

Radical
Queer
Trinity

I wonder which part of that title is the most mysterious for each person sitting here this morning. Probably *not* the word *radical* – Unitarianism, Universalism, and their subsequent joint venture have been considered radical since their inceptions. Radical in every sense of the word – relating to the fundamental nature of something – religion in this case, including theology and understanding of our very existence, *and* having to do with complete and thorough change.

Maybe it's the third word? Why do we need to talk the trinity – didn't we drop that concept almost two centuries ago? We are only five months away from the bicentennial of William Ellery Channing's Baltimore Sermon where he took the term Unitarian which had been thrown at us as an insult and turned it into a banner of identity. Of course, we have been called lots of other names over the years without choosing to clothe ourselves in all of them. Not requiring adherence to a creed, we really have no idea how many people in Unitarian churches may have still believed in the trinity over the years and when we then include the Universalists, I think it is fair to say that Unitarian versus Trinitarian really hasn't mattered to us for a pretty long time.

The idea of the trinity can seem mysterious. How can something be both one and three at the same time? I am not alone in having spent decades in Christian churches without being able to give a coherent explanation of the trinity and why it matters. I know a few Christian ministers who don't have a very good answer. And I completely understand if some of you wonder why it matters, in this Unitarian Universalist place.

I believe the ideas inherent in the concept of the trinity – radical queer ideas – contain an inspirational example that is far greater than the dogmatic cages which ecclesiastical authorities have tried to stuff them into. And I recognize that churches created by those same authorities have caused traumatic injury – emotional, spiritual, sometimes even physical – injury to countless *individuals* who don't fit into narrowly designed enclosures – of belief, gender, sexuality, and other areas. That is more than enough reason for many to have no interest.

But we draw from Christian teachings as one our sources, even today. And we are living in a time of incredible creativity and growth in theology. And that is where the middle word of the title comes in. What does queer have to do with the trinity? Part of my Unitarian Universalist journey has involved finding my way to a personal Christian identity which is dramatically different than the one I grew up with. Finding my way to a Christian identity which is healthy, joyous, life-affirming, and compatible with the larger Unitarian Universalist movement and I could not have done it without queer theology.

The most basic definition of queer theology is: queer talk about God. It starts in the word queer. No word in my life has undergone a greater transformation. From a historically negative connotation of oddness, and strangeness, especially in terms of sexuality, it has been reclaimed in an intentionally transgressive manner. It still means *different* but those of us who now use it about ourselves and our theology find *different* to be a very good thing. In addition to sexuality and gender identity, *queer* can embrace *all* that is transgressive or opposed to

societal norms. As a verb it turns that which is seen as normal, including heteronormative theologies, upside down and inside out, turning convention and authority on their head.

Queer *theology* is a theological method that is self-consciously transgressive, deconstructing boundaries, including essentialist or fixed binary categories of sexuality and gender, but is also intent on uncovering *all* silenced voices or hidden perspectives. It is built on apologetic, liberation, and relational theologies and reconsiders foundational elements of the Christian faith, including things like the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the trinity as very queer concepts which challenged and transcended the norms of the world two millennia ago, bringing hope to many in despair, and still able to provide a guide for personal transformation and resisting oppression today.

I'm going to ask you to consider, for the next few minutes, that every single idea you may have ever heard about Christianity and religion in general can be understood in another way which may reveal something very different than what was presented to you in the past.

A good place to start is terminology. Let's start with that word "God," not just because some of us don't *believe* in the concept of a creator god, but because it has been so often distorted, misappropriated, and perverted in the service of normativity and exploitation that we *need* to queer it, transform it. I want to use the term Vast Mystery. Vast because the concept of god is often explained as the ground of *all* being. Mystery because in every iteration of religion and even of scientific explanations which purport to be free of religion, there is an unexplainable element of origin. We do not know – for certain - what came before the breath over the waters, the island in the sky, the black bird with wings, the bang, or the host of other explanations for how it all began.

Vast Mystery is queer in part because its nature defies categories and boundaries. In the original languages of the scriptures of our Jewish faith sources, in different places the vast mystery is singular and multiple, sometimes male and sometimes female. Sometimes just breath, which has no gender at all.

Then there's Jesus. In the world of the Roman empire, the embodiment of Vast Mystery had to present as a male. Otherwise they would never have been allowed to speak enough words in a public space to inspire anyone to follow them. But when we queer the character known as Jesus, we have, to start with – in light of the virgin birth – a human being who theoretically had no Y chromosome. So, the title Son doesn't seem quite appropriate nor does the pronoun *he* quite fit. The *role* of this element of the trinity was to break down a seemingly eternal boundary which had previously limited relationship with Vast Mystery to just a small group of people. And they did this largely by telling stories and parables, making friends with and helping people despite rigid social boundaries, persuading people that they did not have to live the way society expected. They used logos, logic, reasoning, to deepen people's connection with vast mystery. Let's call this element of the trinity All Logic.

And finally, we have the character often called the holy spirit which has always been a tough concept for people to grab hold of, partly because spirit is difficult to personify, and we like to personify things. In my youth I often heard it called the holy ghost. That term might be easier to personify. I know of a devout southern Baptist woman who once shared with my mom that the term holy ghost always reminded her of Caspar, the friendly ghost, and she visualized Caspar running up and down the aisles of the church and along the pews. Which certainly sounds friendlier than ideas like being slain in the spirit.

This element of the trinity, thought of as incorporeal, is portrayed in scripture as facilitating a *direct* experience and awareness of the divine *in* humans. Not mystics or oracles but ordinary, everyday individuals. That was radically different from human/divine relationships in the past and this interaction was often expressed as one of love, so let's call this element Radical Love.

The thing about this element which seems paramount to me is that it is the *third* participant - the one which prevents this concept from being a pair, a couple, a binary – and it is of no less importance than the other two. Prior to the concept of the trinity, human/divine relationships were essentially and primarily binary. Even when there more than two categories, they were always part of a hierarchy. God/humans, heaven/earth/hell. Some entity was always better, above, in charge.

The egalitarian nature of the trinity was confusing to those in the ancient rigidly hierarchical world. Aristotle's teachings almost killed it. He taught there were ten different qualities to all things but the significant ones for this topic are the qualities of substance and relationship. Substance was special because it was independent of all else. It was also higher, better than relationship. As they gained access to the reins of power and worked to secure supremacy for their faith, the western church tried to prove that their God was a substance because that was the best that something could be. They turned vast mystery into a monarch, a lone critical spectator, effectively elevating them above logic and love.

Augustine tried to fix it later by saying that *all three* elements of the trinity were substances, which did make them equal but no more dynamic. Aquinas finally came along and said that it was the relationship between the three elements which constituted the nature that is the substance of the trinity. The relationship is what really matters. And yet various groups – denominations, movements, theologians – throughout history continued to exalt one or another member of the trinity over the others in practice, creating a sense of hierarchy rather than equality.

The power of the trinity is in relationship, in a flowing dance. Like the props of a juggler. Singly and sitting still, they are just substances. In the hands of the juggler - in motion - they become a relationship. Always moving, never the same moment to moment, in constant interplay with one another.

Within the trinity *nothing* dominates. Vast mystery, all logic, and radical love dance around *together*. Instead of power *over*, there is power *with* – sharing, letting go, trusting. That is quite queer. That is transgressive. It is not how much of the world worked then or now.

What can a radical queer trinity mean for a Unitarian Universalist? It might provide a frame for comparison - of our lives, our institutions, our communities. Can we sense vast mystery *and* all logic *and* radical love moving together in life? Not just being there as substances but in symbiotic relationship? Can we have humility to welcome vast mystery – to recognize there are things about existence we may never know? Can we have a deep awareness of interdependence which all logic brings – that we are only one of a seemingly infinite number of participants in the universe, all of which matter as much as us? Can we feel radical love, foundational, all encompassing, radical love – not approval but love – even between us and people we don't like? I'm not asking only can we love them. Can we recognize that they can love us? Can we find them in the dance?

I don't believe we are meant to be a substance. I believe we are meant to be a relationship. It is not automatic. The greatest danger facing humanity now may be a profound and painful sense of disconnection. In the world around are people who believe, at least for the moment, that they are alone or that they only exist as part of a tribe, with most of the universe arrayed against them. Sometimes we find ourselves in that number. Can we, as individuals and as a healthy loving community, work to change that? I believe the trinity gives us a model for connecting. Can your spirit, your consciousness, your soul, whatever you call the essence of you, can you dance? Can you reach out and join with mystery, logic, and love, with one another, with strangers, recognizing that there are no destinations, there are no unchanging answers, there is no other. There is only the constant flow of creation.

When we queer it, the trinity can be wonderfully transgressive. It shows us that the foundational nature of reality is relational. That sounds very Unitarian Universalist to me. And that is no surprise. Because we are pretty queer.

May it be so. And Amen.