

UU Soup: Season to Taste
Beacon UU Congregation
January 16, 2022
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Many years ago, on a crisp winter day not unlike this one, my fifth -grade son, Sam, came home from school and announced that his class would be having a pasta party that Friday. Each family was expected to contribute a noodle dish to the feast. Sam deduced that everyone would probably "bring spaghetti or something" and that we should try to be unique. I cleverly suggested my Grandma Esther's noodle kugel - a sweet creamy dessert. Sam agreed. But then I panicked...what if I didn't have the recipe? Where would I get it now that my Grandmother and my Mother are both dead?

My heart raced as I pulled down my mother's well-worn leather recipe box from the pantry shelf. It was dusty from scant use during the previous 12 years, but just holding it proved to be moving and poignant. I started leafing through the box, every card a mouthwatering memory or association: brisket with cherry wine, sweet and sour meatballs, scintillating lemon pie. And then, finally, I located the coveted kugel recipe, scrawled in my mother's graceful and familiar handwriting on a yellowing recipe card. In her fashion, she had jotted the word "Yum!" in the corner.

The ingredients are quite pedestrian and the recipe simple. Yet, for me, creating that dessert had been like performing a sacred ritual. As I beat the eggs and sprinkled the cinnamon, I realized that *this* is a recipe for a lot more than noodle kugel. It is a recipe for remembrance, for connection, for communion; a form of Jewish table wisdom passed down from generation to generation ; a legacy blended and baked and sweetened with joy and with tears.

"Eat this in remembrance of me," Grandma Esther calls out from her grave at Bnai Brith cemetery in Pittsburgh. "Eat this and remember." How shall I answer her? How shall any of us answer the dead and honor their legacies?

Most of us, I presume, are searching for ways to stay connected with the living and the dead in this disconnected world. We seek some form of communion, some home-cooking, to nourish us in this fast-food, disposable culture. Indeed, we each represent a unique recipe that combines the flavorful ingredients of our traditions and our heritage, our religious identities and our family histories. Our individual lives have made us the "recipes" that we are -- a soufflé or a rib roast, a hamentaschen or a Yule Log; a potato latke or a hot cross bun; a red-dyed Greek Easter egg or lentils simmered in curry for Ramadan.

The question remains whether we have access anymore to this table wisdom or if we find ourselves increasingly cut off from the feast. "Thou artest what thou eatest," quipped Brillat-Savarin. And if this is true, then, for better or for worse, we aren't what we used to be, because many of us no longer eat the foods we grew up on, literally *and* metaphorically speaking.

Studies show that fewer and fewer Americans even know how to cook, or make the attempt. We rely increasingly on quick processed microwaveable meals and meal kits that fit into our increasingly processed lifestyles and current food fads. In America, our individual uniqueness can, at times blend into one big Cheeseburger (or Beyond Burger) with fries.

Dan Smith, a colleague from Harvard Divinity School, commented on this phenomenon in his sermon, "The Roots of Memory." He writes: "Our memories are being anaesthetized by unceasing demands of that which is trivial, fleeting and fashionable. I suspect we might even spend more time thinking about the memory in our computers than the memories in our lives, our religions, and our families."

Smith reminds me that the Hebrew word for remember is *Zakar*, which in biblical times carried not just a passive and nostalgic sense of recalling the past, but it had an active sense as well. To remember the commandments for the ancients was not just a matter of recital, but of observance. Likewise, remembering Jesus meant acting as he acted. "Believe it or not," writes Smith, "there is something very irreligious about forgetting, because being religious is about being rooted in the shared memory of community. The church is more than anything else, a community of memory."

In Unitarian Universalism, my adopted tradition, I often wonder (even, fret) about the degree of communal memory or the level of familiarity with the UU "recipe." Critics both inside and outside of our movement suggest that we are a smorgasbord of side dishes with no main course; a "salad bowl religion," or worse, a twice-warmed Sunday supper of what Grandma Esther would call *Kakapitzamadritza* -- leftovers!

In reality, I believe that we are a more akin to a soup base that has simmered for centuries, rich in its integrity, courage, and faithfulness. Just as the word religion itself implies a "binding together," our UU soup blends cabbage from Transylvania, sausage from Poland, corn from the Iowa Sisterhood, fine wine from the Enlightenment, a meaty bone from the New Englanders. "Eat this in remembrance of me," calls out Michael Servetus, William Ellery Channing, Olympia Brown. How shall we answer them?

Apprenticing to our individual family legacies takes commitment and courage. I'm grateful that my mother took the time so that I could make noodle kugel for my son's fifth grade class. Likewise, apprenticing to our UU past takes

time, just as Nancy Aronie's long-simmering "Yesterday's Soup" [in our reading this morning] requires many hours to become something more than "water with things floating in it." UU scholar and minister Paul Rasor has noted that "many of us UUs are so eager to reject our religious past that we try to start over from scratch every generation."

And I agree with Paul's conclusion that, ultimately, this approach to UUism is both unnecessary and self-defeating. Instead, we can begin by researching the ingredients that comprise our UU soup base -- the history, theologies, principles, purposes, and sources -- before we creatively toss in reclaimed morsels from our religious upbringings (as I have with my Jewishness); along with the amounts of salt or pepper or herbs or vegetables that makes the soup palatable for each of us in our quests for religious truth and meaning and the creation of a grounded credo. This may not our Grandmother's recipe of faith, but it nourishes many of us. And in the end, I know Grandma would want to see us well-fed.

You may not be aware that the meaning of the word "credo" is "what we willingly give our hearts to." Well, since it's been said that a way to a person's heart is through their stomach, let's get started on a batch of savory and satisfying UU soup, by gathering together our ingredients and retrieving a large stock pot from the cupboard...we'll need it.

First, if science offers us a way to explain the world and religion provides a context for living in it, then, by all means, we are *really* a religion. Our religious "principles" respond powerfully to the challenges of living in this oft-perplexing world. Moreover, we are a religion with a time-tested, blue-ribbon recipe, and it is simply not accurate or fair for us to be defined or to self-define as merely "creedless."

Former UUA President Bill Schulz, who wrote our chalice lighting today, remarks that "to affirm creedlessness alone may be to get the process right but to lose one's vision of what is most important along the way. If UUism is to be a religion worthy of its name, it must provide a faith in substance and not just style, in meaning not just in manner, in power and not just in process." In other words, we need to cook up an honest but creative soup that is rich, layered and filling.

The danger we UUs face, as do all people of faith, is in ripping open a packet of instant Cup-of-soup, gobbling it on the run, and convincing ourselves that we've accomplished the same depth of spiritual experience. As Schulz suggests, we need to acknowledge that religion is a meal, not a snack. It is chowder rather than broth, or at least it should be. Woody Allen once said, "I read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It's about Russia." That's how some of us approach religion at times, and not surprisingly, it fails to satisfy our hunger.

Although we might not always be aware of it, our tradition is more refined than a haphazard *Mrs. Murphy's Chowder* of borrowing, hyphenating, and rejecting. Our soup base is thickened and flavored by Enlightenment root values such as freedom for the individual conscience, the use of reason and discernment, compassionate engagement with the world, a healthy pinch of skepticism, openness to the sacred in its many forms, the free pulpit and the free pew.

And just as potatoes marry carrots and kidney beans ignite chickpeas in "Yesterday's Soup," conscience merges with compassion, reason blends with reverence, skepticism ignites wonder, and our UU soup takes on a vibrant and flavorful life of its own.

Some of you may be familiar with the timeless folk tale, Stone Soup, in which three soldiers happen upon a village. In turn, the peasants hide all their food in barns and under mattresses. In the clever battle of wits that ensues, the soldiers propose to make a wonderful soup with three stones. But, of course, they explain, it's so much better if one adds a carrot or two; some meat and barley would be nice, an onion, perhaps some cabbage or potato.

Ultimately, the soup is a savory stew shared by the villagers, who dine and dance and sing together in a way they hadn't in years. Imagine, a rich man's soup and all from a few stones! In the morning the whole village gathers in the square for a warm send-off. "Many thanks for what you taught us," said the peasants. "We shall never go hungry now that we know how to make soup from stones."

Coincidentally, we UUs can also concoct a marvelous soup from stones to stave off our religious hunger and bind us together in religious community. I'm speaking now of James Luther Adams' *Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism*, a profound religious affirmation and an eloquent expression of our faith. Each stone adds its flavor and texture to our soup base --they are:

1. Revelation is continuous;
2. all association between persons ought to be voluntary, rather than coercive;
3. there is a moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community;
4. the form of virtue is not immaculate, rather it requires social incarnation; and
5. resources, divine and human, are available for the achievement of meaningful change, justifying an attitude of ultimate optimism. Tasty stuff, isn't it?; especially when each villager takes part by tossing in some meaningful morsel.

Now that I've whet your appetite and our soup base is set to simmer, let's turn to the process of individual seasoning that so keenly distinguishes us as a religious tradition. Surely, we are in agreement that UUism is not a *soufflé* that can be easily messed up if we botch the recipe. And most of us are likely glad of it. Nonetheless, in my view, we're still obligated to undertake both a *free* and a

responsible search for truth and meaning (our fourth principle) or to continue our soup metaphor, to season the stock pot with both creativity and integrity.

The UUA put out a pamphlet some years ago, titled, " Can I Believe Anything I Want?" As the author Elizabeth Strong put it, "UUism is not the freedom to believe anything or nothing. It is the freedom to reason and feel your own way to what the evidence leads you to believe." "You have the freedom to form your own beliefs," she writes, " but there are responsibilities that go with this freedom.

Such as: understanding why you believe as you do (how did your recipe evolve?); learning from your experiences (have some soup experiments gone bad?) , using your mind to reason and find answers (more salt or less?); exploring the beliefs and practices of the world's religions (how much curry in Mulligatawny?) ; and learning about UUism, past and present (what went into the soup base in the first place?).

And then, once our UU soup has simmered and bubbled and blended and merged, after we've tossed in the seasonings that make the soup most palatable for each of us, after we've oohed and ahed, and stirred, and added, and experienced that "Oh no, I ruined it" terror, then we can savor that first steaming spoonful and serve this rich, layered "Yesterday's Soup" proudly to our families, our friends, and even our detractors.

But remember, we can only heat up the same soup so many times before bacteria begins to form. We need to either live in accordance with our religious recipes or update them boldly when they become bland. Yes, soup is the ultimate comfort food, yet whenever our religion feels fully comfortable and clear, safe and warm, totally cheerful and free of care, whenever it makes no undue demands on our time, our conscience, our creativity, or our tried and true assumptions -- whenever its that simple, its not enough...it is Today's Soup -- water with floating things.

So, I encourage you to search further, dig deeper. Chop, peel, and simmer. Sacrifice a little more. Be braver..try to touch the outer limits of our faith. Let religion ground our joy, but let it also shake us. But mostly, let it sustain us like a steaming bowl of nourishment on a wintry afternoon. You can share this quest with me beginning Feb 6 from 12-1:15 on zoom as we explore and discuss the book "A Faith for all seasons" and how our liberal religion can respond to the crises and realities we experience. Details and links to the materials are in the e-news and on our website.

I believe that in a life and in a religion examined, there is always food for thought and a place for reclaimed wisdom. What wisdom might *you* be yearning to find in the recipe boxes of your personal past and our shared UU history?

Let us be a community of both memory and innovation, and may we come hungry to this communion of spirits, this banquet of memories pungent and sweet. Live worthy of this bounty. Arrange some flavorful root vegetables artfully around a solid smooth stone, season it, savor it from first spoonful to last. Scrawl out the ingredients on an index card, protect it in a box, preserve it in your heart, and *remember* to pass it on.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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