

FOUR BY FOUR: FOUR RELIGIONS, FOUR WAYS OF FINDING
MEANING

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Dec. 12, 2004

In mountainous states, particularly those in the Rocky Mountain west, four-wheeling is a popular sport in summer and fall before the snow flies. One of the hairiest, scariest four-wheel drive roads in the Rockies, maybe in the world, is Black Bear Pass between Telluride and Ouray, Colorado.

In a song entitled The Black Bear Road, the country singer C.W. McCall, in the 70's, immortalized this 25 mile stretch of so-called road which is little more than a strip of rocks marked by exhaust stains, blood, spilled oil and gas, and bits of metal and rubber tread, overlooking cliffs hundreds of feet high. The scenery is spectacular from the Black Bear Road, but one is never sure one will return alive. And some don't.

Four wheel drive vehicles, such as Jeeps, Broncos, Blazers, and other SUVs, operate on a chassis engineered so that all four wheels are powered by the engine, rather than the two-wheel drive principle, in which a vehicle's front OR back wheels are the only ones powered and the other two just come along. Presumably this four wheel drive gives the vehicle more traction, more power in the crunch, makes it safer because all four wheels are operating together to give the driver more resources to call upon on snowy, muddy, or icy roads.

However, it can also mean that all four wheels get in trouble together, putting all those resources in the ditch at the same time. Much depends upon the driver.

Our service today brings together four powerful sets of resources, four approaches to religious human life that we may find useful or dangerous, depending on our skills as drivers, as religious seekers. And I would like to take us on a religious four-wheel drive tour this afternoon.

I want to touch very briefly on the four noble truths of Buddhism, which offer one understanding of the nature of human life; the four most transformative characteristics of human living as exemplified in Advent, the Christian season which precedes Christmas; the four agreements of Toltec wisdom which offer an avenue to a transformed human life; and the four questions posed by scholars John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, in their book entitled "Excavating Jesus", which suggest an avenue for faith communities which seek to transform human life.

So here we go a four-wheeling!

Buddhism is a faith tradition that does not propose a higher power, a deity to be worshipped and whose laws must be obeyed. Rather, Buddhism asks followers to contemplate the practices of their own lives, to meditate in order to reach understanding of their own nature, and to seek enlightenment and joy through right choices.

Buddhism offers the Four Noble Truths, as an understanding of the nature of human life. The First Noble Truth is that all life is suffering. All human beings will suffer, some more than others, some less. But human life is a life of suffering.

The Second Noble Truth is that most human suffering is caused by desire, desire which comes from wanting things beyond what is actually needed. We suffer and cause others to suffer when we crave anything we don't really need, whether that is food or drink or possessions or fame or status or power. We suffer because we are not satisfied and think we need more than we really do.

The Third Noble Truth is that we can end our self-induced suffering. It is possible to cease our craving and our desire for things we do not need.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a path leading to the elimination of suffering. The Eightfold Path of Buddhism is made up of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Let's look first at the usefulness of these four principles. Most of us are aware of the desires that get us into trouble and we can see that they do cause us suffering. Some of these desires may be for addictive substances or behaviors, like alcohol or sex. But some are more subtle.

I am aware, for example, that if I repeatedly allow myself to be taken advantage of by someone and don't speak up about it, I begin to suffer. That suffering might be related to my desire to wring that someone's neck, but I think it really springs from my deep desire to be liked by the person who is taking advantage of me. I am afraid that if I speak up, I won't be liked or loved. Yet my resentment grows and I see my relationship with that person through a filter of irritation and eventually anger.

So it's useful to be reminded that our unreasonable desires cause us pain and that there is a path which can relieve our suffering.

At the same time, the Four Noble Truths can be interpreted in less healthy ways. Because little mention is made in these truths about living in community, a person might become isolated, might avoid others, finding it easier to squelch desire by staying away from objects of desire. We all know what it's like not to have anything sweet in the house when we're trying to diet. It may be easier, but it doesn't squelch the desire for the sweet; it often makes the desire more intense, even if we don't succumb.

So the Four Noble Truths have their usefulness and their dangers.

What are the characteristics of Advent, which is the Christian season we're in right now, and how might they be useful or dangerous?

Growing up Baptist, a faith tradition which doesn't put much stock in ritual and ceremony, I never learned anything about the Advent season. Oh, there were those cute little Advent calendars with the little doors to open that our cousins had, but our parents never talked about Advent, other than to explain that it was a way of anticipating Jesus' birth by celebrating every day for the four weeks before Christmas.

Well, I don't know about the rest of you who are mothers, but when I was pregnant and awaiting my son's birth, every day of the four weeks before his birthdate was spent not in celebrating but in wondering just how much longer before I could see my feet, just how much longer could I stand the ache in my back, just how much longer I could put up with blimphood before my child was born and put me out of my misery (little did I know!).

So Advent has meant little to me as a season. However, during the Advent season in a Lutheran church, such as Trinity or in other mainline denominations, religious folks think deeply about four qualities of human life which are particularly sacred and which are universally celebrated: faith, the trust we have in each other and in God, or the universe; hope, the reassurance we receive from others that we belong, that we are part of the human family; love, the reassurance we give others that we are connected to them, and joy, the outcome of lives lived in trust, hope, and love.

We all experience these moments in human life and most of us seek to increase their frequency, by living in ways that we have learned since our birth. However, most of us also have our human baggage, the events of our lives that have trained us to fear each other sometimes, to cling to hopelessness, to withhold love on occasion, and to question whether or not we deserve our joy.

These habitual actions which deprive us of faith, hope, love, and joy often cause us to turn to religion, to psychotherapy, to friends and other confidantes, but sometimes to negative sources of relief---addictive behaviors such as overeating, overspending, sexual obsession, drugging and drinking, ragefulness--ordinary behaviors run amuck which nevertheless can provide temporary relief from the anxiety caused by an unhappy life.

The Christian tradition offers a connection to God through Jesus the Christ, as a way to cope with negative behaviors. When one becomes a Christian and enters a congregation which is devoted to supporting members in community, to reaching out to others, and to seeking justice for the oppressed, the person often finds relief and a pathway to the essential elements of human life----faith (or trust), hope, love, and joy.

But sometimes a person seeking a way to happiness finds a congregation which is toxic in some important way. Perhaps that congregation is unwelcoming to people who are different---persons of color, g/l/b/t folk, poor or homeless or unemployed people, children, or persons whose theology is not quite right.

Some of us have been there, have felt unwelcome or uncomfortable in that kind of congregation. We know that it can be damaging to seek trust, hope, love and joy in a toxic environment. We may find distrust, fear, obsession and despair instead of the nurture we need.

How can we live and find fulfillment in that living?

A little book I once discovered is entitled "The Four Agreements: a Practical Guide to Personal Freedom" and was written by Don Miguel Ruiz, a master teacher from the legendary Toltecs of southern Mexico, not a tribe or nation, but scientists and artists who, thousands of years ago, formed a society to explore and conserve the spiritual knowledge and practices of the ancients.

Though it may look to some like “pop spirituality”, I am intrigued by this wisdom, which consists of four agreements with oneself, four behaviors which can bring a positive human life. These four agreements are not with God or the universe or other people; they are strictly rules for you or me to follow in our daily lives.

The First agreement is to “be impeccable with your word”. In other words, speak truth, speak with integrity, don’t gossip. Say only what you mean and use the power of your word to bring truth and love, not enmity.

The Second agreement is to “take nothing personally”. Remember that any criticism or negative-sounding statement reveals more about the speaker than about you. Examine the criticism and if it is applicable to you, consider it. If not, let go of it. This is easiest if you don’t take anything personally. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality. When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won’t be the victim of needless suffering.

The Third agreement is to “make no assumptions”. Our erroneous assumptions often get us in deep doodoo, particularly when we take something personally! Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really need. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness, and melodrama.

The Fourth agreement is to “do your best always”. Your best is going to change from moment to moment; it will be different when you are healthy as opposed to sick. Under any circumstance, simply do your best, and you will avoid self-judgment, self-recrimination, and regret.

Those who practiced this Toltec wisdom in ancient times, according to the author, often lived in small communities, extended families which offered care and support. The practice of this wisdom enhanced community life and individual relationships. People could trust each other; people were hopeful because they experienced connection with others; people loved freely and without fear; and people experienced the joy that comes from faith, hope and love.

However, if a person were not connected with a community or an extended family of some kind, the four agreements, which only involve oneself, might be more isolating, more likely to create a person without many human connections. It is certainly easier to live with these four agreements if you are living alone, not seeing many people, working in isolation from others.

These three approaches to spiritual living and the happiness that can accompany the good life are clearly similar, though they represent very different cultures. Their usefulnesses are much alike, as are their dangers.

They are most useful when they encourage us to connect with others, to follow a path which includes nurturing relationships and behaviors of kindness, understanding and compassion.

They are most dangerous when they lead us into isolation, into ego trips, into obsessive relationships and behaviors.

So what does it all mean to a congregation, a community like ours, looking for a wholesome, nurturing, compassionate way of being together? Our final set of four offers a possible approach to this question.

In their provocative work, “Excavating Jesus”, two noted scholars, Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed have proposed four questions that every faith community must ask itself about its existence.

First, what is the character of your God? Let’s unpack this question a little bit. What does the word God mean? “God” can imply a host of concepts, from the rigid, vengeful, angry supernatural being of the Hebrew scriptures, to the loving, wise, fatherly also supernatural God of the Christian scriptures, to the Force for Good in the universe, the Creator, Love, the Spirit of Life, the natural laws which govern the universe, and a host of negative concepts like money, power, fame, status, control.

I consider the word God to be a euphemism for what we consider of ultimate value, whether that is the love that binds us to each other, the mystical power in the universe, or our own power and control--over others or over our own lives. So what is the character of your God? What is the character of our God, here at UUCWI? What is most important to us, in our lives, in this congregation?

Second, Crossan and Reed ask, what is the content of your faith? What do you believe in, as an individual? What do we believe in, as a congregation?

We have a number of Social Justice interests individually and in this congregation, from populist democracy, to environmental concerns, to civil rights for all persons, to poverty, homelessness, and children’s issues. We also---individually and as a congregation---strive to grow spiritually, in a host of different ways.

What does this say that we believe in, individually and as a congregation? Do we understand what the members and friends of this congregation hold in common? What is our common faith?

Third question: what is the purpose of your congregation? Are we here just to make each other happy? Are we here just to listen to scintillating sermons? Are we here just for the great potlucks and parties? Are we here to support each other in sickness and in health? in sorrow and in joy? Are we here to contemplate our own navels or are we here to do something about justice in the world?

And fourth: what is the function of your worship? In many religious communities, a worship service is primarily adoration, supplication to a god or gods which will result in good fortune of some kind, to mark important holy dates in the year, to hear again and again the stories of the faith, to congratulate each other on superior knowledge and understanding.

What is the function, the outcome of our worship here? We are not all adoring a personal God, though this is true of some of us. We are not here to pray for good fortune, though we may lift up the sorrows and joys of our community and ask for wisdom and strength and support.

We do not have many stories from ancient times which are specifically Unitarian Universalist. Though we may find much meaning in Bible stories and other philosophical tales, we are often more interested in the lives of others like us, who have found transformation and purpose in working toward a clearer understanding of life.

Are we here to feel superior in our advanced knowledge and rejection of the old ways? Is this the function of our worship? Sometimes we seem to emphasize what we reject about our personal religious histories. We are so glad not to be Catholic or Baptist or Mormon or whatever, any more. But if we focus on the bad old days, we lose sight of the present, where we are now, what we come together to do.

As we go four wheeling through the holiday season this year, negotiating the cliffs and chasms of gift-giving and celebration, perhaps it makes sense to wonder whether our desires are causing us to suffer, whether we have the faith, hope, love and joy we need, whether we can find it through disciplined responses to our life events, and how we as a congregation might answer the four questions of religious community life.

What is the nature of our God? What is the content of our faith? What is the purpose of this congregation? And what is the function of our worship?

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #298, "Wake Now My Senses".

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that this community gathers to nurture and sustain ourselves in love and thereby strengthens us to reach out to others who need our saving message. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.

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