

# **PANEL ON THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

**PACIFIC CENTRAL DISTRICT ASSEMBLY  
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION**



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# PANEL ON THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

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Pacific Central District  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
6536 Telegraph Avenue, Suite C-102  
Oakland, California 94609  
(510) 601-1437  
email: [uuapcd@aol.com](mailto:uuapcd@aol.com)

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## FOREWORD

by Elizabeth Fisher

At the Annual District Assembly held in Oakland in April, I had the good fortune to participate on a panel exploring how our personal theology informs our daily actions. The panel consisted of individuals from four congregations who identified their theology as predominantly nature-based, humanist, theist or Christian. Each of us delivered a ten minute statement, followed by a brief conversation among us and then comments from the audience. Judging from the reactions during and following the event, the panel was very useful to those attending.

Because theological conversation is one of my favorite pastimes, I eagerly volunteered to compile and edit these statements, then produce them as a published booklet. By having them in written form, others who did not have the pleasure of attending, as well as those who did, would have a chance to review these statements and perhaps do some thinking about how they would respond to the following question that stimulated the panel:

How does your theological perspective inform your choices as you live out your UU values on a day to day basis?

Here are some of the highlights of our conversation. We found out that all of us felt a strong personal identification with Unitarian Universalism. We each declared we find support and stimulation in being a part of a denomination that encourages theological diversity. The concluding paragraph of our UU Statement of Principles, adopted continentally in 1985, summarizes this communal sentiment beautifully. It is the basis upon which we intentionally pledge to one another, known as "covenanting" in religious parlance.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations, we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

I knew before the panel that even though we all value tolerance, practice sometimes falls short. Feelings can run high around religious beliefs. So, while I hoped for dialog, I was prepared for debate. What took place was surprising to me and many who attended. While panel members sincerely acknowledged appreciation for aspects of perspectives they were not directly representing, the tone of the panel was more than tolerance. Rather, the participants identified significant intersections they feel among the sources upon which Unitarian Universalism draws — direct experience, wisdom of the

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world religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, Humanist teachings, and spiritual teachings of nature-centered traditions. Among these are:

- placing significant importance on personal responsibility
- supporting ethical action in the world as one of theology's primary purposes
- appreciating the lessons nature and indigenous teachings offer
- paying attention to the contributions of science to theological inquiry
- focusing reflection on careful evaluation of beliefs and perspectives, sometimes called "the use of reason," not idolizing a supernatural being

During the comment period, another side of theological diversity within our denomination surfaced. Several who spoke shared their frustration with what they perceived as a lack of tolerance for theological diversity within congregations. One speaker testified that because he didn't adhere to only one source, but found inspiration and support in all, he was perceived by some in his congregation as "soft minded." Another, that theology is rarely discussed in her home church for fear of uncontrollable conflict surfacing.

It was my sense the panel helped many who attended further clarify what being a Unitarian Universalist meant to them. Increasing education about our sources within our local congregations, and scheduling more formal exploration of the nature of our personal theologies were both endorsed as effective ways to relieve tensions and expand understanding.

As Dr. David Sammons, the moderator of the panel, concluded:

In summary, our speakers have chosen to walk together as Unitarian Universalists because they "want to be in a relational community" in which they "don't have to deal with six things in which they don't believe before breakfast," but struggle to "relate to the divine," whatever that is, "both within and without" so they can "be the best they can be." Walking together we "breathe in and breathe out our faith perspectives" with, says panelist John Klopacz, "pagan minds, Jewish hearts, and Christian souls," living as best we humanly can with all our human blessings and faults. Together we want to be able to honor life and to live out a theology of hospitality, no matter what the stories or symbols we use to remind us of the importance of this.

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## NATURE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY AS ETHICAL GUIDE

by Elizabeth Fisher

As I considered this issue of defining my personal theology and its impact on my actions in the world, I quickly realized our denominational claiming of diverse sources of religious and ethical inspiration is an important reason why I identify myself as a Unitarian Universalist. Despite moments of discomfort during worship which is not stylistically pleasing to me, it didn't take long for me to acknowledge that our denominational respect for theological diversity both steadies and enlivens my own ability to choose how I will act in the world.

I am most supported personally by what we have come to know as earth-based spirituality, with a key component being inclusion of the female divine. However, I must admit the emphasis on universal equality that humanism brings to us as well as its respect for well reasoned beliefs, the Christian love teachings of Jesus, and the fair and compassionate quality of liberal Judaism have all been significant and inspirational influences upon me. With that in mind, I am especially pleased to be a part of this public discussion and look forward to the other panelists' reflections.

Now, to turn my attention to earth-based spirituality. For me, three key beliefs of nature-centered theology have special significance.

First, **Spirit is a dynamic essence present in *all* that exists.** This Spirit is an ethical intelligence which has been called Oversoul, Cosmic Soul, Goddess/God. Spirit provides a web-like structure.... an interconnectedness....which, when fully felt, dissolves the illusion of isolation.

Second, **natural processes teach us the ways of the Spirit.** To discern these, and then to live in harmony with them, is to become a serious student of the "mysteries of the universe." This is a dynamic process we are all an intimate part of. This cycling of birth, life, completion and renewal, named the "sacred circle of life" in the sixth source of inspiration in our UU Principles, is active on all levels of our experience, not just in the physical world. It counters the widespread perception that we are here to use our human intelligence to manipulate static content....an orientation often encouraged by the mechanized worldview, still current and all too popular.

Third, **all individuals can come to know Spirit *through direct personal experience, not dogma or dictates.*** Further, we are called to co-create with this ethical intelligence with the charge that what we create...to the best of our ability...must support the well-being of a balanced, ecologically healthy system.

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What ethical implications do I draw from these perspectives? Here are a few.

**To value all elements and beings in the natural world, and their interconnection, which creates an ethos of just and empathetic behavior.** By inference, social equality exists among humans, female and male, and among all races and classes. We must find ways to do our part to consciously foster opportunities that actualize this equality.

**To refuse to accept pain and suffering as a necessity and to make significant efforts toward the work of eliminating human produced suffering.** This requires us to find ways we can advocate for equal access for all to spiritual and material comfort, creative fulfillment and a sense of belonging. This requires a constant and vigilant emphasis on the perspective that each being has "a vital part to play" and deserves respect.

**To revere nature as a *home* rather than seeing the natural world as an adversary.** This calls us to work with Nature, not to try to dominate her. Humans can live in harmony with nature only if we recast many of our approaches to the ways we live in the world. It is our responsibility to discover and implement ways that we can contribute to regaining needed ecological integration and balance.

Now how do I apply these ethics to my life in the late twentieth century?

Out of love for all in the system, I seek to find appropriate ways to use my life to redress inequities. Being an ally to the voiceless has been one of my choices, including my own personal spirit when I feel silenced by unfair circumstances. Seizing opportunities where and when they arise in my life, rather than waiting for the perfect setup, has become my methodology.

I make a crucial and constant effort to be at least as proactive as I am reactive. This requires being present to possibility; looking for ways to actualize some part of "what I have always wanted to do but never had the time to do." I have also found that the bigger the vision the smaller each piece appears to be, making me increasingly sensitive to the importance of being patient with the necessity of what seems like small steps.

Being open to journeying, which means leaving spaces for this journeying in my daily schedule, has been my antidote to the speed of modern life. I actively facilitate bringing into my life that which I have not yet experienced, welcoming what arises from this free form contact. My Spirit becomes enlivened through openness to these new exchanges, just as cells continually replace themselves in my body.

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In closing, to be useful in a changing world, ethical belief systems need to be elastic and responsive while structured enough to support action. So, also, find contact with a diversity of theological perspectives actually enhances possibilities for creating a viable system that can guide my journey effectively while maintaining its probability for poetry and charm.

Despite the difficulties we sometimes have coexisting peaceably in a theologically diverse community, when considering the value of claims of varied but compatible theological and ethical perspectives, I ask these five questions.

Can we simultaneously be:  
humanistic earth-based spiritualists...  
or nature-honoring humanists...  
or christianized humanists...  
or humanistic christians...  
or christianized pagans...or paganized christians?

Obviously this is an idealized view of how we might be able to accept and even embrace our diversity, an ethic of hope perhaps, but it has worked for me...and I recommend it.

Because I am seeking some personally satisfying mix of beliefs and practices that ties me to a greater whole, I have needed throughout my life an on-going idealistic vision. Rather than disappointing and corny, I find the idealism, hope and possibility like whole food...the body craves the trace elements hope provides, elements we can't even identify. Because our theological mix honors diversity, both historically and contemporarily, it carries many trace elements which have sustained me through hard times, inspired and motivated me to act in new and enriching ways, and provided me with support and stimulation. What more can I ask of my community?

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