

Minister's Page

Learning as Spiritual Practice

by Reverend Dr. Brent Smith

Having created the ROOTS and BRANCHES (RB) small group program in 1991 as Senior Minister at All Souls in Tulsa, I was eager to see if it could help the new start I was involved in ten years later in Grand Rapids, Michigan, All Souls Community Church (UU). Because RB integrates education and fellowship, it might help implant this as part of a new congregation's DNA. "Learning," Merlin tells young Arthur, "is the only thing that never fails." Small Groups can help UU's employ learning as a spiritual practice. Before I arrived, congregants had come to see learning, along with worship, as central to community by deepening the covenant with one another that formed them into a spiritual endeavor. We just needed to decide on what wine needed to be in the new wineskins!

The RB program begins with newcomers completing the four session ROOTS experience for those considering a deeper relationship to the community than attendance at worship. This is taught by the minister, regardless of the size of the congregation! Upon completion of ROOTS, those interested in membership are gathered into a BRANCHES group, meeting monthly or semi-monthly, and led by a longer-standing lay member trained by the minister and a member of a minister-led BRANCHES Leaders group. The BRANCHES small group experience is formed around learning, fellowship, and service. The service component involves BOTH the congregation and the larger community. This teaches practical churchmanship inside and volunteerism outside the congregation. The fellowship component involves BRANCHES groups enjoying the fellowship of one another, fellowship amongst all groups, and serving the congregation by creating fellowship opportunities for all. The learning component is the most important of all. Using materials chosen by the minister and mentored by the BRANCHES group lay leader, this involves reading and discussing primary source material including current and famous historical sermons, documents, and interpretations of classic Unitarian and Universalist theology, polity, spiritual practice, and cultural critique. The aim, guided by the lay leader's direction, is to assist each member in giving articulation to their individual faith, and coming to understand the collective faith identity of the particular, covenanted congregation, and our common Unitarian Universalist tradition. Identity building is the aim, especially helping individuals to understand themselves as part of an historical, theological viewpoint that transcends subjectivity by and through a communal covenant upholding individuality. A faith tradition existed before any of us arrived, a "pool of saints living and dead" into which we dive and are "baptized" in a manner true to "us."

UU's have valued education as far back as the 16th century congregational movements out of which we came. Even the Transcendentalists started out as small group learning, called "Hedge's Club"! And, we revolutionized church school education in the 1900's as part of this "learning" tradition. Yet, in the 21st century, we are somewhat tepid in our educational pursuits regarding religion and our UU faith. We admittedly lack knowledge of our own history, too often treat evangelical Christianity as if its particularity is universal, do not see our theological connections to Judaism, and forget our links to Islam go back to the 1500's! We lack some basic understandings of theology, sometimes reduce philosophy to materialism, and on too many occasions dismiss religious experience as psychological weakness. And we may not realize how knowing congregational polity and why it arose, might assist us in our Board meetings!

A church beginning begs the question of spiritual identity. How are we religious? How are we different religiously from others, especially other liberal religionists? How is our spiritual liberality distinct from

politics? Even, how our various congregational cultures are similar and different from one another? This is the pool of questions every congregation swims in. The new one just knows it's wet!

There are religious and theological reasons why we have always viewed science as a friend in the interpretation and meaning of human existence when others have not. There are Unitarian views of the human-God relationship that justified general, liberal education in that the ignorant cannot be free nor unfold in their likeness to the divine. Universalist declarations of God's Love for all yielded public service fruits coveted and envied by other faiths. And the chief challenge of the 21st century - the challenge of connecting with the "religious other" - will be addressed best by those who know spiritually who they are, what forms the shape of their faith tradition, and **through a particular identity**, practice engaging others with a curiosity that is universal and respectful.

And what better way for new and old UU congregations to splash about in spiritual identity than by learning something new together in a companionship of the Spirit yearning to be free?

The Reverend Doctor Brent Smith was a UU parish minister for nearly 27 years, serving our largest congregation, a new start congregation, and is now on the faculty of Grand Valley State University (MI) helping to develop a Religious Studies major and department.

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