, and so it went until Yavo began roaring with laughter. That’s when he dropped the mirror and it broke into a million, million splinters, each the size of a grain of sand. The wind began to blow and it blew splinters throughout the land. When a splinter lodged in a person’s eye, everything they looked at appeared evil and ugly. People stopped trusting. They stopped loving. Everything seemed dark and cold, as if their hearts had become frozen.

A splinter got in Mikkell’s eye. He was just 12 years old. His best friend, Gerda, who was also 12, slept through the windstorm and her eyes were not touched by the splinters. The splinter changed Mikkell and this worried Gerda. They had been best friends since they were five, and Gerda loved Mikkell more than she loved anything or anyone. When Mikkell looked at Gerda, he saw a friend who was now ugly and disfigured. When Gerda, looked at Mikkell she saw her good friend who now seemed so afraid and suspicious. Neither Mikkell nor Gerda knew what had happened, but everything was worse.

Gerda confronted Mikkell, asking, “What is wrong?”

“Wrong,” said Mikkell. “You are what is wrong. Why did you become so evil and ugly?”

Gerda was shocked. “I haven’t changed,” she said.

Mikkell sneered, “You are just trying to fool me.”

“No,” Gerda said. “I wouldn’t fool you. I love you.” The she said, “Look into my eyes and see what is reflected there for that is who I truly am.”

Mikkell looked in her eyes and saw beauty. He was so shocked that he began weeping. His tears washed away the splinter, and the world magically changed in front of his eyes. Everywhere he looked, he saw beauty. As others were invited to look into the eyes of those who loved them, more splinters were washed away. But that, unfortunately, has not yet happened to everyone. Sometimes the best mirrors are the eyes of those who love us.

Source: *Touchstones*, based on *About the Mirror and its Pieces* from the *Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen

4.0: *Theology Ablaze* by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

Theology ...orients our scattered minds and slakes our thirsty souls.

...The report of the Commission of Appraisal to the American Unitarian Association (1936) was entitled *Unitarians Face a New Age*. ... [it noted,] “What Channing, Emerson, Parker, Henry W. Bellows, and Thomas Starr King did for their generations must be done anew for ours.... The genius of the Unitarian movement has been its power to adapt ...to new knowledge, new conditions, and new situations.”

...*The Free Church in a Changing World* (1963) ...defines “theology as a critical and creative intellectual attempt to express, clarify, defend, [and] reconstruct a religion,” ...adding that “religion is related to theology as practice is to theory ...and we should never mistake theology for religion, or assume that ...theology can adequately substitute for ...religion.”

...*Engaging our Theological Diversity* (2005) ...developed [a] ...working definition of theology.... “...In modern usage, the definition of theology is understood to include the full range of religious and philosophical beliefs (not just theistic ones) and our human understanding of the meaning and purpose of Ultimate Reality.”

...Across the span of the past half-century, we’ve experienced systematic thinkers in our Unitarian Universalist ranks beckoning us to claim, clarify, [and] then embody the foundational themes of our theology. ...Earl Morse Wilbur, eminent Unitarian historian, ...lifted up freedom, reason, and tolerance not as “the final goals to be aimed at in religion,” but rather as “conditions under which the true ends may best be attained.” ...*Theology Ablaze* ...seconds [the call] ...for us to expand our religion ...by intentionally cultivating, deepening, and embodying our theology.

Source: *Theology Ablaze* by Tom Owen-Towle

5.0: *Prophetic Theology* by Rev. George Kimmich Beach

James Luther Adams (1901-1994) articulated theology “in a prophetic key” because he believed that social relevance and ethical commitment were the touchstones of authentic faith. Authentic faith is reliance upon that which, when we are faithful, will not betray us; he calls “spurious” faith our “ever-recurrent reliance upon the unreliable.” His theological writings are an ongoing essay on the difference between authentic and spurious faith, and between reliable and unreliable faith. The dialectical relationship between faith and ethical commitment that Adams proposed leads to a conclusion that may seem surprising, given his thoroughly Biblical language. Ethical commitment is a clearer sign of authentic faith than is any particular language of religion, including God-language itself.

Adams wrote, “An authentic prophet is one who prophesies in a fashion that does not comfort the people, but actually calls them to make some new sacrifices. That’s an authentic prophet, whether one speaks in the name of God or whatever. A great deal of authentic prophetism in the modern world is to be found in non-religious terms and in non-church configurations, often even hostile to the church. The churches themselves have broadly failed the prophetic function. Therefore, a good deal of atheism, from my point of view, is theologically significant.”

Prophetic faith yields a theology of hope. It means proclaiming in the face of present injustice, a justice to come, and in the face of present hatred and fear, a peace to come—both as moral commitments and as articles of faith. It means knowing that the sin of religion is “cheap grace,” offering spiritual comfort without “the call to make some new sacrifices.”

Source: *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* by George Kimmich Beach

6.0: Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: “Everyone is a theologian, either conscious or unconscious, in the sense that everyone has some conception of the nature of reality, of the demands of reality, and of those elements in reality that support or threaten meaningful existence.” James Luther Adams

Day 2: “Theological reflection is the process of seeking meaning.” Patricia O. Killen & John de Beer

Day 3: “Unitarian Universalism, at our truest, comprises a shining theology that can deliver saving words to our world. It is life-affirming, liberating, and loving...here and now.” Tom Owen-Towle

Day 4: “...Theology is first of all not the study of doctrines, but a process of reflection.... The classic definition of theology, ‘faith seeking understanding,’ remains always valid.” Luke Timothy Johnson

Day 5: “How can one maintain a theological confidence in what one claims to be true while acknowledging the existence of multiple religions that also claim to be true?” Namsoon Kang

Day 6: “Alimentary theology ...is ...theology as nourishment: food as theology and theology as food, food for thought ...[which] addresses some of the spiritual and physical hungers of the world, and seeks ways of bringing about nourishment.” A. F. Mendez Montoya

Day 7: “You don’t need a Master’s in Theology to love people.” D.R. Silva

Day 8: “Much of what hinders us is that we have had a lot of mistaken theology in our head and it has gotten down into our heart.” Dallas Willard

Day 9: “The world doesn’t judge us by our theology; the world judges us by our behavior.” Carolyn Mahaney

Day 10: “It’s sloppy theology to think that all suffering is good for us, or that it’s a result of sin. All suffering can be used for good, over time, after mourning and healing.... But sometimes it’s just plain loss, not because you needed to grow, not because life ...or anything is teaching you any kind of lesson.” Shauna Niequist

Day 11: “‘See that’s where it falls apart for me!’ Anne cried. ‘What sticks in my throat is that God gets the credit but never the blame. I just can’t swallow that kind of theological candy. Either God’s in charge or he’s not....’” Mary Doria Russell

Day 12: “The ...drive for justice-making lies at the core of my theology... the belief that we—humans, not God—are responsible for making and sustaining a just world.” Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Day 13: “Our theology must be demonstrated, not only by our words but, more importantly, by our actions.” Freeman-Smith

Day 14: “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology.” Karen Armstrong

Day 15: “Art is so often better at theology than theology is.” Christian Wiman

Day 16: “The distinction between faith and theology is itself a matter for theological reflection.” Francis Cardinal George

Day 17: “Theological reflection is the most important activity a person can perform.” Vincent Cheung

Day 18: “Searching for meaning through theological reflection is not easy, because it does not yield the security of absolute answers.” Patricia O’Connell Killen & John de Beer

Day 19: “Liberal theology with its riskiness, its openness, and its tentativeness is not apt to fare well in a time of political crisis.” Bruce Southworth

Day 20: “One good thing about being a cat, apart from the extra lives, was that the theology was a lot simpler.” Terry Pratchett

Day 21: “Life is a mess. And theology must be lived out in the midst of that mess.” Charles Colson

Day 22: “Theological discourse can be, in and of itself, a form of identity and solidarity.” Namsoon Kang

Day 23: “We ignore the question of how we talk about and manifest theology in our congregations at our peril.” Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Day 24: “Who, then, is qualified for theology? The theological task is implied by the very life of faith itself. Every ...[one] is therefore called to do theology in this sense.” Luke Timothy Johnson

Day 25: “When we recognize that our theology is not the moon but rather a finger pointing at the moon, we enjoy the freedom of questioning it from time to time.” Rachel Held Evans

Day 26: “Question the answers, I repeated every class. Reevaluate your conclusions when the evidence changes.” Craig Mullaney

Day 27: “Theology is never any help; it is searching in a dark cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn’t there.” Robert A. Heinlein

Day 28: “Our theology, far from being mature in any evolutionary or historical sense, is in fact in its early stages.” The Free Church in a Changing World (1963)

Day 29: “...My faith goes beyond theology and religion and requires considerable work and effort.” Jimmy Carter

Day 30: “Theology is—or should be—a species of poetry.... You have to open yourself to a poem with a quiet, receptive mind, in the same way you might listen to a difficult piece of music....” Karen Armstrong

Day 31: “I wish that there were more of a focus on [conversations about theology and beliefs] because I’ve been personally really struggling with it....” UU Youth, 2005

7.0: *Faith And Theology: The Art of Theological Reflection* by Patricia O’Connell Killen & John de Beer

Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring ...experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. ...Theological reflection ...may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and ...the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning.

...Reflection is the act of interpreting our lives.... This ...makes us vulnerable in two ways: (1) we re-experience the incident—the feelings of fear, anger, awe, joy that were there. ... (2) We open our own interpretive framework to revision so that all [of] our most dearly held beliefs, biases, convictions, and ways of responding to life may be called into question.

...Theological reflection is...the movement toward insight....

...When we find ourselves on unaccustomed ground..., we tend to adopt one of two very different standpoints. One is the exclusive standpoint of certitude. From this standpoint ...we can tolerate only that which fits our predetermined categories.

...When we operate exclusively from a standpoint of certitude, we are unable to test a new experience.... We make our current interpretation absolute, unchanging, and true. We cram everything that happens to us into that interpretation or [we] deny experience itself.

...When life undermines the certitudes governing our view of the world, we no longer have a way to see. We need a ...new way of seeing.

...Sometimes our world overwhelms us with its complexity; our social, religious, and familial traditions appear unreliable, irrelevant, or oppressive; and we fear that we cannot count on the people around us. Fed up with our own frailty and fallibility of our contexts, we may decide to trust only ourselves, our own experience, how we think and feel now, in each new situation. We choose to be our own compass, map, and guide, and reject our need for any other. ...This is the standpoint of self-assurance: to rely on ...what I think and feel now.

...In the standpoint of self-assurance, we think of our lives as primarily our own projects and consider our social contexts and our traditions primarily as burdens to be overcome or manipulated for our benefit.

...These exclusive standpoints of certitude and self-assurance do not empower reflective, committed, compassionate lives. ...Faith is reduced to a possession. Faith serves as a justification for what we already think....

...The alternative to the exclusive standpoints of certitude and self-assurance is a ***standpoint of exploration***. Sometimes we break out ...of our habitual tendency to see only what fits our preconceived notions or to rely only on our immediate responses. At this point, we may ...attempt to discover where we are and how ...to proceed.

...The first step in finding our way is to pay careful attention to where we are. If we pause to describe the territory in as much detail as possible, the territory itself will often present us with a clue for further exploration. ...When we enter into our experience..., we may find ourselves caught up in the movement of discovery.... Following this movement will lead us on new paths and change our way of understanding the world and our place in it.

...As explorers, we enter our experience not knowing the hidden thoughts we will discover, the feelings that will arise, the images we will encounter, the questions we will endure, or the insights that will guide us.

...Transformative theological reflection [begins with] ...the standpoint of exploration.

...The process ...has a structure to it ...[that] we call... the *movement toward insight*.

The movement flows through five parts: experience, feelings, images, insight, and action. Think of them as related in a circular spiral: action ...propels us back to experience. The movement is this: When we enter our experience, we encounter our feelings. When we pay attention to those feelings, images arise. Considering and questioning those images may spark insight. Insight leads, if we are willing and ready, to action.

...The *movement toward insight* is ...a journey. ...We may not be aware of the movement. Bringing it to awareness allows our reflection to become more conscious and critical. Practicing our awareness of the movement leads to increased knowledge and more perceptive sensibilities in relation to ourselves, family, community, the earth, and our religious tradition.

Source: *The Art of Theological Reflection* by Patricia O'Connell Killen & John de Beer, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1994.

8.0: The Broken Cup & Theological Reflection

The following is a process of theological reflection developed by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer.

1. Look quietly at the picture of a broken cup.

- ◆ How is it broken?
- ◆ What can or can't be done with it?
- ◆ How is a broken cup usually regarded?
- ◆ What happens to broken cups?
- ◆ Why might you repair the broken cup pictured?

2. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Moving through your own life experience, recall times when you were a "broken cup." Briefly note one from childhood, young adulthood, and from the past year or two. Explore each one.

- ◆ What were your key thoughts and feelings?
- ◆ How were you broken?
- ◆ What did you find yourself able and unable to do?
- ◆ How do you think others regarded you and treated you?
- ◆ What happened in each situation?

Write a paragraph that begins: "When I am a broken cup, I..."

3. Go back to the broken cup and let it lead you into Unitarian Universalism.

- ◆ What does our tradition say about being broken & wanting wholeness?

- ◆ How does the “inherent worth and dignity” influence your thinking about brokenness?
 - ◆ Ernest Hemingway wrote, “The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.” How might this be true?
 - ◆ Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, tells the story of an angry, young man recovering emotionally from an amputation. In the course of his exploration of “being broken,” he revised a picture that he drew earlier of a broken vase by drawing yellow streaks extending out from the crack in the vase explaining, “This is where the light comes from.” What is the light that has flowed from your brokenness?
4. Compare and contrast the experience of and perspectives on being broken from your life, Unitarian Universalism, and common attitudes toward brokenness in our culture. From this comparison and contrast, what do you believe about being a broken cup? Write a statement about broken-cup experiences that you are willing to claim as your own.
5. What do you want to remember or do differently the next time you find yourself in the position or situation of being a broken cup? How might you engage the brokenness that you experience in others, or in the world?

Source: [Touchstones & The Art of Theological Reflection](#)

9.0: Family Matters

9.1: Windows and Mirrors

Sydney Harris observes that, “Most people are mirrors, reflecting the moods and emotions of the times; few are windows, bringing light to bear on the dark corners where troubles fester. The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.” Lucille Clifton, a Black poet, writer, and educator, offers a more nuanced view suggesting that we give children, “Mirrors in which they can see themselves, windows in which they can see the world.”

The Tapestry of Faith program, *Windows and Mirrors* by Gabrielle Farrel, Rev. Natalie Fenimore, and Dr. Jenice View, is a springboard toward theological reflection. The curriculum

- ◆ Introduces the reality and the impact of multiple perspectives and multiple experiences as we live in this world.
- ◆ Use the metaphor of a window and a mirror to help children better understand themselves in relation to others.
- ◆ Presents the windows and mirrors metaphor as an effective tool for understanding and living our Unitarian Universalist Principles.
- ◆ Guides children to identify and respect their own values, views, and needs as well as those of others in a variety of contexts; teaches that to do so is a faith practice.
- ◆ Provides children with practice in observation, interpretation, and critical thinking.
- ◆ Develops children’s empathy, open-mindedness and respect for differences, seen and unseen.

These elements are also instructive for adults as they participate in theological reflection.

Source: Touchstones &

http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/winmirrors_column.pdf

9.2: Family Activity: Windows & Mirrors

Using a large piece of cardboard for each child, invite them to create a “window” on one side and a “mirror” on the other side. On the mirror side, invite your children to describe how they appear to the world using words, drawings, or symbols. This is their outer self, how others may see them. Have them consider the fact that different people may see them differently. Then invite them to turn the cardboard over to work on the window side, the side through which they look into themselves. Ask them, “Who is your true self? What are the dreams and thoughts that maybe just a few people—or maybe only you—know?” Finally, ask them to talk about the differences between their outer self and their inner self.

10.0: Questions for Theological Reflection

The following questions are from a graduate course, *Unitarian Universalist Systematic Theology*. In *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, the *Commission on Appraisal* wrote, “We ignore the question of how we talk about and manifest theology in our congregations at our peril.” The first six categories are aligned with the book, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century* (2011) by John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, which also has a discussion guide, <https://www.beacon.org/Assets/PDFs/AHouseForHopedg.pdf>. These questions both define theological categories and prompt engaging discussions.

The Garden: Eschatology

Where are we headed? Where are we going? What is the purpose of existence? What is the horizon to which our lives are oriented? How do we contend with eschatologies of destruction? What are the components of a progressive eschatology of a world made fair and all her people one? What constitutes hell on earth? What constitutes heaven on earth (e.g., liberation of the oppressed, food for the hungry, peace for all people, reverence for the earth)? How do we make sense of the world if, as Rebecca Parker suggests, the apocalypse has already occurred?

The Sheltering Walls: Ecclesiology

Who are we/Whose are we as a people of faith? Who are we when we gather in beloved community? What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? What role, if any, does conversion play in becoming a Unitarian Universalist? What is the process of conversion? To what are we converting? How are we transformed (i.e., second order change) by conversion? What is the role of covenant in terms of how we understand who we are? What is the nature and purpose of a religious community? What brings religious community into being and binds it together? How is a Unitarian Universalist congregation different from the secular society in which it resides? How is a Unitarian Universalist congregation counter-cultural?

The Roof: Soteriology (i.e., salvation / wholeness)

How do we understand ultimacy/divinity at work in the world? What is sin? (For Gandhi, the seven deadly sins were wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principle.) What are the crucifying powers from which we need to be saved (e.g., for Walter Rauschenbusch: militarism, religious bigotry, mob spirit, greed and economic exploitation, and a corrupt system of justice)? What is salvation? How does salvation occur?

Who will be saved? In the hells made by human beings, what can heal the wounds or stop the injury? What can protect life from harm? How can communities broken by injustice be restored? How do we come to terms with evil? Who or what will deliver us from evil? How might we articulate the concept of universal salvation, i.e., a communal salvation in place of individual salvation, in ways that would be meaningful for Unitarian Universalists today? What is wholeness?

The Foundations: Theology Proper

What matters most? Since the ways in which people speak of God have profound public significance, how can we justify silence in this area? Where is God encountered? How can we speak of God in ways that are respectful of our theological diversity? What are unworthy images of God? Why? What are worthy images of God? Why?

The Welcoming Rooms: Pneumatology

How is the spirit among us? In your theological framework, what is spirit and what is soul? How, in our tradition, are spirituality and rationality in tension? How are they reinforcing aspects of the human condition? How can our congregations become a sanctuary for the Spirit? What is the role of worship in moving the Spirit among us and in growing the capacities of the human soul? How can worship and spiritual practice restore the soul when it is depleted, anesthetized, bored, satiated, shut down, fragmented, wounded, despairing, humiliated, or lost? What are, in the words of William Ellery Channing, “the powers of the soul?” How can we shelter the Spirit from the corrosive, individualistic, and narcissistic “spirituality” of contemporary culture? How can we overcome the spiritual poverty of materialism?

The Threshold: Missiology

What are we supposed to Do? How do we regard the “others” that are outside our faith, i.e., other faith traditions as well as the stranger? What is the role of our church? What is our collective mission as a community of faith? How is our mission related to the common good? What does it mean for the church to be owned by its mission? What role, if any, does evangelism play in a Unitarian Universalist congregation’s mission? What is a great commission for Unitarian Universalism? How does the work of justice relate to our mission?

Anthropology (individually) / Ecclesiology (congregationally)

What is your/our authority? What are the roles of experience and reason in developing and exercising authority? What is the interplay between experience and belief in our tradition? How does the idea of multiple intelligences influence our authority? How, if at all, are Unitarian Universalist history and tradition authoritative for Unitarian Universalists? If the ultimate locus of religious authority resides in the individual, how can that be reconciled with congregational authority beyond the instrumental role of the democratic process? To what, if anything, in our tradition is individual authority accountable?

Anthropology

What is the nature of humanity? Within the framework of the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” how are we to understand evil and sin? If we reject original sin, do we understand birth as conferring original blessing? How do we understand the interplay of nature

and nurture? What view of human nature will do justice to the complexity of human beings, as well as the motivations for personal and social transformation? How does our anthropology of the individual conflict with and/or support participation in community and “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part?”

Cosmology / Theological Ecology

What is our Unitarian Universalist theological pluralism and Diversity of belief? What is the scope of our theological pluralism (i.e., what is in and what is out)? What is the nature of the lens that makes it possible to adapt a theological perspective to Unitarian Universalism (e.g., process theology)? What is an example of a theological orientation that is outside of Unitarian Universalism? Why is it outside our Unitarian Universalist framework? What are the strengths and challenges of theological pluralism? Given the reality of theological pluralism, what holds us together?

Source: [Touchstones](#)

11.0: *Questioning Our Questions* by Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs

“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.” *Anonymous*

The usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask. Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. Questions can lead to movement and action on key issues; by generating creative insights, they can ignite change.

Consider the possibility that everything we know today about our world emerged because people were curious. They formulated a question or series of questions about something that sparked their interest or deeply concerned them, which lead them to learn something new.

...If asking good questions is so critical, why don't most of us spend more of our time and energy on discovering and framing them? One reason may be that much of Western culture, and North American society in particular, focuses on having the “right answer” rather than discovering the “right question.” Our educational system focuses more on memorization and rote answers than on the art of seeking new possibilities. We are rarely asked to discover compelling questions, nor are we taught why we should ask such questions in the first place. ...

[Actually,] it is quite easy to learn the basics of crafting powerful questions. However, once you understand the importance of inquiry, it's hard to turn back. As your questions become broader and deeper than before, so does your experience of life. There is no telling where a powerful question might lead you.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=510>