

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**Metaphor as Muse: How Preaching
Incarnates the Religious Ethos**

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by

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Metaphor as Muse: How Preaching Incarnates the Religious Ethos
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ABSTRACT

“Metaphor as Muse: How Preaching Incarnates the Religious Ethos” is a rhetorical analysis of metaphors used in preaching that is designed to reveal the trajectory of Unitarian Universalist values. The study, grounded in linguistics and language theory, examines fifty contemporary and denominationally significant sermons delivered over a ten-year period. The findings reveal that the sermon metaphors reflect the faith’s basic values, but they do so in ways that are conflictual. The metaphors are less prevalent, more commonplace, and more narrowly interpreted than might be expected in Unitarian Universalist preaching. The major implication of the study is that the overall metaphorical thrust of Unitarian Universalism is toward issues related to social justice and away from metaphors of transcendence, suggesting a de-ontologized and de-cosmologized emphasis.

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PART I: THE IMPORTANCE OF METAPHOR IN PREACHING

Part I consists of background material that informs this project. Chapters 1–3 outline the purpose, theological assumptions, and project methodology. Chapters 4–5 review relevant literature, including the role of metaphor in generating meaning in sermons and the broader scholarship on linguistics theory from world-renowned philosophers who make the case for metaphor’s ontological significance. Here, the word *ontological* is being used to suggest that language and its structures create possible realities.

Chapter 1: Purpose

When a sermon is charged with creative language, something extraordinary can happen. New realities can be imagined, inspiring people to explore their deepest human callings, open themselves to greater understanding of the conditions of their lives, get a glimpse of the divine, and experience beauty, mystery, and awe. People can embark on a sacred journey into unknown and untested territories where there are no paths and no guideposts. Creative language and, more specifically, metaphor can unleash these limitless possibilities in which new worlds can and do take shape and reverberate in the imagination.

For the past three years as a doctoral student at Lancaster Theological Seminary, I have been engaged in exploring the creative power of metaphor in sermons to unleash these possibilities in Unitarian Universalism. I have examined the power of metaphor in preaching to structure religious values. I have considered the ways that metaphor shapes thought, meaning, and behavior. My research, analysis, and conclusions comprise this study. Along the way, I have listened to, viewed, and read fifty selected sermons. In addition, over those years, I have written and delivered numerous sermons myself and have read or heard preached many others that are not part of the study.

In the course of engaging the metaphors in these fifty sermons, I found that I held certain expectations and hopes, some of which were realized and others that were not. As I expected, the sermons offer impactful messages, calling people of faith to live their values through commitment and courage. The sermons provide intellectual and spiritual challenges. Some raise uncomfortable questions about practices of ministry and the life of faith in ways that enlarge my understanding of Unitarian Universalism. Other sermons expose a troubled world while ultimately managing to offer motivation and hope. The sermons are rhetorically stimulating and enlivened with stories, poetry, and personal experiences, exhibiting the kind of

humor, good will, intelligence, dedication, justice seeking, and ethics for which Unitarian Universalist preaching is best known.

Some of my expectations remain unfulfilled by these sermons. Awe-inspiring metaphors are far rarer than I wish they had been in the selected sermons. The sermon metaphors seldom relate to mystical experience, cosmology, mystery, or transcendence. Innovative and provocative metaphors for what I understand and refer to as the holy, the divine, or God are largely absent.

I am grateful to the preachers of these sermons for meeting and for defying my expectations as well as for the opportunities to reflect on the implications and possibilities they present for Unitarian Universalism. I am grateful to the colleagues whose metaphors, stories, wisdom, dedication, words, struggles, and passions I have studied, analyzed, and admired, and with which I have sometimes wrestled and argued. To them, I offer my thanks and sincerest hope that I have listened and heeded carefully, but not too carefully, their words and the life of faith they sought to evoke.

Chapter 2: Theological Assumptions

My fundamental assumption is that good preaching thrives on good metaphors. We live our everyday lives mired in and oblivious to the many ordinary metaphors that shape our worldview. But metaphors also have the audacious power to rise out of the mundane and captivate hearts and minds, making new realities possibilities. This is what I mean by “good metaphors.” These metaphors can open new and renewing vistas of meaning, making it possible to see more than what could at first be seen and to know more than what was previously considered possible. Such metaphors shape and revitalize the human imagination and the human spirit. Always and ever, good metaphors resist attempts to control them.

Another assumption about preaching is that it is designed to be interactive between the preacher and the listener. This means the metaphors in a sermon disclose possible worlds that the listener can enter and experience. The preacher can influence, but not control, how the listener responds to the metaphors. The listener/reader has a chance to try on the possible worlds evoked by the metaphors, envisioning them in ways that correspond to the listener’s/reader’s own experience. In this sense, the metaphor plays a central, and even revelatory, role in generating insight. Metaphor invites us to conjure up new worlds and create meaning. It nearly insists on our doing so.

This project assumes a postmodern theological perspective in which what is considered to be reality is socially constructed. Metaphor is one of the ways in which that reality gets constructed, and it is the focus here. There are also nonverbal and nontextual ways that reality is constructed, but these are beyond the scope of this project.

My position on interpreting the metaphors is a tempered postmodernism. For me, this means that metaphors do not have one single meaning, nor does “anything go.” In other words, metaphors can mean many things and can be appropriated by many people in many different ways, but there is a reasonable range, albeit a broad one, of plausible meanings. The

metaphorical meaning is not entirely in the eyes of the beholder. As a result, my intention in this study is not to stipulate what the metaphors mean but instead to offer directions in which the metaphors point. This is a vital distinction.

To that end, I have strived to be as true as I could be to the world of the text, in this case the sermon text, knowing that my own interpretations are themselves only partial. I am a white, able-bodied, cisgender woman ordained in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. I was raised in the United Methodist tradition with Lutheran, River Brethren, and United Brethren strains running through my family of origin. I have a background in literary studies and a vocation as a poet. I have served an historically Universalist congregation in the City of Reading, Pennsylvania, since 2004. It is my first and remains my only called ministry position. Both Universalism and the urban context within which I serve have shaped me as a minister.

I have sought to approach this study through an antiracist, anti-oppression, multicultural lens. Yet I am certain that I have missed as much or more than I have observed. Others, including clergy, lay ministers, theologians, and academicians, are invited and indeed encouraged to bring their own interpretations and experiences to bear on this study. In fact, metaphor implores us to do just that.

Another of the project's assumptions is that theological insight can be disclosed in diverse texts, inclusive of and referencing sacred scripture and wisdom traditions, but not exclusively so. Sermons do not need to explicitly or implicitly reference these traditional religious sources to convey theological meaning. I am profoundly impacted by my literary studies and my religious tradition in this regard. As a student of literature, I would contend that the story of Moby Dick is as mythic as the story of Jonah and the Whale, and both can be effectively used by preachers. As a religious naturalist, I would argue that creation stories rooted in evolutionary theory are as mythic as Christian or Hindu creation stories in creating important meaning. A poem by Jalaluddin Rumi or Gwendolyn Brooks can be as powerful as a Buddhist sutra.

Nevertheless, my project acknowledges that, while the sources drawn upon in Unitarian Universalism are quite diverse, by its very nature, a religious community shares some common metaphors, language, and values—whether implicit or explicit—that shape and guide behavior and ethical commitments. For Unitarian Universalism, naming what is held in common turns out to be a subject of considerable inquiry. For the purposes of this thesis, the Unitarian Universalist principles, sources, and other key factors will together be considered representative of common ground, even if not exclusively so.

The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which is charged with studying and reporting on areas that require deeper reflection or revitalization in Unitarian Universalism, provides the most comprehensive view of what could be understood as commonly held values. The Commission undertook a study more than a decade ago to answer the question “What holds us together?”¹ The study framed the question in a couple of ways, including: “Is there unity in Unitarian Universalism's diversity of belief?” and “What is . . . at the center of our faith?”² The Commission insists that “a healthy diversity requires common ground.” Given Unitarian Universalism’s noncreedal, nondoctrinal approach to religion, the exact nature of that common ground remains open to interpretation.³ Nevertheless, the study finds that “in practice the principles have emerged as a symbol of unity.”⁴ These principles offer one way of thinking about shared tenets.

¹ Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), 1.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 139.

Adopted in 1960, the seven principles are affirmed through a vote of member congregations and are subject to periodic review and revision. The current principles are stated as follows:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.⁵

At the time of writing this thesis, an eighth principle has been newly proposed and is under consideration. The draft language of the proposed principle is “Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

The Commission’s findings echo Rev. Edward Frost’s conclusions in *With Purpose and Principle*. Frost poses a telling question with which Unitarian Universalism grapples: “can a religious association without a common faith have any significant claim on its members, let alone any significant influence in the world? . . . The difficulty . . . lay in formulating what could be said without usurping the freedom of belief cherished and firmly defended by their members.” Frost concludes that the principles help to identify “what brings us together” and name a shared context.⁶

⁵ Unitarian Universalist Association, front matter to *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: UUA, 1993), x.

⁶ Edward A. Frost, ed., *With Purpose and Principle: Essays about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 1–2.

The Commission on Appraisal's report recognizes that for some people the sources fulfill a similar function to the principles.⁷ Like the seven principles, the six sources are part of the Unitarian Universalist Association bylaws and also integral to an understanding of the faith tradition. The sources are stated as follows:

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.⁸

The denomination's newest hymnal supplement and a new book of readings are organized around these sources. At the time of writing this thesis, the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly delegates held a preliminary vote to amend the language of the second source and will hold a final vote in June 2018. The amendment would change "prophetic women and men" to "prophetic people,"

The Commission's report finds that Unitarian Universalists also share common ground not explicitly identified in the principles or sources. Among these key factors are characteristics such as "wholeness," "a connection to beauty and nature," and "harmony with the Divine."⁹ The report also identifies central theologies that are suggested by the principles or sources but not explicit in them, including the following:

grounded in history and ideas
ecological in the vision of
interconnection

profoundly human
responsible
experiential

⁷ Commission, 70.

⁸ Unitarian Universalist Association, front matter, x.

⁹ Commission, 52–61.

free as individuals and
congregations
imaginative
relational
covenantal

curious
reasonable
hopeful

Some newly emerging characteristics that describe Unitarian Universalism are “embodied,” “mindful,” and “prophetic.”¹⁰

The report also reflects on postmodernism in relation to Unitarian Universalism, observing that many of the words used to describe postmodernism are also words used to describe Unitarian Universalism. These descriptors are also relevant to this study and include the terms *pluralistic*, *radically inclusive*, and *syncretic*. The report cautions against overly aggressive attempts to find a theological or common core, which could ultimately inhibit the progression of thought.¹¹

These various assumptions about preaching and theology, including the central role of metaphor in preaching and the way in which Unitarian Universalist values are expressed through the seven principles, six sources, and other key characteristics, guide and influence the methodology used for the study. That methodology is described in the next chapter.

¹⁰ Commission, 91–93.

¹¹ Ibid., 85.

Chapter 3: Project Methodology

As a student of literature and as a poet, I have been trained to analyze metaphors in literary works, but, as a preacher, I have received no such training. Preaching courses and resources have focused on the shape of sermons, themes, practical considerations, style of sermon, and the types of illustrations, examples, and stories to include, but they have not emphasized how metaphors in sermons shape thought or behavior. While the literature shows the importance of metaphor to language and more specifically to preaching, no study has been found that *applies* the theory to preaching.

My study seeks to address the gap in the conversation about metaphor in preaching through a close examination of the basic metaphors being used in Unitarian Universalist sermons. More specifically, the study analyzes and discusses the ways the sermon metaphors and metaphoric patterns reflect and shape the religious ethos.

A review of the literature about metaphor establishes the case for metaphor's power in creating meaning. First, I make the case that metaphor is not only an important but also an essential way that meaning is created in sermons. Second, I review the linguistic theory that establishes the significance of metaphor in creating what is considered to be real.

I then turn my attention to applying the theory to selected sermons. Sermon selection was a critical consideration. To ensure a representative sampling of metaphors, fifty sermons that span a ten-year period and that were delivered by Unitarian Universalist preachers were reviewed. The sermons selected for this study also had to meet specific criteria that identified them as denominationally significant. Most important among the criteria, each sermon had to have been solicited by denominational leaders for delivery at a major denominational event or have been designated by denominational leaders as an award-winning sermon.

They had to meet at least one of these additional criteria: 1) be delivered at General Assembly, the annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists; 2) be delivered at Ministry Days, the

annual gathering of Unitarian Universalist ministers; or 3) be the recipient of a national Unitarian Universalist sermon award. Table 3.1 provides a chart indicting the year and type of sermons included in this project. In most cases, sermons not included in any given type or year were not available. Included are sermons from these categories:

- General Assembly “Sunday Morning Worship”
- General Assembly “Service of the Living Tradition”
- Skinner Sermon Award for a sermon that expresses Unitarian Universalist social values
- Social Witness Sermon Award for a sermon that addresses a current Congregational Study/Action Issue¹²
- Stewardship Sermon Award for a sermon that promotes financial support and affirms the Unitarian Universalist faith
- Church of the Larger Fellowship Sermon delivered at General Assembly
- Program Sermon delivered at General Assembly
- Unitarian Universalist Ministry Days “Opening Worship”

¹² Congregational Study/Action Issues are proposed by congregations to the General Assembly where lay delegates elected by their congregations and religious professionals who have delegate status per the Unitarian Universalist Association bylaws vote on the final selections.

Table 3.1. Selected sermons by year and type

Year	Sunday Morning Worship	Service of the Living Tradition	Skinner Sermon Award	Social Witness Sermon Award	Stewardship Sermon Award	Church of the Larger Fellowship Sermon	Program Sermon	Ministry Days Sermon
2017	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
2016	✓	✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓			✓
2015	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
2014	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
2013	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
2012	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
2011	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
2010	✓	✓	✓			✓		
2009		✓		✓		✓		
2008	✓							
2007				✓				
2006			✓	✓				

The selected sermons were viewed and read whenever available in both video and text formats. Some sermons were also experienced live when they were first delivered. When a text was available, whether transcript, Portable Document Format (PDF), or paper copy, it served as the primary format with which to study the sermon and identify the metaphors. When no text was available, notes were taken on videotaped sermons and used for ease of reference. Ministry Days sermons and homilies are available in video format only. Most award-winning sermons are available in text format only.

This chapter has provided the methodology that guides this project. The next chapter reviews the literature on metaphor in preaching to establish that metaphors used in sermons evoke what ordinary language cannot.

Chapter 4: Literature on Metaphor in Preaching

Studies of preaching emphasize the meaning-making role of metaphors in sermons. Metaphor is not the only rhetorical device available to preachers but is a vital one. Metaphor, after all, is the language of poetry, story, and imagination. Ordinary discourse can explain, but poetic language evokes. And sermons seek, among other things, to evoke. This chapter examines literature that articulates this crucial role of metaphor in preaching, including the work of David Buttrick and Eugene Lowry, both authors of influential books on homiletics. I also consider resources that make the case for using metaphor in Unitarian Universalist preaching. These texts and resources theorize about the importance of poetic language in preaching but do not undertake a study of sermons.

Language and Meaning in Sermons: David Buttrick

In *Homiletic*, David Buttrick claims that a sermon's metaphors help to shape thinking and behavior. This argument is fundamental to my claim that studying metaphors in sermons reveals the ethos of a religious community. He explores language theory and the use of the term *metaphor*. Buttrick uses the term *metaphor* in a broad sense and describes stories and myths as metaphorical. For example, he considers the biblical stories of creation and the fall to be essentially metaphorical.¹³ He also views sermon illustrations and examples as being like metaphors because they juxtapose images to create new meaning.¹⁴

While I, too, consider myths and stories as having metaphorical meaning-making potential, I take a narrower and more traditional approach to metaphor. To be included in my project, an image, story, or myth must be used to create a link between two different ideas. Just containing an image or juxtaposition of images is not enough. This does not automatically give a

¹³ David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 123–124.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127–128.

story or illustration metaphorical value. Given the prevalence of personal experiences, story-telling, and images in contemporary sermons, this distinction is clarifying.

Buttrick's approach to homiletics is phenomenological, focusing on the function of poetic language. He believes that "sermons happen in consciousness"¹⁵ and that, in fact, words create consciousness. However, he argues they do not create the world itself, which only God, he says, can do. His point is that there is a reality "beyond our world," and the only way to access that world is "by dancing the edges of language."¹⁶ For the purposes of this study, my assumption is that language is a primary way reality and consciousness get constructed. Buttrick offers this telling description of language and its relationship to consciousness:

Language does constitute the world in-consciousness, the significant social world in which we live. People and places, things, symbols, social roles and moral values, lands never visited, persons never met, cosmologies, psychological "models"—all these are named in consciousness and become a "world" in which people live together.¹⁷

Like Buttrick, I believe language makes possible communication and human functioning. Buttrick insists humans think and relate to experience with language, and cannot do so without language. While I consider verbal language essential and primary, I do not find it to be the only language available to humans. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe there are nonverbal as well as verbal elements, such as body language, vestments, and architecture, among others, that convey thoughts and emotions. Nevertheless, while I recognize the importance of these nonverbal elements, I do not address them in this study. Instead, I focus on verbal language.

People live in interlocking patterns of metaphor, which influence behavior and shape values.¹⁸ If language creates reality, and I believe it does, then the language in preaching has a

¹⁵ Buttrick, preface to *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), xii.

¹⁶ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 183.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

role in creating that reality. For Buttrick, that reality is “a ‘faith-world’ related to God.”¹⁹ What he means by the use of the term *faith-world* is the story of human encounter with God as illustrated in Biblical narratives. I interpret this more broadly to relate to the larger scope of ethics, values, and theologies, including but not limited to Biblical conceptions of God.

Metaphor makes meaning by pairing ideas. Buttrick describes this as “bumping mysteries together.”²⁰ Through these couplings, new knowledge is born. New connections get made, and new insights are forged. In Buttrick’s words, “as new words are coined and mingle with our social dictionary, we think new thoughts and reach out toward the wider reality language itself witnesses.”²¹ He extrapolates this idea a step further, making the provocative claim that “when words change, we can assume that, as a culture, we may be ‘changing our minds.’”²² To put it another way, when a religious community’s language changes, the community’s ethos may be changing. My thesis claims that changes to the metaphors used in preaching signal changes in the community’s ethos.

Unpredictable Meaning in Sermons: Eugene L. Lowry

Eugene L. Lowry incorporates much of Buttrick’s analysis of language theory and preaching into his own discussion of transformational preaching. In *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery*, he addresses essential questions about the sermon’s purpose and the language appropriate to it. One purpose of a sermon is transformation, which evokes an experience and generates unpredictable meaning.²³ Lowry rightly claims that the sermon yields results the

¹⁹ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

²² *Ibid.*, 180.

²³ Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 31–32.

preacher cannot predict.²⁴ According to Lowry, the sermon does that through “analogy, metaphoric tease, and the tensiveness of parabolic thought,” which “provide great potential for the evocation” of life in preaching.²⁵

Lowry offers a helpful way for preachers to make sense of the postmodern context in which they preach. He urges preachers to find middle ground in order “to get unhooked from modernity’s commitment to unchanging ‘stared at’ discursive truth on the one hand, and yet managing to not succumb to . . . the mentality of the skeptical postmodernists on the other.”²⁶ Rather than insisting on or rejecting universals, the preacher can recognize that there are some truths, realities, and patterns that exist side-by-side with ongoing mystery, imagination, and provisional knowledge. Preachers may find Lowry’s metaphors for the preacher’s role in postmodernism useful. One such metaphor is the preacher as a stagehand “who holds back the curtain so that some might be able to catch a glimpse of the divine play” if the curtain is able to be opened far enough.²⁷ Another is the preacher as midwife who understands that “life is being born.”²⁸

Unitarian Universalists: The Case for Metaphor in Sermons

Though they do not provide an analysis of metaphors used in preaching, several Unitarian Universalist resources make a specific case for using metaphors. In *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*, Revs. Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz summarize interviews with ministers about crafting successful sermons. In one interview, Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman told them that “our text is metaphorical, and usually the best

²⁴ Lowry, 37.

²⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁶ Ibid., 44.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Ibid., 53.

way to express ourselves through the text is through poetry, or an image . . . that's the way we do our best teaching . . . through image and metaphor.”²⁹

Similarly, Revs. Jane Rzepka and Ken Sawyer in *Thematic Preaching* devote a chapter to “The Use of Story, Examples, and Evocative Illustrations.” They assert that:

Preachers supply or inspire detail, color, imagery, and feeling. With the use of story, poetry, quotation, anecdote, example, and references to near-common experience or popular culture—even music within the sermon, art on the cover of the bulletin, props such as sculpture and posters, or just about anything else—we do our best to add life to the sermon. We bring the raw material of the sermon as close to home as possible without dictating the congregation’s reactions or providing the “correct” interpretations. Our listeners take it from there.³⁰

Two significant online worship resources for Unitarian Universalists advocate the use of metaphor in crafting sermons though they do not study their actual usage. The first is the online Unitarian Universalist Association Worship Web, which is organized by theme, occasion, and keyword.³¹ This site includes materials to assist worship leaders in brainstorming images and image clusters to convey a particular theme.³² The second resource is the Soul Matters Sharing Circle, which provides worship resources organized by theme, though not by metaphor.³³

²⁹ Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), 88.

³⁰ Jane Rzepka and Ken Sawyer, *Thematic Preaching* (St. Louis, MS: Chalice Press, 2001), 71.

³¹ Unitarian Universalist Association, “WorshipWeb Collection,” Unitarian Universalist Association website, accessed May 13, 2017, www.uua.org/worship.

³² Unitarian Universalist Association, “Worship Planning Worksheet” in “WorshipWeb Collection,” Unitarian Universalist Association website, accessed May 13, 2017, www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/brooks_hewitt_worksheet_o.pdf.

³³ Soul Matters Sharing Circle website, accessed May 13, 2017, www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/member-access/category/2016-2017. This is a member access only website. There is also an open access Facebook community sharing page available at: www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/.

The literature in this chapter underscores the meaning-making power of metaphor specific to preaching. The literature on linguistic theory reviewed in the next chapter makes evident the creative significance of metaphor and its capacity to expand human insight.

Chapter 5: Linguistic Theory of Metaphor

The last chapter demonstrated the case for using metaphors in preaching. But how do metaphors operate in language as a whole? How do they create new ideas? Linguistic and philosophical theories offer insight into the ways metaphors function. Whether used in conversation, articles, books, lyrics, or sermons, metaphors are springboards for the human imagination. They launch possibilities for new thinking and fresh understandings that shape ethics and values. This chapter examines the foundational theories of metaphor to show how metaphors function linguistically.

The theories of Max Black, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson are fundamental resources for a postmodern perspective on metaphor. The approaches to meaning-making and the shaping of reality by these philosophers as well as their dynamic understandings of metaphor and conceptual structures are highly regarded in the field of linguistics and the philosophy of language. Their approaches also fit the Unitarian Universalist intention to offer evocative insights rather than doctrinal statements.

Lyotard offers the definitive manifesto on postmodernist thought that informs the contemporary postmodernist worldview I bring to my research. Black's and Ricoeur's careful studies of metaphor demonstrate language's exciting meaning-making possibilities. Black's thought on models, along with Lakoff's and Johnson's examination of conceptual structures, inform my study of metaphoric patterns.

Joseph Campbell and Steven Pinker provide contrasting perspectives on how metaphors function. While Campbell's claim that myths hold universal meaning holds popular appeal, his theory suggests limits to language's freedom and power. Pinker's extreme theory of innate, a priori, language provides a useful, though flawed, contrast to the views held by Black, Ricoeur, Lakoff, and Johnson that language is unbounded.

Metaphor and Insight: Max Black

The work of Max Black, a twentieth-century US analytical philosopher, is central to a postmodern understanding of metaphor. His analysis of metaphor establishes metaphor's primacy in creating new meaning. He lays out several key concepts that undergird the work of other thinkers in this chapter. Three areas of Black's work of primary concern to this project are (1) the role of metaphoric versus ordinary language, (2) the difference between a model and a metaphor, and (3) the relationship between language and reality.

Metaphoric Versus Ordinary Language

Metaphoric and ordinary language have different goals and purposes. Ordinary language conveys information and communicates directly. Metaphor has the power to spark insight. While metaphoric language has this creative potential, not every metaphor has the same potential. Black astutely contends that metaphors that cannot be paraphrased and that generate new insights are ontologically significant.³⁴ Ontologically significant metaphors have the power to create possible realities and make new meaning.

Black uses the term *gap* to describe the linguistic space that a metaphor fills. He says, "metaphor plugs the gaps in the literal vocabulary."³⁵ Literal, ordinary language is unable to fill that vacuum and convey new meaning.³⁶ Metaphor has the unique capability to create new meaning that ordinary language cannot to fill the gap. The new meaning arises from the interaction between the reader and the metaphor. Black terms this the "interaction view" of

³⁴ Max Black dismisses the decorative function and comparison view of metaphor as philosophically insignificant because they fail to create new meaning or insight. The comparison view makes an analogy between two things that could be paraphrased or replaced with more literal language.

³⁵ Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

metaphor.³⁷ The interaction between the reader and metaphor generates imaginative ways of bridging the space and, in doing so, transforms ideas, producing shifts in meaning.³⁸ In the context of this study, the reader can be understood to be the person listening to, watching, or reading the sermon.

The Difference between a Metaphor and a Model

According to Black, a model, like a metaphor, helps us to see new connections, infusing old ideas with fresh meaning.³⁹ The model is a pattern of interconnected metaphors. Black's discussion of metaphor and model begins a notable conversation that will carry all the way through to works discussed later in this chapter, including George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's discussion of conceptual systems of metaphors. In my study, Black's concept of models and Lakoff's and Johnson's conceptual systems inform my understanding of metaphorical patterns, which I call types of metaphor. Not only do individual metaphors generate meaning, but metaphoric patterns do as well. In the case of the selected sermons studied in this project, the metaphoric patterns, when viewed across the sermons, provide insight into trends in religious thought and values.

The Relationship between Language and Reality

Black explores the relationship between thought and language, considering how each shapes the other. He rejects the concept of extreme linguistic relativity, which rigidly identifies thought with language and instead claims a middle ground between objectivism and

³⁷ Black, 38.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁹ Ibid., 237.

determinism, on the one hand, and subjectivism and relativity, on the other.⁴⁰ Black's thought on language and reality boils down to the idea that language reflects reality and helps shape it, although all ideas do not get expressed in words.

The Hopi provide an example of thoughts for which there are no words that clarifies Black's point. While the Hopi have no words for *time* or *kiva*, Black insists the Hopi nevertheless have an understanding of time and know what a kiva is. To argue otherwise, according to Black, would be ludicrous. This leads him to conclude that "even if symbolization is essential to thought, a place must be left for *ad hoc* symbols, nonverbal tokens, and other ways of thinking without using dictionary words."⁴¹

Ad hoc symbols recognize that words are not always adequate to express ideas, and this offers a helpful caution for my study. While this study does not explore nonverbal communication, I recognize that everyone does not rely equally on verbal expressions and that language is not the only way to create meaning. Honoring different modalities of learning and expression promotes inclusion.

Metaphor and Possibility: Paul Ricoeur

The twentieth-century French philosopher Paul Ricoeur contributes to my examination of metaphor in several significant ways. Like Black, he distinguishes between metaphor and ordinary language, describing the reality-shaping abilities of language. Ricoeur makes an additional claim, albeit one that may seem obvious to some, relevant to this thesis. He claims that religious experience can be understood via language.

⁴⁰ Black, 254–255. Black rejects Benjamin Lee Whorf's understanding of "linguistic relativity" as expressed in the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis." The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis undergirds the extreme relativism of postmodernism. The hypothesis asserts that: "Human beings ... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society" and "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group." (quoted in Black, 245.)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

The Role of Metaphor Versus Ordinary Language

Ricoeur shares Max Black's view that metaphor creates meaning. Ricoeur maintains that metaphor expresses reality but asserts that it does much more than simply duplicate it.⁴² Because metaphor presents "human action in a poetic way," according to Ricoeur, it leads to something more than reality, something he helpfully describes as "emergent meaning."⁴³ Like Black, Ricoeur maintains that poetic language would be inconsequential if it did not have this creative meaning-making power, which distinguishes it from ordinary language. He writes, "linguistic creations would be meaningless if they did not serve the general project of letting new worlds emerge from poetry."⁴⁴ As already stated, I claim that metaphor unlocks new worlds for human exploration and is essential for doing so. Since one of religion's core functions is to cultivate and shape meaning, religion relies on metaphor as an essential tool to give expression to religious ideas and beliefs.

The Relationship between Language and Reality

According to Ricoeur, metaphor actually transforms both language and reality. Metaphorical language manages "to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language."⁴⁵ A metaphor shatters language by using it in novel ways and increases reality by producing original ideas. Like Black, Ricoeur holds an interaction understanding of language. For Ricoeur, this interaction occurs between what he calls a text and a reader. The text proposes a world, and the reader imagines inhabiting that world, which

⁴² Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. by David Stewart and Charles E. Reagan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 146–147.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 132–133.

Ricoeur calls “the world of the text.” Myth and metaphor “disclose” possibilities of meaning through this interaction, resulting in limitless potentialities.⁴⁶

One of the most exciting aspects of Ricoeur’s work is his application of Heideggerian Being to metaphor. Ricoeur draws on Martin Heidegger’s book, *Being and Time*, and applies Heidegger’s concept of the “projection of our ownmost possibilities” to his own concept of “the world of the text.” His conclusion is that an individual is developing self-understanding, even creating the self, by projecting the self into the proposed world encountered in a text. Ricoeur writes, “What is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities.”⁴⁷ Here Ricoeur is exploring the implications of language and its structures in creating our understanding of what is real. These implications are especially relevant for religion. Not only does Ricoeur believe that meaning is being made in the interaction of reader and text, but he argues that the self itself is being made. By interacting with the text, the reader accesses more truth and more reality. For Ricoeur, there is a sense that reality does exist and can be accessed. The takeaway for my project is that, when used in sermons, metaphors give the listener/reader more access to more truth and more reality.

The Relationship of Metaphor to Religion

I agree with Ricoeur’s assertion that language is one of the best ways to understand religious experiences. Sacred texts, sermons, hymns, and other genres of religious discourse are avenues for expressing these experiences. The particular genre will reveal unique possibilities of meaning by virtue of its form.⁴⁸ The implication is that a sermon will disclose religious experience and that it will disclose that experience in a unique way.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Philosophy*, 237.

⁴⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, ed. by Mark I. Wallace, trans. by David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

Myth and Monomyth: Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell, a twentieth-century US author and professor, explores comparative mythology and comparative religion. His work is of interest to my project for two reasons. First, unlike Black and Ricoeur, he focuses on myth. A consideration of mythology is relevant to this study because myths function similarly to metaphors. They conjure different possibilities and worlds. Second, Campbell presents a contrasting perspective on the relationship of language to reality, viewing language as universal and therefore less relativistic than Black and Ricoeur with whom I agree.

My assessment of Campbell's discussion of myth and meaning is mixed. I do agree with him that myths emerge from the universal need to explain reality. I cannot help but acknowledge his widespread popularity and influence on popular culture. However, I disagree with his notion that the basic, mythic themes remain constant and universal and that they serve as allegories of the way humans ought to live their lives.⁴⁹ He calls these universal myths *monomyths*, arguing that all myths ultimately tell a single story. As intriguing as his ideas are, by universalizing the world's mythology into a theory of monomyths, Campbell ultimately ends up limiting the very meaning-making possibilities that metaphor and myth propose.

I do find that Campbell's retellings breathe fresh life into old myths and themes by reinterpreting them for the modern world. Unfortunately, his retellings are presented as the definitive interpretation rather than one example among many. Rather than encouraging a diversity of interpretations, he perpetuates an absolutist understanding of reality that presents a monolithic approach. In this respect, his approach is anti-postmodern and anti-cultural pluralism. His theory differs from the postmodern assumptions I bring to this project that favor a multiplicity of perspectives over universals. Campbell's position as the "expert" who has the unique capacity to interpret the myths undercuts any potential interaction between reader and text. Ultimately, if myths can be interpreted for readers into fixed understandings, then the

⁴⁹ Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 19.

reader's role is not to discover new insights but instead to learn and absorb a prescribed worldview.

Another difficulty I have with Campbell is his insistence that myth is *a priori* or, as he calls it, “native to the mind.”⁵⁰ To the extent that language, myth, or any other way of knowing is innate or preexisting, it is not open to possibilities. To put it simply, if myths explain reality in deterministic ways, then they are not creating new realities, and I have already established my claim that metaphors disclose new worlds.

Language and Reality: Steven Pinker

Steven Pinker is a Canadian–US psychologist who presents an extreme perspective of innate language. While Black describes metaphor as filling gaps of meaning, and Ricoeur emphasizes the possibility of Being emerging from myth, Pinker focuses on language as *a priori*, placing him in the same philosophical camp as Campbell. Pinker mistakenly argues that humans are born with the innate knowledge of language, which he terms an “instinct.” He wrongly deems language an instinct akin to a spider weaving a web. His assumption is that humans not only have the innate capacity for language but also the innate knowledge of language. He goes so far as to argue that evolutionary theory can explain this “language instinct” because humans have evolved the instinct for language. Pinker's views are so far outside the norm that he does not even believe children need to be taught language. Instead, he claims language is an instinct, just as weaving a web is instinctive to a spider.

While Campbell bases his theory of monomyths on a universal mythic structure, Pinker bases his on a universal grammatical structure. Elaborating on Noam Chomsky's now obsolete idea of a “Universal Grammar,” Pinker argues that humans are born with the knowledge of the

⁵⁰ Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 28.

universals of grammar, which are common to all cultures and people.⁵¹ By contending that there is a universal religious language with an *a priori* structure, Campbell and Pinker reject the idea that truth is disclosed through language's endless possibilities and instead insist that language conveys pre-existing meaning.

While the fields of philosophy and linguistics seem to have largely rejected Chomsky's "Universal Grammar" and Pinker's "language instinct," Pinker does get it right in two ways. He says that (1) humans are born with the capacity to learn language and (2) humans have thoughts for which they do not have language.

Postmodernism and Meaning: Jean-François Lyotard

The twentieth-century French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard articulates a postmodernist theory beginning in the 1970s. Lyotard uses the term *postmodern* to describe a society's post-industrial period, characterized by the rise of science and technology.⁵² The result, he says, is a "crisis of narratives."⁵³ In a postmodern society, the metanarratives that have been long-accepted prove untenable. The metanarratives are untenable because their overarching, universalizing accounts inhibit diversity, invention, and imagination—the very hallmarks of postmodernism. The crisis arises because those long-standing metanarratives served an essential function by providing cultural authority, legitimacy, and other truth claims. Without them, society needs another means to determine truth, justice, and other fundamental values.

⁵¹ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 4–5. Noam Chomsky is a US linguist and philosopher. His theory of a Universal Grammar was developed in the 1960s.

⁵² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), 3.

⁵³ Jean-François Lyotard, introduction to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), xxiii.

Lyotard's search for a new framework to legitimize truth claims led him to posit micronarratives as the source of knowing. Micronarratives focus on imagination, invention, and inexhaustible possibilities. According to Lyotard, "The little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention."⁵⁴ Lyotard's revelatory understanding of micronarratives as creating inexhaustible possibilities parallels Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor as creating inexhaustible possibilities as well as Black's interaction view of metaphor. In other words, what Lyotard says about language generally also applies to metaphor specifically. Metaphors, like micronarratives, creates unbounded meaning.

Lyotard, like Black and Ricoeur, emphasizes the creative possibilities and meaning-making potential of language that I assume as a fundamental basis for my project. What is at stake in this understanding of language has to do with knowledge itself. Lyotard insists that knowledge via language is unbounded. He says, "Language's reserve of possible utterances . . . is inexhaustible."⁵⁵ Lyotard argues that what is important in postmodernism is "not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy." He insists that "invention is always born of dissension."⁵⁶ To put it simply, language is a creative tool that allows humans to push the edges of what is known and invent new ideas. That happens through dissension when different and even opposing ideas flourish.

Adapting this idea of dissension to justice, Lyotard links metanarratives to injustice because metanarratives compress diverse viewpoints. He links micronarratives to justice because they encourage variety. Extending Lyotard's theory to religion, respect for micronarratives in sermons is suggestive of a justice orientation, while the urge toward metanarratives could be perpetuating injustice.

⁵⁴ Lyotard, *Postmodern*, 60.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, introduction, xxv.

Experientialism and New Meaning: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

In their book, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff, US linguist, professor, and author, and Mark Johnson, US philosopher, professor, and author, theorize that metaphor is “pervasive in everyday language and thought.”⁵⁷ I agree with them that metaphor is pervasive and also with their assessment that metaphor influences consciousness and motivates action. They reject traditional Western philosophical assumptions that privilege objective reality and instead emphasize the role of experience. They maintain that “human experience and understanding, rather than objective truth, [play] the central role.”⁵⁸

Lakoff and Johnson provide a tempered postmodernism that acknowledges there are some universals and structures, while also insisting on the potential for invention. Specific aspects of their work that inform this project are (1) their exploration of the difference between conventional and new metaphors, (2) their understanding of the relationship between metaphor and reality, (3) their assertion that metaphors operate in conceptual structures or systems, and (4) their proposal of an experiential theory of truth.

The Difference between Conventional and New Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson categorize two types of metaphors: conventional and new. They describe the metaphors that structure how humans think and act without our awareness as conventional. Examples include “argument is war” and “time is money.”⁵⁹ These, they say, are the “metaphors we live by.”⁶⁰ New metaphors are the domain of inventiveness. An example of a

⁵⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, preface to *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), ix.

⁵⁸ Ibid., x.

⁵⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 55.

new metaphor is “love is a collaborative work of art.”⁶¹ When encountering this new metaphor, a person thinks about both love and art in new ways. Lakoff and Johnson contend that people can deepen their understanding of how metaphors are shaping their lives by examining metaphors.

They further assert that metaphors are so deeply engrained in religion that those metaphors are nearly impossible to recognize as metaphor at all. One implication is that a greater awareness of conventional metaphors can help a religion better understand itself. A second implication is that an intentional effort to craft new metaphors can stimulate new insight, truth, and even culture change. In other words, changing religious metaphors may alter the religious culture. It is uncertain which metaphors will catch on with individuals or religious communities and which will not, nor is there any way to know for certain what the result will be if a conventional metaphor is supplanted by a new one. If such efforts were undertaken with a particular intention to control people’s ideas or beliefs, that would certainly raise some important ethical considerations. As has been witnessed in politics and culture, metaphor can be “dehumanizing” when employed to manipulate, exclude, and denigrate people. It can also restrain creativity.⁶²

Historically, when religion or political regimes have sought to dictate the meaning of metaphor and myth, the result has been mixed. New ideas persisted as heresies and marginalized beliefs because metaphor and myth by their nature resist attempts to control them. Those efforts to control meaning have at times resulted in the suppression of pluralism and exercise of hegemonic power. I would argue that, because language invites insight in unpredictable ways despite efforts to control it, new metaphors will break through in unexpected ways. There will also be individuals, communities, and cultures that reinterpret conventional metaphors and stories in new ways, despite coercive attempts by religion or

⁶¹ Lakoff and Johnson, 139.

⁶² Ibid., 236.

politics to thwart free thought. The ethical implications of manipulating language to control people is a real concern that warrants close attention and examination.

The Relationship between Metaphor and Reality

Like Black, Lakoff and Johnson see the primary value of metaphor as its ability to invent new realities.⁶³ According to Lakoff and Johnson, when new metaphors are created, they conjure new worlds. Distinguishing their view from a more traditional one, they write,

The idea that metaphors can create realities goes against most traditional views of metaphor. The reason is that metaphor has traditionally been viewed as a matter of mere language rather than primarily as a means of structuring our conceptual system and the kinds of everyday activities we perform. It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don't change reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions.

The idea that metaphor is just a matter of language and can at best only describe reality stems from the view that what is real is wholly external to, and independent of, how human beings conceptualize the world—as if the study of reality were just the study of the physical world. Such a view of reality—so-called objective reality—leaves out human aspects of reality in particular the real perceptions, conceptualizations, motivations, and actions that constitute most of what we experience. But the human aspects of reality are most of what matters to us, and these vary from culture to culture, since different cultures have different conceptual systems.⁶⁴

In a nutshell, language has far more creative power and far greater capability to organize reality than credited by traditional thought. Metaphor, in short, does more than reflect things as they are. It structures them.

⁶³ Lakoff and Johnson, 156.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 145–146.

Conceptual Structures of Metaphors

While individual metaphors have an important role in creating meaning, metaphors do not function in isolation. They exist within various systems or conceptual structures. According to Lakoff and Johnson, some individual metaphors have a coherence in which their “metaphorical expressions are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way.” A metaphor such as “time is money,” for example, has a whole network of related concepts, including “you’re wasting my time,” “this gadget will save you hours,” and “I don’t have the time to give you.”⁶⁵ When encountered individually, these metaphors may appear to be either random or isolated cases. However, according to Lakoff and Johnson, “They are part of whole metaphorical systems that together serve the complex purpose of characterizing the concept . . . in all of its aspects, as we conceive them.”⁶⁶ A network of metaphorical concepts is able to create “reverberations” of meaning with the various expressions of the metaphor connecting to memories, experiences, and other associations.⁶⁷ Lakoff and Johnson’s discussion of coherent systems of metaphorical concepts is akin to Black’s view of models. These two theories together inform my categorization of sermon metaphors into types that through their connections reverberate with meaning.

An Experiential Theory of Truth

In terms of being able to identify truth, Lakoff and Johnson argue that truths are still possible, and that they are rooted in culture.⁶⁸ What makes a metaphor true is its ability to fit the context of the sentence and situation in which it is used.⁶⁹ However, Lakoff and Johnson

⁶⁵ Lakoff and Johnson, 7.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 141–142.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 172.

explain that the central role of a metaphor is not truth so much as insight into life. They say that “in getting us to try to understand how [a metaphor] could be true, it makes possible a new understanding of our lives.”⁷⁰

They propose experientialism as an alternative and a middle ground to either objectivism or subjectivism because experientialism preserves the best of both objectivism and subjectivism. Experientialism refuses to focus exclusively on either the external world or the internal one.⁷¹ Instead, truth emerges from the interplay of the external and internal, relying on context for meaning. That context includes the physical environment and the culture in which people live as well as a person’s feelings, perceptions, and overall experience.⁷²

Conclusion

The review of the literature on preaching, linguistics, and language theory reveals the decisive role of language in creating new possibilities for thought, meaning, and behavior. The literature clarifies language’s ability to help shape reality and give birth to new ideas. As described by Black and Ricoeur, metaphorical language is uniquely charged with meaning-making potential. Myth, like metaphor, has the potential to generate new meaning.

Campbell and Pinker wrongly insist that language communicates pre-existing meaning. Campbell emphasizes that myths are universal metanarratives while Pinker argues that language is innate. In contrast, Lyotard argues that micronarratives and their multivalent perspectives foster imagination and invention. For Lyotard, language’s creative possibilities are boundless, making truth claims difficult, if not impossible. Lakoff and Johnson take a more tempered approach, acknowledging metaphor’s creative potential, on the one hand, and the possibility of some truths and structure, on the other hand.

⁷⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, 175.

⁷¹ Ibid., 226, 229.

⁷² Ibid., 230.

The implications of linguistics and language theory for religion are profound. Because language shapes thought and action, the language a religion uses will help create and structure thought and action for a religion or religious community. In his discussion of metaphor in preaching, Buttrick advances the provocative theory that when a religion's or community's language changes, the group's culture is changing. Because metaphors are uniquely capable of generating fresh insights and because sermons are a significant way Unitarian Universalism communicates what is important to the faith, studying sermon metaphors can offer insight into the religious ethos.

Through metaphor, sermons create what we can understand as truth and reality. But what metaphors are being used? What possible truths and realities are they suggesting? It is now time to turn our attention to answering those questions in the context of Unitarian Universalism.

PART II: METAPHORS IN SELECTED SERMONS

Part II presents the findings of the study of selected sermons and the implications for Unitarian Universalism. It begins with a chapter examining the major, operative metaphors in the fifty selected sermons, naming the metaphors and metaphoric patterns. The final chapter presents implications, including both limitations and possibilities, for Unitarian Universalism in light of the findings.

Chapter 6: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the metaphors and metaphoric patterns uncovered through the study of the fifty selected sermons. As has already been established through the review of literature on metaphors in preaching and linguistic theory, poetic language has the power to convey the spiritual life and to do that in ways that ordinary language cannot. In some traditions, there might be a single metaphor or organizing principle that encapsulates the spiritual life. The Tao in Taoism is an example of such an organizing principle. For Unitarian Universalists, as well as for the contemporary “spiritual but not religious” and other liberal religious communities, there is no such single metaphor and no single organizing principle. As a result, my study seeks to uncover a multiplicity of metaphors that reveals the faith’s diverse experiences and that can open new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting. This basic assumption led me to expect to uncover a variety of metaphors in each sermon and across the sermons studied, rather than a narrow range of metaphors common to all the sermons. While expecting to find tremendous variety, I remained open to the possibility of commonalities among the metaphors.

In my review of sermons, I first identified what I will be referring to as major or operative metaphors used in each individual sermon. These metaphors need to be significant, as described by Max Black in contrast to merely decorative metaphors, and new, as described by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in contrast to merely conventional metaphors. These so-called major metaphors provide the basic poetic language and/or thematic content for the sermon. To qualify as major metaphors, they must appear frequently in the sermon, be pivotal in the sermon’s development, or both.

After identifying the major metaphors in the sermons, I categorized the metaphors into types. The categorization of metaphors by types is grounded in Black’s work on models and

Lakoff's and Johnson's discussion of conceptual structures. While I anticipated finding types such as organic, mechanistic, or artistic, I determined the actual types presented here based on the metaphors encountered in the sermons and how they seemed to coalesce into metaphorical patterns, rather than using preconceived categories. For example, when it became clear that a bus, dirigible, and boat were major sermon metaphors and that they had a kind of coherence, transportation became one type of metaphor. My findings are organized by these metaphorical types. The individual metaphors are discussed within each type.

It is instructive to note that in the course of my research I also attempted to group the metaphors by the themes or topics, such as life, religious community, ministry, or the world. I quickly discovered that, while Unitarian Universalist preachers have some shared language, they use metaphors in unique and varied ways with many nuances that make this approach untenable. These early attempts to categorize by theme also seemed to blunt the metaphorical impact. Even more problematic, this approach fell victim to the kind of modernist, metanarrative approach employed by Joseph Campbell's monomyths and which I philosophically reject. I found myself "trying to stuff a bloody foot into a glass slipper," a metaphor Rev. Marlin Lavanhar uses to describe trying to fit into existing boxes.⁷³

⁷³ Marlin Lavanhar, "For Just Such a Time as This" (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2015 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Portland, Oregon, June 25, 2015), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2015/worship/slt>.

After many attempts with only partial success in which, thankfully, the metaphors resisted my attempts to fit them into tidy thematic categories, I abandoned that approach. I found I was trying to draw conclusions about whether an encounter with “the guy on the bus” is a metaphor for life, relationships, or religious community?⁷⁴ Or all of those? Is the bus the world, the church, or something else? Is it a container or a meeting place? Is “wrestling with the other” a metaphor for relationships, religious community, or hospitality? Or is it more about transformation? Rather than trying to answer these questions, I believe these are the very kinds of questions and reflections that the metaphors are intended to open and which are useful in prompting the listener’s/reader’s imagination.

The organization of metaphors into types is, therefore, not intended to limit the metaphors. If anything, my hope is that it will provide opportunities for more meaning-making and associations. However, this organization, too, is an imperfect arrangement. It risks masking some of the metaphoric meaning while privileging other meanings. Even the naming of the types is ultimately interpretive. I trust that the metaphors themselves and the listeners/readers of the sermons will raise their own questions and offer resistance in the places where I have drawn the lines too narrowly or too broadly. Ultimately, I have tried to be true to the metaphors and their contexts.

Before exploring the specific types of metaphors, let me share a few additional observations related to the challenges of identifying major metaphors in the sermons.

⁷⁴ Bill Neely, “The Guy on the Bus” (sermon, Stewardship Sermon Award, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton, Princeton, New Jersey, March 5, 2017), 3, accessed July 25, 2017, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the_guy_on_the_bus_2017_stewardship_sermon_award_winner.pdf.

General Observations and Challenges

First, the operative metaphors are sometimes but not always alluded to in the sermon title. Sermons tend to be titled for either their theme or their metaphor. Occasionally, they bear the marks of neither of these.

Second, preachers sometimes include metaphorical references, in addition to employing one or two major metaphors. These become notable when the references resonate with major metaphors used in other preachers' sermons, but which are not central to their own. However, these are often commonly used metaphors found in every day communication. For example, one sermon might use "boxes" as a major metaphor while another sermon might refer to being "boxed in" in passing but not use it as a major metaphor.

Third, in most cases, there is only one major metaphor in a sermon. In the cases where a sermon has more than one major metaphor, I include each metaphor. This sometimes resulted in sermons being represented in more than one type of metaphor. There were a few sermons in which I was unable to identify a major metaphor, and they are, therefore, not represented in any of the types. The lack of an identifiable major metaphor does not reflect negatively upon the individual sermon. Sermons without major metaphors use other rhetorical devices, such as narrative or repetition of a key phrase. Some organize around a rhetorical question repeated throughout the sermon. Others use description, persuasion, foreshadowing, problem and solution, or cause and effect to structure the sermon and create interest and momentum. Because some sermons contain more than one major metaphor, and some contain none, the number of metaphors represented in the research does not equate to the number of sermons studied. As this is not a quantified data-driven project, I do not make statistical conclusions.

A fourth and more difficult challenge that I did not expect is that some of the metaphors are implicit rather than explicit. Examples of explicit metaphors include “the game of life”⁷⁵ and “relationship is the sandpaper.”⁷⁶ An example of an implicit metaphor is the use of a bus to suggest inclusive religious community. The sermon does not specifically name this metaphor. Instead, the sermon describes the importance of inviting people into religious community and building connections with people on buses or elsewhere.⁷⁷ On the one hand, an implicit metaphor can open a space for the listener/reader to draw conclusions and wrestle with making connections themselves. On the other hand, it can lead to a lack of clarity. In this study, implicit sermon metaphors have been made explicit. My efforts to name these metaphors entailed making interpretive decisions based on the context in which the metaphors were used.

A fifth consideration is the matter of pronoun use in the selected sermons. Some sermons use the pronoun *we* in undefined ways that create ambiguity. The nebulous *we* leaves the listener/reader to decide to whom the *we* refers. Is the *we* that is being referenced humanity, the people hearing the sermon, Unitarian Universalists, the religious community, ministers, or an ideal *we* that does not even exist? Or does the pronoun imply unexamined assumptions about the audience as being liberal or white, for example? The use of the term *we* has become a source of discussion, frustration, and analysis in Unitarian Universalism. Recognition has

⁷⁵ John T. Crestwell, Jr., “Justice Is Love in Action” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2012 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Phoenix, Arizona, June 24, 2012), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2012/worship/200330.shtml>.

⁷⁶ Nancy McDonald Ladd, “In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2016 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Columbus, Ohio, June 26, 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2016/worship/sunday>.

⁷⁷ Bill Neely, “The Guy on the Bus” (sermon, Stewardship Sermon Award, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton, Princeton, New Jersey, March 5, 2017), 3, accessed July 25, 2017, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the_guy_on_the_bus_2017_stewardship_sermon_award_winner.pdf.

increased about the way the pronoun can exclude and alienate people as well as perpetuate white culture. The vague pronoun reference, if not defined in context, can imply a shared experience that may or may not exist and can too frequently mask the experiences of non-dominant groups. When addressing a congregation or gathering of religious people, the preacher's use of the collective pronoun can be somewhat difficult to avoid entirely without the sermon becoming impersonal and/or laden with qualifications. In this thesis, I strive to limit the use of *we*.

An additional consideration with pronouns arises in reference to the preachers of the selected sermons. When discussing the sermons, I have attempted to avoid the use of gender-specific pronouns. Instead, I have opted to use the preacher's name or, more often, to refer to the sermon or metaphor. This decision is an effort to avoid assumptions on my part about the preacher's gender identity, except in cases where the preacher has been explicit about their own gender or that of individuals in stories they tell or references they make.

Finally, in terms of the discussion of metaphors, I have chosen to view the metaphors as belonging to the sermon more than to the preacher. While the preacher has a role to play in creating and using the metaphors, as has been established through the research, the metaphors themselves take on a life of their own that the preacher cannot entirely control. Just as important, my intention is not to highlight individual preachers or their particular literary techniques. The focus is not ultimately on individual sermons or individual metaphors but instead on the collective result. My goal is to shine a light on the patterns of metaphors and their role in creating meaning in Unitarian Universalism.

Metaphors and Metaphoric Patterns

The various types of metaphors and their uses in the selected sermons are discussed in the remainder of this chapter. In discussing the metaphors, I draw conclusions about their meaning based on the sermon's context and logic. I strive to be transparent about my

interpretations, recognizing that they are provisional. The metaphors as I have identified them appear in boldface type. When parts of the metaphor are in the preacher's own words, their words appear in quotation marks, as well. The types of metaphors in the selected sermons include the following, which are also presented in figure 4.1:

architectural	awakening	story
natural	sports	other
social	transportation	

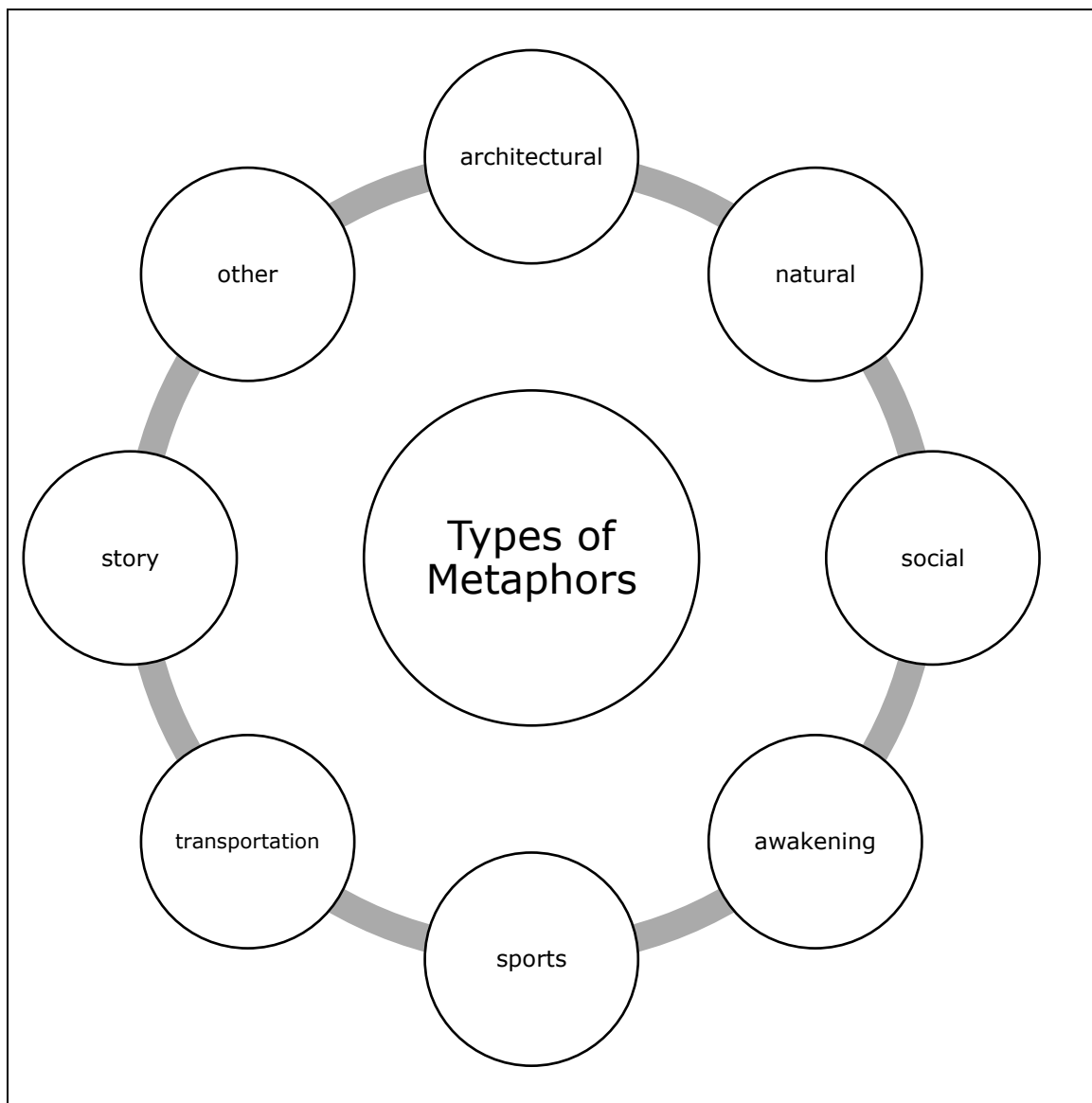


Figure 4.1 Types of Metaphors

Architectural Metaphors

Among the most frequent metaphors in the selected sermons are architectural ones. These metaphors make use of objects that are constructed by humans or used in construction. Among these images are closets, boxes, cages, gates, doors, and instruments (figure 4.2). These building-related elements function as barriers, thresholds, and containers, among other things. They serve as hindrances, zones of discomfort, and places of encounter, exile, hiding, and secrets. The architectural metaphors foster transformation or produce isolation by being built, dismantled, crossed, exited, and entered. Many of these architectural metaphors have a spatial element that focuses on moving from one sort of space to another one. The architectural metaphors are not typically portrayed as sheltering or protecting. Nor are they typically used to suggest their everyday usage for storage or other utilitarian functions. They do not relate to residences or creative venues.

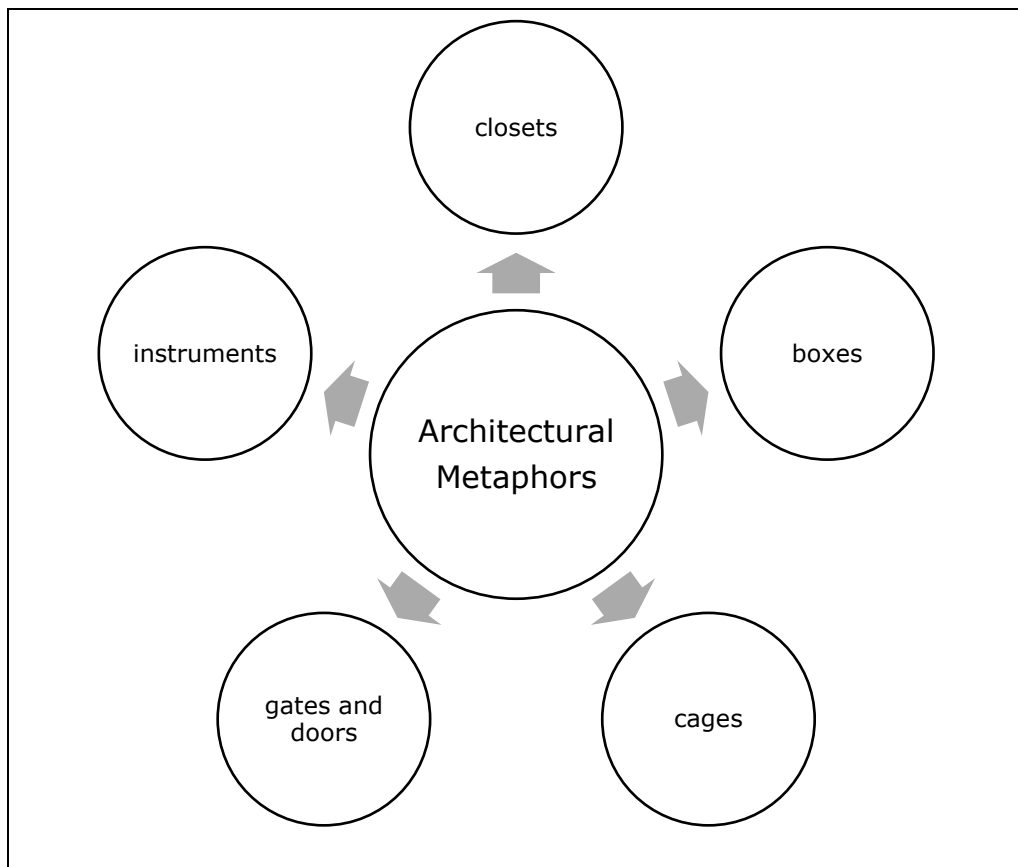


Figure 4.2 Architectural Metaphors

Closets

In the sermon, “For Just Such a Time as This,” Rev. Marlin Lavanhar uses the metaphor of coming out of the closet to talk about the ways that people are “spiritually closeted.”⁷⁸ This use broadens the concept of coming out from sexual orientation and gender identity to include other identities as well. The operative metaphor is that **coming out of the closet is revealing one’s identities**. According to the sermon, “as our culture has been learning, coming out is not just for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) people anymore.” Here, the metaphor offers a cultural critique and also applies to the church where people also need to come out. The metaphor is described here:

We need a *coming out* [emphasis added] in our association for those of us who are poor . . . or immigrants, military veterans, Christians . . . Theists . . . Republicans . . . and more. The problem is that despite all our inclusiveness, in many ways, we still have a fairly spiritually and emotionally *closeted culture* [emphasis added]. And it’s not just about not being welcoming to certain outsiders; it can be pretty lonely and sometimes painful even for insiders.⁷⁹

The sermon revolves around this coming out metaphor. Other references that reinforce and elaborate the meaning include the following: “hiding themselves,” “spiritual silos,” “people afraid to reveal their true selves openly to one another,” “presenting a façade of self-reliance,” “a spiritual and emotional closet,” and “our culture sends people into closets . . . in order to feel like they belong.”⁸⁰ Closets become places of separation, hiding, and exile.

The metaphor of coming out of the closet also figures in the sermon, “Sex, Religion, Abortion, and Justice,” by Rev. Rob Keithan. This sermon responds to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Congregational Study/Action Issue of Reproductive Justice. Here, as with Lavanhar’s sermon, the meaning extends beyond sexual orientation and gender identity. In this case, the metaphor seems to be that **coming out is an act of faith**. More specifically, the

⁷⁸ Lavanhar, “For Just Such a Time as This.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

sermon argues that coming out of the closet means being open about being a person of faith and about sharing one's social justice values in the public square. By being open, the person of faith creates an opportunity for others to come out as well. Being in the closet is compared to getting "stuck" and "reducing access."

The sermon uses additional architectural references, including "reproductive justice framework," "finding access," "increased access," "restrict access," and "the potential to unlock possibilities."⁸¹ Coming out is described as fostering connections. The ability to form connections "unlocks a transformative, collaborative and creative power that remains hidden to us when we only work in silos."⁸² Sharing, rather than hiding, creates the potential for change.

In Rev. Barbara Prose's sermon, "Define American," which responds to the Unitarian Universalist Association's Congregational Study/Action Issue of Immigration as a Moral Issue, there is no direct reference to the closet, but there are references to coming out. One such reference is the use of the *Exodus* story. The sermon also describes immigrant workers as making an exodus and expresses the idea of coming out to the world. The metaphor seems to be **coming out as telling one's truth publicly**. More specifically, immigrants come out when they are open about their identities. The metaphor shifts to the forefront in a story about Jose who

came out to the world . . . and that's what he calls it, *coming out* [emphasis added]—and has started an online conversation about what it means to be an American. . . . Jose's definition of an American is anyone who works hard, is proud of his country and wants to contribute, who's not a burden to anyone. I'm an American, he says.

Is he or isn't he an American? And who gets to decide? It helps me at this point to remember the definition of who is an American has never been fixed. Who is allowed to

⁸¹ Rob Keithan, "Sex, Religion, Abortion, and Justice" (sermon, 2015 Skinner Sermon Award, 2015 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Portland, Oregon, June 25, 2015), 3, accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/keithan_sex_religion_abortion_and_justice_sermon_text_2015-06-25_final_for_reading.pdf.

⁸² Ibid., 7.

be a citizen has never been fixed. What is required to become a citizen has always been and continues to be fluid.⁸³

Coming out means “Jose decided to tell the truth.” Conversely, not telling the truth means being in the closet and being “stuck.” It also involves the “anonymity” of keeping one’s “face away from the cameras” and knowing “when to hide [one’s] identity.” Hiding oneself or parts of oneself prevents people from being honest and keeps them imprisoned and exiled. The sermon describes those who are not public about their identity as “enslaved” and exiled, marked by “years in detention, under arrest.” The sermon concludes with a reference to another architectural element, a door, which is the threshold to freedom, as indicated in the following quotation:

As we *open our doors* [emphasis added] and our hearts to those of us who still need to hide some part, any part of our identity in order to survive, may we remember that each time one of us dares to tell the truth about who we are, it makes it possible for another person to step out of the shadows and into the light.⁸⁴

For some people, remaining in the closet may be a matter of survival, but those who risk revealing who they are help to liberate others.

In Rev. Mark Stringer’s sermon, “Be Ours a Religion,” **coming out of the cloister is welcoming theological diversity**. The metaphor builds on the words of Transcendentalist Unitarian Theodore Parker who said that “religion . . . like sunshine, goes everywhere.”⁸⁵ While the word *everywhere* may not at first seem like an architectural metaphor, the term here applies to leaving space to welcome theological diversity. The metaphor becomes most explicit when the sermon warns that “we can no longer afford to remain *cloistered* [emphasis added] in the so-

⁸³ Barbara Prose, “Define American” (sermon, 2012 Social Witness Sermon Award, 2012 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Phoenix, Arizona, June 22, 2012), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2012/worship/200324.shtml>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Theodore Parker, “Be Ours a Religion” (No. 683) in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

called comfort of like-minded people.”⁸⁶ *Cloistered* and *closeted* are related words. What is cloistered are Unitarian Universalists who hold “ideas about God ... too tightly.” This cloistering is described as “often divisive and sometimes dangerous.” The solution, says Stringer, is to make more space for interaction with religions and theologies other than one’s own.⁸⁷

Boxes

The title of Rev. Kaaren Anderson’s sermon, “Living Outside the Box,” suggests that the box is a central metaphor. The metaphorical implication is that **dogma is a box**, and Anderson says compassion and connection are what enable people to live outside the box of dogma. Two stories illustrate what it means to live outside the box: the story of Abraham offering a greeting to strangers in the desert and a contemporary story of hospitality. In the contemporary story, Anderson’s friends give their boxed up Chinese leftovers to a woman who was so hungry she came into a restaurant and stole their dinner plates off their table. The box of Chinese leftovers functions both literally and figuratively. Rather than resenting or condemning the woman, Anderson’s friends make a different choice about how to respond compassionately. In both stories, people strive to live outside the box rather than remaining in “familiar territory.”⁸⁸

Rev. Darcy Roake’s sermon, “Not-So-Great-Expectations,” similarly explores what it means to get out of the box, in this case, the box of expectations. A major metaphor in the sermon is **expectations as a box**. “Expectations,” according to the sermon, “while hopeful or initially exciting, can quickly become demands or strictures—a way to *box in* [emphasis added]

⁸⁶ Mark Stringer, “Be Ours a Religion” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2014 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Providence, Rhode Island, June 29, 2014), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2014/worship/295428.shtml>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Kaaren Anderson, “Living Outside the Box” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2011 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Charlotte, North Carolina, June 26, 2011), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2011/worship/184418.shtml>.

opportunity and growth in favor of what we feel we individually need at that very moment.” Love can “throw so many of these expectations out the window” and free people from “the expectations that [they themselves have] built.”⁸⁹ The box creates barriers. Revealing its contents offers the potential for acceptance.

The title of Rev. Paige Getty’s sermon, “Beautiful Faces and Complex Natures,” appears to evoke a social metaphor. However, the sermon is steeped in architectural language. The metaphor seems to be that **categorizing people is putting them in a box**. Additional architectural references include these: “barriers [that] exist between us” and the need to move past “the surface . . . the polished veneer.”⁹⁰ A box is a barrier that separates people, and getting outside it to know other people requires recognizing peoples’ depth and complexity. The sermon contends that “there is more to each of us—more beauty, more complexity, more depth, than we often see in one another or allow to be exposed in ourselves.” Emphasis is placed on exposing what is hidden in order to see “more than mere sides in a debate” and foster deeper human engagement.⁹¹

Cages

Because Rev. Dr. Lynn M. Acquafondata’s sermon, “Caging Violence,” is the United States prison and court systems, it only makes sense that the word *prison* would show up. However, prison is used metaphorically as well as literally. A major metaphor seems to be that **oppression is a cage**. The metaphor is derived from Maya Angelou’s poem, “Caged Bird,” in

⁸⁹ Darcy Roake, “Not-So-Great-Expectations” (sermon, Stewardship Program, 2014 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Providence, Rhode Island, June 26, 2014), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/finance/fundraising/presentations/296344.shtml>.

⁹⁰ Paige Getty, “Beautiful Faces and Complex Natures” (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2010 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 24, 2010), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2010/165854.shtml>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

which people are compared to free and caged birds. The sermon likens violent prisoners to caged birds that sing “with a fearful trill” and suffer a death of self that is like “[standing] on the grave of dreams.”⁹² The “*bars that cage* [emphasis added] . . . come primarily from perpetual neglect, abuse, shame and despair, not iron.”⁹³ The metaphor suggests that the problems that result from violence are a cage that imprisons everyone, prisoners and free people alike.

The metaphoric language appears in other phrases such as “break the chains of generations of violence and oppression” and “[shine] a light on the dingy, frightening corners of human life.” Like the closet metaphor, the cage metaphor represents parts of the self that need to be liberated from captivity and hiding.⁹⁴

Gates and Doors

Preaching about “Our Greatest Challenge,” Rev. Peter Morales describes the “practice of greeting people at the door” while serving as a congregational minister.⁹⁵ In the sermon, the door is both literal and metaphorical. **The door is welcome**, representing hospitality and offering the possibility of making room for all those who are coming to religious community. Morales’s sermon challenges listeners to consider how well the community is doing at “housing the religiously homeless” and whether it is “a prison” or “an inspiration.” The door metaphor

⁹² Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York, New York: Random House, 1994), 194.

⁹³ Lynn M. Acquafondata, “Caging Violence” (sermon, 2010 Skinner Sermon Award), 1-2, accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/acquafondatalynn/caging_violence_sermon.pdf, 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁵ Peter Morales, “Our Greatest Challenge” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2010 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 27, 2010), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2010/sunday-worship>.

encourages people to consider how well they are doing at “making room for people who are not just like us.”⁹⁶

In Rev. Mara Dowdall’s sermon entitled, “The Shared World,” **the airport gate is the shared world**. The gate metaphor comes from Naomi Shihab Nye’s prose poem “Gate A-4” in which Nye responds to an airline’s request for someone who understands Arabic to come to airport Gate A-4. At the gate, Nye encounters a Palestinian woman en route for medical treatment who is terrified because she thinks her flight has been canceled. According to the sermon, those waiting at the gate “co-create a little version of Beloved Community.”⁹⁷

Human communion, according to the sermon, can happen “at the airport terminal and in a hospital room; it can happen at the courthouse or in a prison cell. It can happen at the bus stop or in a plenary hall.”⁹⁸ The gate serves as a literal and figurative obstacle that is encountered. The airport gate bars travelers, but with no promise that everything will turn out okay. Ironically, the barrier is also what creates the opportunity for genuine human encounter.

Instruments

The sermon, “In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding,” by Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd explores the human longing for real encounter with other people. A major metaphor within the sermon is that **“relationship is the sandpaper.”** The metaphor comes from Mickey ScottBey Jones, Director of Healing Justice with the Southern-based collective Faith Matters Network and an Associate Fellow of Racial Justice with Evangelicals for Social Action. Human differences and resistance to those differences are described as the sandpaper that smooths people and

⁹⁶ Morales.

⁹⁷ Mara Dowdall, “The Shared World” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2017 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 25, 2017), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2017/worship/sunday>. Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem, “Gate A-4,” is quoted and discussed in the sermon.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

primes them for real relationships and connection. Meaningful human encounter occurs through “holy abrasion” that “agitates” and even “rubs us raw.” Developing a workable relationship takes effort, which individuals may be less inclined to undertake if they are not required to or until they are “stuck together long enough.”⁹⁹

Ladd’s own personal story illustrates how relationship can be born of stuckness. That stuckness occurred while Ladd was a young altar server working with a priest who did not think Ladd belonged in the chancel and who at first refused to allow Ladd to pour water into the chalice after communion. The following description of that encounter delineates the metaphor:

This meeting of hands and this sea change of possibility was realized not because we were the heroes of our own story, nor because we earned the grace of our encounter, but because we were stuck with each other.

. . . stuck with one another so long that understanding might arise in the very *friction* [emphasis added] of our difference. . . .

The wonderful, deep spirited antiracist organizer Mickey ScottBey Jones has said that *relationship is the sandpaper* [emphasis added] that wears away our resistance to change. Relationship is the abrasion that *agitates* [emphasis added] enough to make a way forward, relationship consistent and ongoing encounter with people and perspectives different than our own. It smooths the way for the sacred even as it *rubs us raw* [emphasis added]. And there is a *holy abrasion* [emphasis added] of the spirit that is born in deep relational encounters across differences. We, as congregations and as a movement, exist to be *instruments of that holy abrasion* [emphasis added]. Those very encounters are our work. And yet we know that there are many ways to hide from the discomfort inherent in a holy abrasion.¹⁰⁰

Other sermon references to this uncomfortable smoothing process can be found in phrases such as: “formative abrasion,” “resistance,” “sandpaper of the holy,” “transformative sandpaper of real relationship,” and “we remain thoroughly agitated.” People are described as instruments in service to this formative process.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ladd.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Natural Metaphors

Natural metaphors play prominently in the selected sermons. The natural types of metaphors exist in or is caused by nature, as opposed to being constructed or made by human hands or by existing in human imagination. They include food and wine, plants and trees, the web, and the elements (figure 4.3). Like the architectural metaphors, the natural metaphors elucidate human interactions. They tend to point toward relational difficulties and challenges, pointing to pathways to overcome barriers that separate people. Seldom are they used to evoke transcendence or mystery. Nor do they, with a few exceptions, tend to be used to promote an ecological consciousness, foster ecojustice, or describe the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

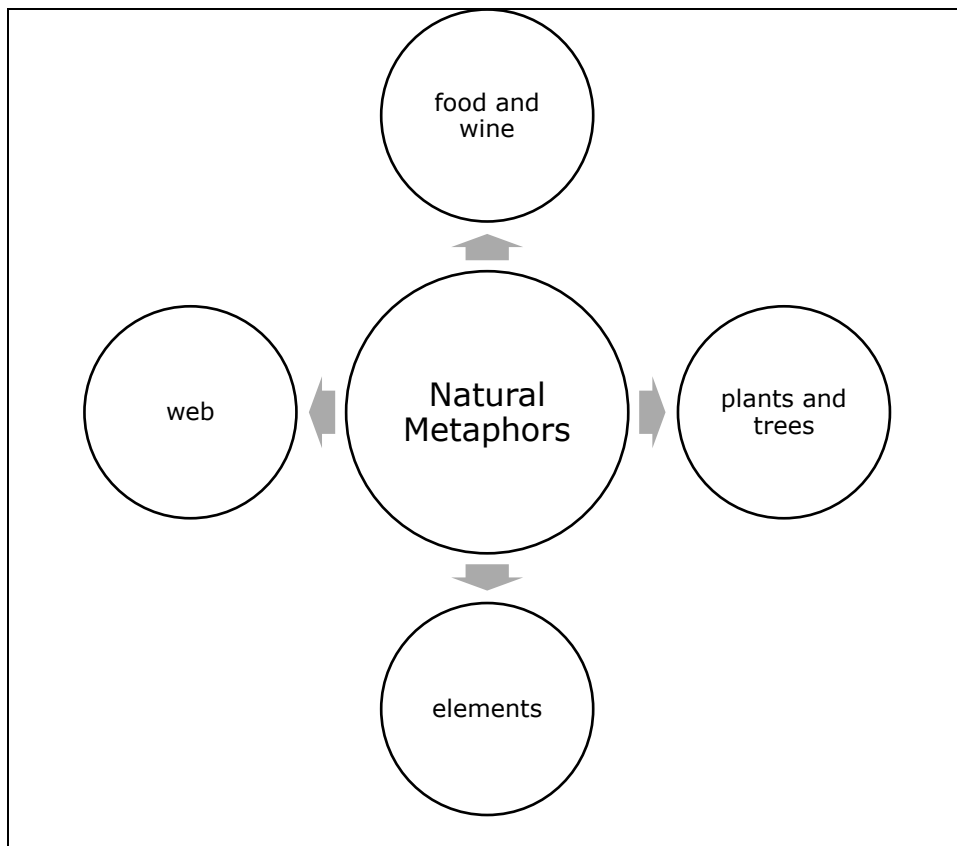


Figure 4.3 Natural Metaphors

Food and Wine

The subject of Rev. Alison M. Cornish's sermon, "What Can't You Eat?," is food and food ethics, so it is tempting to categorize this sermon as natural for that reason alone. However, food is used metaphorically, as well. An operative metaphor in the sermon seems to be **food ethics as a garden**. That garden requires regular tending. The metaphor is cast from the sermon's first sentence with the word *genesis*.¹⁰² A story of a multi-faith gathering conjures images of communion with the representatives at that gathering reflecting together on the various foods each tradition eats and does not eat. They recognize that eating together at all is a challenge for the group. While complicated, food ethics, according to the sermon, offer insight into what a religion values.

The sermon ends with a story about prison gardening that reinforces the garden metaphor. A woman in prison who gardens for the first time while in prison shares what has been learned in the process of creating the garden. Here is the description:

The weeds run really deep, but the roots of the fruits and vegetables can get pulled out so easy. That's the way it is out in the world. . . . The good things need to be tended daily. The weeds will take over if you let them. You can't let them—or there goes your *garden of life* [emphasis added]. I learned this here, in this garden.¹⁰³

The sermon concludes that the best way to do that daily tending is "for your food and your spirit to be in harmony."¹⁰⁴

In addition to using architectural language, Rev. Peter Morales's sermon, "Our Greatest Challenge," uses natural language. The metaphor is that **religious seeking is a hunger for relationship**. People are described as coming to church "out of a deep hunger . . . for human

¹⁰² Alison M. Cornish, "What Can't You Eat?" (sermon, 2009 Social Witness Sermon Award, 2009 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 27, 2009), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2009/ga2009/sermon-award>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

relationship.”¹⁰⁵ The metaphor is furthered through related references, including: “spiritual hunger,” “feeding the spiritually hungry,” “it’s like watching hundreds of thousands of people slowly starve to death when our storehouses are full.”¹⁰⁶ The reference to storehouses could fit into the architectural type of metaphor, but most closely relates to food distribution and satisfying people’s hunger. The sermon concludes that “the challenge before us is huge. The stakes are enormous. We live in a time in which the hunger for love is palpable.”¹⁰⁷ The metaphor suggests not only the needs of spiritual seekers but also the community’s difficulty in providing for those needs.

Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz’s sermon, “Tasting the Wine of Astonishment,” incorporates two natural images—wine and the cosmos. Each is vivid and powerful. The image of tasting wine comes from Psalm 60:3, which declares, “thou has made us to taste the wine of astonishment.”¹⁰⁸ The metaphor is **the cosmos as the “wine of astonishment.”** The sermon incorporates a three-and-a-half-minute video presentation that moves from earth out to the universe and back to the cellular level of life. The stunning images inspire the viewer to reflect on how vulnerable humans are while each also being “held tight in the embrace of creation.”¹⁰⁹ The video seems intended to elicit an experience of awe and wonder.

A homily also delivered by Schulz and included in this study combines two other natural metaphors—bread and roses. The metaphor is that **bread and roses are justice and**

¹⁰⁵ Morales.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Psalm 60:3 (King James Version).

¹⁰⁹ William F. Schulz, “Tasting the Wine of Astonishment” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2013 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Louisville, Kentucky, June 23, 2013), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2013/worship/287044.shtml>.

beauty. The images, taken from James Oppenheim's poem, also came to be used as the catch phrase, "bread and roses," by the Irish Labor Party. Bread is a metaphor for what is described as "the base necessities of life."¹¹⁰ Roses are a metaphor for beauty and for the beauty of a person's spirit. Together bread and roses constitute "the magic combination that lies at the heart of Unitarian Universalism."¹¹¹ Roses could also fit within the plants category of metaphor, but for simplicity, is not cross-referenced there.

Plants and Trees

Schulz's sermon, "Tasting the Wine of Astonishment," also uses roses as a metaphor. In a story about an ancient poetry contest, the second and third place winners each receive a rose made of gold and silver, respectively. The first-place winner receives "a living rose." The metaphor seems to be **life as a living rose**. The sermon concludes with the question: "if we had to choose, who among us would not choose the living rose?"¹¹² The story is told in a way that suggests that a person's life resembles the living rose because it is fragile and short-lived, while also being beautiful and astonishing.

Rev. Darcy Roake's sermon, "Not-So-Great-Expectations," makes use of a natural metaphor to explore stewardship. The natural metaphor is that **expectations are trees, and forests are love**. According to Roake, "not-so-great expectations lead us to be unable to see *the forest of love and faith through the trees of demands and needs* [emphasis added]."¹¹³ The sermon plays off the natural metaphor elsewhere, inviting the community of faith to "be

¹¹⁰ William F. Schulz, homily (Church of the Larger Fellowship Worship Service, 2009 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 2009), 7, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2009/ga2009/clf>, 7.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹¹² Schulz, "Tasting the Wine of Astonishment."

¹¹³ Roake.

nurtured and grow in unexpected ways . . . ensuring that . . . generosity and love for Unitarian Universalism will bear fruit for generations.” For such growth to occur, the community needs to avoid getting caught up in “trees of expectations.” The metaphor becomes explicit in the call “to help each other see that forest of love through the trees of not-so-great expectations.” Expectations get in the way, according to the sermon, but love fosters community.¹¹⁴

In the stewardship sermon, “Strengthening Our Roots,” Rev. Shelley Page uses the metaphor of **the congregation as “a stand of aspens.”** The Unitarian Universalist congregation is described as “a stand of strong and beautiful aspens, all growing together with a foundation of strong interdependent intertwined roots.”¹¹⁵ Congregants are likened to trees and their generosity to leaves, while the strong congregation is compared to a stand of trees with interdependent roots.

In the sermon, “Caging Violence,” Rev. Dr. Lynn M. Acquafondata draws a natural metaphor from Thich Nhat Hanh’s reading, “Roses and Garbage.” An architectural metaphor in this sermon has previously been discussed. The natural metaphor is that **people are roses and garbage.** The metaphor suggests that violent prisoners are part of the cycle of life, just like everyone else, and can be transformed. Nhat Hanh’s reading presents the rose and garbage as coequal.¹¹⁶ The sermon applies this concept to those inside and those outside prison, in particular to prisoners who have committed violent crimes and to individuals who have not. While violent prisoners, says Acquafondata, are often considered society’s “garbage” and “we” are considered the roses, everyone is both beautiful and flawed.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Roake.

¹¹⁵ Shelley Page, “Strengthening Our Roots” (sermon, 2016 Stewardship Sermon Award, Unitarian Universalist Church of Ogden, Ogden, Utah, March 13, 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/giving/awards/stewardshipsermon/2016-recipient>.

¹¹⁶ Acquafondata, 1.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

Words and phrases that reinforce the metaphor include the following: “cycles of wealth and poverty” and the “garbage of society.”¹¹⁸ Another reference related to the metaphor is to “the living dead, biologically alive yet spiritually and emotionally dead.”¹¹⁹ In this context, I am including the terms *living* and *dead*, like *roses* and *garbage*, as natural phenomena. Additional descriptive language includes the phrase, “a fruitless attempt to come alive again.”¹²⁰ In the following passage, the metaphor of the prisoner being both roses and garbage is made explicit: “All of a sudden this beautiful person took on emotions from the dark side of life. The rose wilted and began to decompose.”¹²¹ A person’s original beauty, like a rose’s, can deteriorate due to despair, abuse, and other negative experiences.

Rev. Don Southworth’s sermon plays off the burning bush metaphor and draws on both fire and garden language. The metaphor is **ministry as a burning bush**. Like a burning bush, the call to ministry needs regular tending to ensure it is robust. The sermon concludes by focusing on how to tend a burning bush, likening its tending to the call to ministry. Ministers are advised to give their ministries space to grow and daily watering to nourish and sustain their own and the community’s spiritual, emotional, and intellectual life.¹²²

Elements: Fire

In Southworth’s sermon, the metaphor is fire. Specifically, **the passion for ministry is fire**. The sermon challenges ministers to consider the question, “What bush is ablaze in your

¹¹⁸ Acquafondata, 2–3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 4–5.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹²¹ Ibid., 7.

¹²² Don Southworth. Untitled sermon (2014 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Providence, Rhode Island, June 2014), accessed July 25, 2017, <https://uuma.site-ym.com/page/MD16OpeningVideo>.

life, in your ministry that you must pay attention to now?”¹²³ Clergy are cautioned that their passion has the potential to consume rather than inspire them.

Rev. Duane Fickeisen also uses fire to evoke the call to ministry in the sermon, “Flare Up Like Flame.” The metaphor emerges from a Rainer Maria Rilke poem, in which Rilke encourages people to “flare up like flame and make big shadows.”¹²⁴ The sermon applies this idea to ministry, casting the metaphor that **the call to ministry is the flame that flares up**. According to the sermon, “we have been called to something beyond ourselves. We’ve been called by life itself.”¹²⁵ The point is for that passion to have an impact.

Elements: Water

Rev. Rod Richards’ sermon, “Whatever Works,” adopts a water metaphor from a parable attributed to Saul Alinsky. In the parable, people fall down the waterfall and are rescued downstream. The story has commonly been used to describe the need for prevention rather than rescue. The metaphor is that **economic injustice is falling down a waterfall** and suggests that contemporary religion is failing to address the issues underlying economic injustice that would help to prevent such injustices. Richards preaches that, while “*our compassion* can pull people from the water, save them from drowning,” if we want to prevent the problem in the first

¹²³ Southworth.

¹²⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, “God Speaks to Each of Us as He Makes Us” in *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, trans. by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York, New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 88.

¹²⁵ Duane Fickeisen, “Flare Up Like Flame” (sermon, 2015 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Portland, Oregon, June 23, 2015), accessed July 25, 2017. <https://uuma.site-ym.com/?2015VideoOpening>.

place, “we need to find out *why so many people are falling in to the river* [emphasis added].”¹²⁶
That preventive work represents the collective commitment to effecting justice.

Revs. Walter LeFlore, Josh Pawelek, and Mitra Rahnema present sermon reflections on what it means to move what is at the center of Unitarian Universalism to the margins and what is at the margins to the center in an effort to overcome resistance to changing the faith’s culture. All three ministers served as members of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association’s Committee for Antiracism Anti-oppression Multiculturalism (CARAOM) at the time this thesis was written and shared different perspectives in their sermons with an intentional ARAOMC lens. They offer reflections based on a contemporary midrash-style retelling of the Biblical story in Matthew 14:29 of Peter walking on water. Water and a boat are both operative metaphors. The boat is included in the section on transportation types of metaphor. These sermon reflections are also discussed in the section on story.

The water metaphor is expressed in several ways, including: **walking on water as living one’s faith** and **walking on water as being cast into stormy waters**. Who is walking on water and who is sinking depends on one’s perspective.

According to Pawelek,

Throughout the course of my ministry, and I’m sure it’s the same for many of you, there has been a relentless call to get out of the boat. . . . Not only are there multiple storms bearing down upon us, and it turns out our boat isn’t designed to weather them, but we’re learning even calm water and smooth sailing aren’t that much in our best interest anymore. . . . It’s time to walk on water. . . . It . . . means doing things differently . . . transforming our culture.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Rod Richards, “Whatever Works” (sermon, 2016 Social Witness Sermon Award), 4, accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/whateverworks_2016_csw_sermon.pdf.

¹²⁷ Josh Pawelek, sermon reflection (2016 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Columbus, Ohio, June 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, <https://uuma.site-ym.com/page/MD16OpeningVideo>.

Pawelek hopes ministers will “tow each other back to shore, those who need towing, or . . . teach each other to tread water a little longer, or . . . show each other how to swim, and maybe, just maybe, . . . discern how to stay on the surface of the water for a few more steps.”¹²⁸

LeFlore imagines what it might mean if Peter were understood to represent a white person “stepping out of the boat and into waters of diversity, into a sea of difference.” Another interpretation LeFlore offers is that is that “too many people of color are walking on water, questioning their faith as they try to get into the UU boat, some sinking before being welcomed into the boat.”¹²⁹

Rahnema characterizes walking on water as a liberatory act. The sermon reflection concludes that

I want to liberate ministry so we can step into water holding onto the beauty of ambiguity with love and forgiveness, to encourage one another, even if we don’t get it. . . . I believe if we do it together, if we are united in the complexity, then we will be able to tow one another home when we sink. . . .

May we step out of the boat and shift our full weight into the water, exposing ourselves to the elements and put at the center that which is at the margins, the margins of our being and the margins in society so we may nurture the spirit of truth. Frankly, I would rather live my life walking on water for ten feet than not at all.¹³⁰

These three reflections draw out a variety of possible metaphoric interpretations for stepping into water and encourage the listeners/readers to relate their own experiences.

Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern’s sermon, “On the Edge: The Next Great Awakening,” revolves around the metaphor of diving into unknown water. The sermon begins with a personal story about a diving lesson in which Southern is standing on the back of a boat that is rocking in

¹²⁸ Pawelek.

¹²⁹ Walter LeFlore, sermon reflection (2016 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Columbus, Ohio, June 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, <https://uuma.site-ym.com/page/MD16OpeningVideo>.

¹³⁰ Mitra Rahnema, sermon reflection (2016 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Columbus, Ohio, June 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, <https://uuma.site-ym.com/page/MD16OpeningVideo>.

waves, “preparing to leap” amid uncertainty. The religious revolution is compared to this experience of entering the “world beyond what we know and trust.”¹³¹ The metaphor is that **the religious revolution is leaping into unknown waters**. According to Southern, religious people

find ourselves standing here facing these waters.

That’s why we have this awkward new gear strapped on our backs and some old habits working against us. And *we are preparing to leap* [emphasis added]. . . . It’s this Great Awakening that we have been preparing for for a lifetime. And for this, we are asked to *leap just beyond the surface of what we know and trust* [emphasis added].

Before you dive, the instructor tells you there are two things you have to remember, only two. The first is just to remember to breathe. Breath—that word so close to spirit, that which ties you to life and its call.

The second thing to remember, he says, is never to dive alone. . . . And breath and that hand will be what makes the scary possible.¹³²

Water-related language pervades the sermon and includes the following: “the religious wave that’s washing over us is made up of people who have no innate love of institutions,” “we get this wave of the future,” and “this age of spirit may be a little more chaotic than we are used to.”¹³³ Despite the chaos, Unitarian Universalists are said to remain committed to their faith.

Elements: Stone/Earth

Rev. Dawn Cooley’s basic metaphor is contained in the sentence: “I have this vision of us, religious liberals in general and UUs in particular, standing atop a precipice, at the brink of an extremely dangerous situation with disastrous potential.”¹³⁴ The metaphor is **religious**

¹³¹ Vanessa Rush Southern, “On the Edge: The Next Great Awakening” (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2013 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Louisville, Kentucky, June 22, 2013), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2013/worship/286915.shtml>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Dawn Cooley, “Standing at the Precipice” (sermon, 2007 Social Witness Sermon Award, 2007 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Portland, Oregon, June 23, 2007), 3, accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/cooleydawn/070623_standingprecipice.pdf.

dominionism as a dangerous precipice and liberal religion as smooth stones. The sermon addresses the Unitarian Universalist Association's Congregational Study/Action Issue of Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society. The precipice represents not only dominionism's control but also Unitarian Universalism's reluctance to take a strong public position for religious freedom. James Luther Adams terms these liberal values "the five smooth stones of religious liberalism."¹³⁵ The sermon employs Adams's smooth stones as the framework for embodying faith.¹³⁶

Rev. Dr. Mary J. Harrington's sermon, "A Lifetime Isn't Long Enough," employs an array of natural images. A central stone-related metaphor is drawn from the Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi:

Come! Take a pick-axe
And break apart
Your stony self.¹³⁷

The metaphor seems to be that **paying attention is the "spiritual pickaxe that breaks [people] open."** For Harrington, "poetry is often a kind of spiritual pickaxe that breaks me open—shakes me up and rearranges my priorities."¹³⁸ The image of the pickaxe provides a refrain throughout the sermon to name ways the preacher was broken open following

¹³⁵ Cooley, 4. The sermon refers to and discusses "the five smooth stones" in James Luther Adams's essay, "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith," in *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*, edited by Max Stackhouse, Beacon Press, 1976, 12–20.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹³⁷ Jalaluddin Rumi, "What Is This Fragrance?" in *An Anthology of Translations of Mevlâna Jalâluddin Rumi*. Ed. by Kabir Helminski (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 15.

¹³⁸ Mary J. Harrington, "A Lifetime Isn't Long Enough" (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2009 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 26, 2009), accessed August 11, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/program/highlights/slt>.

a diagnosis of Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS). A second metaphor of awakening is described later in this chapter.

In "Resilience and Religious Freedom," Rev. Kate Landis strikes the metaphor of **freedom as taking the long view from the mountain**. According to the sermon, "hopelessness is the cancer of our time." Combatting despair depends on the ability to "[clamber] up the mountain so we can take the long view."¹³⁹ The mountaintop perspective is the key to resilience. The preacher says, "The view *from the mountaintop* [emphasis added] is sustaining. . . . What is another arrest when you know freedom is on the horizon? What difference is a legislative let-down when you can see the promised land up ahead?"¹⁴⁰

Martin Luther King, Jr., Jerald Goldstein, and Francis David are offered as examples of people who "had been to the mountaintop of [their] faith" and remained confident in their own ability to make a difference.¹⁴¹

Web

Rev. James C. Leach's sermon, "the infinite enlargement of the heart," uses the interdependent web of existence as a metaphor. Here, **the web is a metaphor for the common good**. The sermon also uses Ralph Waldo Emerson's image of "the common heart" as a metaphor for the common good, a metaphor included in the section of other types of metaphor.¹⁴² The sermon incorporates terms and phrases, such as "entwined" and "our well-

¹³⁹ Kate Landis, "Resilience and Religious Freedom" (sermon, 2017 Skinner Sermon Award, Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church, Shoreline, Washington, January 15, 2017), 2, accessed August 11, 2017, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/resilience_religious_freedom_2017_skinner_award_o.pdf.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" in *The Works of Emerson* (Roslyn, NY: Black's Readers Service Company, 1932), 174.

being . . . inextricably tied together as if in some expansive web.”¹⁴³ A few other sermons in this study have references to the web, but, because they do not elaborate on it as a metaphor, I have not included them here.

Awakening Metaphors

Metaphors related to awakening include nightmare, illusions, sleep, and numbness (figure 4.4). While some of these metaphors relate to spiritual awareness, most relate to sensitivity to social injustice. They serve as wake-up calls to individuals who are unable to see injustice and even more so to the religious community as a whole to raise its collective consciousness to racism and other injustices. The references associated with these metaphors are rooted in popular culture’s dystopian films and literature as well as in Eastern philosophy.

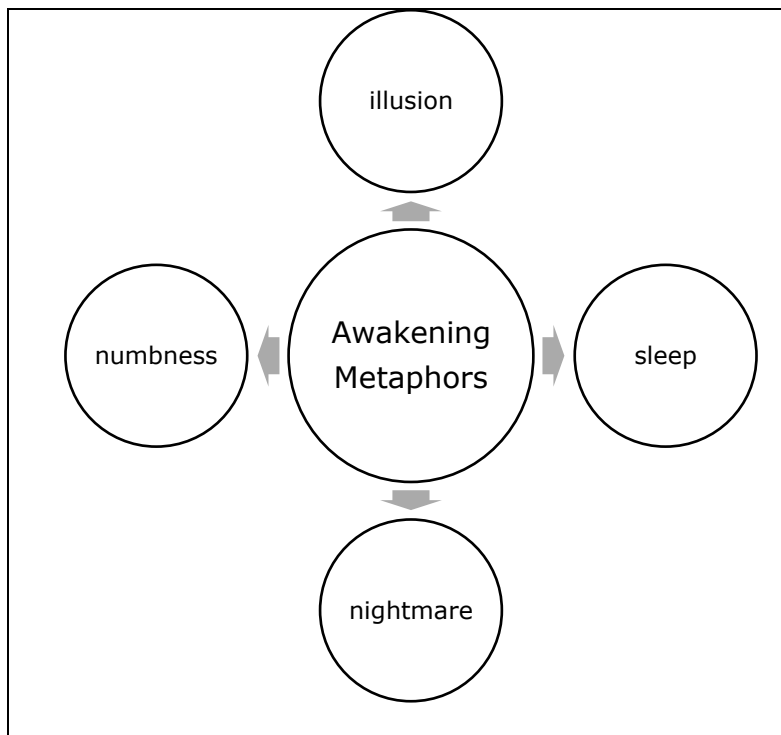


Figure 4.4 Awakening Metaphors

¹⁴³ James C. Leach, “the infinite enlargement of the heart” (sermon, 2012 Stewardship Sermon Award, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, Columbus, Ohio, February 2, 2012), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/198845.shtml>.

Illusion

The movie, *The Matrix*, provides a major metaphor for Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern's sermon, "Learning Some Other Country's History." In *The Matrix*, people living in an illusion have the possibility of taking a pill to wake up, and in the sermon, the metaphor seems to be that **listening is the pill that wakes people up from illusions**. Listening awakens them to more truth about racism. According to the sermon,

Once we take that pill, once we start reading accounts we never read, and having conversations we never used to have, and listening to people we never engaged with before, we learn things we can't unlearn. We have more of the truth

The truth is hard, it's painful, it disturbs your sleep, it disturbs your conscience, and it compels you to change your life.¹⁴⁴

In the movie, taking the red pill results in waking up once and for all, but Morgenstern points out that in real life waking up is "piecemeal."¹⁴⁵ Every time a person is exposed to a new perspective on life, they get insight into a little more of the truth. The sermon's use of story is discussed in that section of this chapter.

Sleep

Rev. Marlin Lavanhar's sermon, "A Calling for US," revolves around images of **religious literalism as people lulled to sleep**. Sermon references include phrases such as "seeing under some of the veils of our society," "resurrecting the dead," "the walking dead," "there are a

¹⁴⁴ Amy Zucker Morgenstern, "Learning Some Other Country's History" (sermon, 2016 Skinner Sermon Award), 6, accessed July 25, 2017, <https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/learningsomeothercountryshistory.pdf>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

lot of people in this world who are part of the living dead,” “our nation was lulled back to sleep,” and “lifting of the veil of our democracy.”¹⁴⁶ The remedy, according to the metaphor, is “conscious [emphasis added], progressive, open-minded broken-hearted people who will stand up and help re-imagine what will come next.” The *veil* is a related metaphor for uncovering corruption. When that veil is lifted, people can experience the true meaning of the democratic ideal.¹⁴⁷

Nightmare

Rev. Bill Sinkford’s sermon, “Love Calls Us On,” is oriented around the metaphor that **Unitarian Universalists are “deluded dreamers living in a racial nightmare.”**¹⁴⁸ The sermon incorporates dream language in phrases such as “comfortable dream” and “conscious ones.” While Unitarian Universalists thought they were “fully enlightened,” in reality, progress for people of color has stalled. The metaphoric language is further expressed in the question, “Did we fall asleep at the switch?” and in the observation that “the racial nightmare has not been ended. . . . We cannot stay woke. . . . We cannot prevent the racial nightmare from continuing.” According to the sermon, the work of the Unitarian Universalist community is to wake up from the delusion and to be vigilant about ending racism.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Marlin Lavanhar, “A Calling for US” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship, 2008 General Assembly, Unitarian Universalist Association, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, June 29, 2008), 10, accessed July 25, 2017. <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2008/worship/sunday>; http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/lavanharmartin/080629_ga5003_sundayworshipsermon.pdf.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ William G. Sinkford, “Love Calls Us On” (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2016 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Columbus, Ohio, June 23, 2016), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2016/worship/slt>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Numbness

The sermon, “A Lifetime Isn’t Long Enough,” strikes the metaphor of **awakening from “spiritual lethargy” as a responsibility**. For Rev. Dr. Mary J. Harrington, people need to “reawake to life at its heights and its depths.”¹⁵⁰ The sermon declares that the “our greatest responsibility” is “to be awake to the reality Mary Oliver reminds us of, that even ‘a lifetime isn’t long enough for the beauty of this world.’”¹⁵¹ What hampers that awakening is “dull routine and habit, leading to numbness, forgetfulness, zoning out.”¹⁵²

Awakening after being diagnosed with ALS, Harrington had the personal discovery that “it takes vigilance, focusing on living in the moment and what I care about and love most, to keep this illness from defeating my spirit, from taking me over, including my truest, deepest self.”¹⁵³

Social Metaphors

Social metaphors use the language of society or community (figure 4.5). There are two occurrences, both referring to the large tribe. The tribe metaphors are rooted in concepts of global and earth consciousness. Like the architectural metaphors, they point to ideas of insiders and outsiders, reflecting on the relationship between being part of one worldwide tribe versus belonging to one’s own tribe.

¹⁵⁰ Harrington.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. The sermon references Mary Oliver’s *The Leaf and the Cloud: A Poem* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), “Flare, Part 12.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

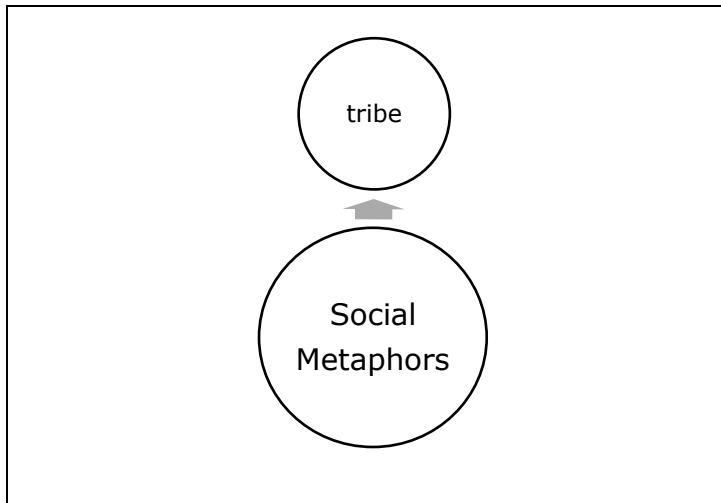


Figure 4.5 Social Metaphors

In Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray's sermon on immigration and compassion, a major metaphor is that **the large tribe is an ideal of worldwide love**. The tribe image comes from Alberto Blanco's poem, "My Tribe." The sermon incorporates the phrases, "it is human to seek out our place, the comforts of belonging in one's tribe" and "stepping out of our own tribe to walk with another, to follow the lead of another, changes a person." The sermon reminds listeners of "A. Powell Davies calling us to be a religion that says we will never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the love of one another." What seems most crucial is the willingness to engage across barriers and fears to embrace a vision of global consciousness and see the larger family of all people.¹⁵⁴

Rev. Amy Carol Webb speaks of the tribe both literally and metaphorically in her sermon, "People of the Good Earth: A Celebration of First Nations." **The large tribe is** a metaphor for **all races coming together**. The sermon draws on the tribe concept in several ways. For one thing, Webb refers to being part of the "lost blood," meaning those who have been

¹⁵⁴ Susan Frederick-Gray, untitled (sermon, 2012 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Phoenix, Arizona, June 19, 2012), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uuma.org/general/custom.asp?page=MD2012Video1>.

disconnected from their own history and the land of their ancestors.¹⁵⁵ A quotation from the Cree Tribe also gives expression to the tribe metaphor. The longing for “a tribe of people from all races . . . who will put their faith in deeds, not words, and make the planet green again.”¹⁵⁶ The gathering of diverse people into one tribe is an ideal society that would bring about healing.

Sports Metaphors

The sports type of metaphors includes games, wrestling, and paragliding (figure 4.6). Interestingly, some of the most popular contemporary sports and games, such as football, basketball, and soccer, are not mentioned at all. The games are darts and gambling, which are games of chance and skill. Wrestling and paragliding have elements of emotional and physical risk. With gambling and paragliding, there is the prospect of pleasure alongside the danger.

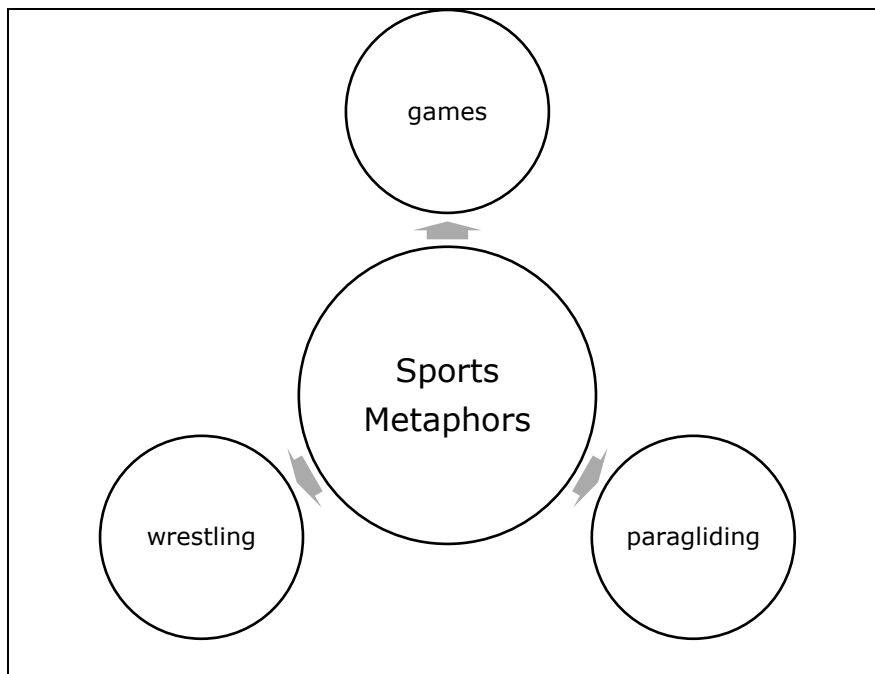


Figure 4.6 Sports Metaphors

Games

¹⁵⁵ Amy Carol Webb, "People of the Good Earth: A Celebration of First Nations" (sermon, Skinner Sermon Award, November 11, 2015), 3, accessed July 25, 2017, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/people_of_the_good_earth_winner1.pdf.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Webb, 7.

In the sermon, “Justice Is Love in Action,” Rev. John T. Crestwell describes **life as a game of darts** and insists that Unitarian Universalists need to start getting involved and taking a position. According to the sermon,

The [Spirit] is calling us to wake up and understand the game that is being played. It is asking us *to learn the game of life and get into it ready to play* [emphasis added]. Now currently in this game we’re witnessing a paradigm shift in many societies and many are uncomfortable and afraid. This game is called modern tribalism.

Let me break this down to you, just focusing here on America. We are all living in a constructed or created reality, the American dream. This is what I’m talking about. We’ve collectively created it and we can collectively change it. It’s not that simple, though, because *it works quite well for a few gamers who get lots of incentives to keep the game a certain way* [emphasis added].

Now, in this game there is no alien at work, only the tragic human condition with all of its prejudices and biases, virtues and vices, various stories, mores, folklores, et cetera. We’ve created meaning. We’ve created things we love. And we’ve created things we hate.

. . . Now, within the game those with massive incentives have created, what I’m calling, the societal quintessential of privilege.¹⁵⁷

The dartboard illustrates the game of privilege in America and the battle for control. Those with the incentives get closest to the bullseye center. To alter this structure, Unitarian Universalists need to learn to take sides. The sermon seeks to reframe the idea of winners and losers from being about people to being about values. People of faith are encouraged to side with their ethical principles.¹⁵⁸

Rev. Peter Friedrichs’s sermon, “All In,” uses two sports-related metaphors. The first is the gambling metaphor that having **faith is going “all in.”** A personal story about going to Las Vegas expresses the metaphor. Friedrichs says, “I sat down at the table *ready to risk it all* [emphasis added], but in the moment of truth *I couldn’t pull the trigger to make the bold move* [emphasis added], to ask for that next card. So I stood pat.” He lost and “that night . . . tossed

¹⁵⁷ Crestwell.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

and turned . . . wondering about what might have been.”¹⁵⁹ The sermon reflects on what might be possible if church members were willing to risk everything for their faith.¹⁶⁰

Paragliding

Friedrichs’s second sports metaphor has to do with flying and, as with the gambling metaphor, urges an “all in” approach. The metaphor seems to be **faith is jumping in with both feet**. Paragliding provides the metaphor as seen in this quotation:

What I’ve learned so far with paragliding is that you’ve got to commit. Once your wing is inflated above you, you’ve got to run as fast as you can toward the edge of the mountain. If you balk, if you run half-heartedly, you’re never going to fly and you’re likely to end up in a heap or in a tree. To gain the freedom of the flight you’ve got to overcome the fear of failure. *It’s about going “all in” every time* [emphasis added].¹⁶¹

The sermon describes the expectation of church membership as making that “all in” commitment.

Wrestling

Nancy McDonald Ladd’s sermon, “In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding,” uses a sports metaphor as well as the architectural one already discussed. The metaphor is **faith as a wrestling match**. The match is for survival, not winning, and the phrases used to describe it include: “contests complete with winners and losers,” “a good fight,” “an honest fight,” “non-violent army,” “fake fights,” “fierce and unremitting conflict,” “to make faith into a contest,” “the ultimate prize,” “when professional wrestlers have fake fights,” “tap out,” “bang the mat,” and “duking it out.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Peter Friedrichs, “All In” (sermon, Stewardship Sermon Award, Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County, Media, Pennsylvania, May 22, 2012), 1-2, accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/all_in.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶¹ Friedrichs, 2.

¹⁶² Ladd.

In the sermon, “Growing in Love: Beyond Tolerance to Loving the Stranger,” Rev. Abhi Janamanchi also uses the metaphor of **wrestling with the stranger**, in this case with an explicit reference to the Biblical story of Jacob. Janamanchi says,

The story of Jacob suggests what it might mean to live a life of faith in a pluralistic world. We should not expect automatic harmony with our neighbors. When we encounter those whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways, we should expect conflict with them. But winning such a conflict need not be a *zero sum game* [emphasis added]. Although Jacob was injured, he won, and yet the stranger was not defeated but instead blessed him. Jacob was wounded, yet blessed and transformed. That is what we should expect. Encounter with the stranger can be wounding, but it can be a wounding that will heal and transform us into finer new beings. Who we become through such encounters we cannot predict, but our expanded new being is a gracious gift of our encounter with the stranger.¹⁶³

Other wrestling language in the sermon includes the following: “moments of struggle” and “compulsion to wrestle with our consciences.” Other conflict-related terms include “alienation,” “allegiance,” “comfort zones,” “bore the brunt,” and “reconcile.” According to the sermon, a pluralistic world necessarily leads to difficult interactions with others.¹⁶⁴

Transportation Metaphors

Transportation images are plentiful in the selected sermons, but most of them are used literally, not metaphorically. This is not especially surprising given the transient nature of contemporary life and the frequency with which individuals travel by car, airplane, train, and other vehicles. Interestingly, transportation metaphors in the selected sermons are not primarily, if at all, journey motifs, nor do they describe movement from one physical or emotional place to another. Instead, the images of a bus, dirigible, and boat allude to the nature and value of community (figure 4.7).

¹⁶³ Abhi Janamanchi, “Loving the Stranger” (homily, Church of the Larger Fellowship Worship Service, 2010 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 25, 2010), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2010/clf>. The quotation was adapted by Janamanchi from *The Coming of the New Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race* by Darrell J. Fasching, pages 44–45.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

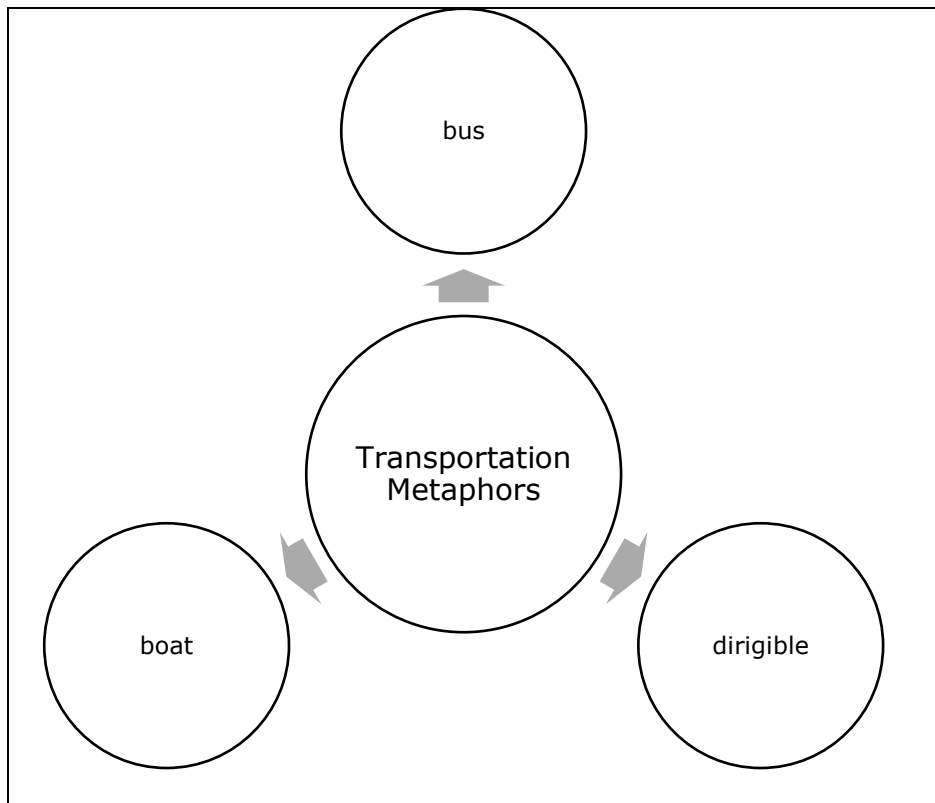


Figure 4.7 Transportation Metaphors

Bus

In Rev. Bill Neely's sermon, "The Guy on the Bus," **the bus is a metaphor for inclusive religious community**. The role of religious community is to invite more people into relationship and community, providing tangible assistance when needed as well as encouragement.¹⁶⁵ The metaphor is derived from Neely's personal story of riding the bus as a child. One day, short on money to get home, the guy behind him said, "I got you." By paying Neely's fare, "the guy" enabled Neely to get back home safely.¹⁶⁶ The sermon draws the conclusion that, like the guy on the bus, "we too know life to be an interdependent enterprise,

¹⁶⁵ Neely, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

and that we are elementally interconnected with everyone else on the bus, in the mall, and in homes and places everywhere.”¹⁶⁷

Dirigible

Rev. James C. Leach’s sermon, “the infinite enlargement of the heart,” incorporates the unusual image of a dirigible, a floating Navy airship, which he adopts from Arthur Miller. As a child, Miller mistakenly pledged the flag, saying, “One Nation in a Dirigible, with Liberty and Justice for All.”¹⁶⁸ Miller’s mistake yields the sermon metaphor of **religious community as a dirigible**. The metaphor is described this way: “We are all in this together, as if suspended in a dirigible. There’s no other ship, in the air, on the sea, on this earth where we reside together.”¹⁶⁹ The sermon also includes a natural metaphor, already discussed in that section and a metaphor discussed in the section on other metaphors.

Boat

The sermon reflections by Revs. Josh Pawelek, Mitra Rahnema, and Walter LeFlore create the metaphor of **religious community as a boat**. These preachers raise questions about whether people of faith are being called to get out of the boat or to help others get into it. LeFlore relates getting out of the boat to effecting transformation of Unitarian Universalist culture.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Neely, 4.

¹⁶⁸ Arthur Miller, “Op-Ed: School Prayer: A Political Dirigible,” *The New York Times on the Web: Books* (March 12, 1984), accessed February 26, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-prayer.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Leach, “the infinite enlargement of the heart,” 3.

¹⁷⁰ LeFlore.

Story Metaphors

So prevalent is the mention of “story” in these selected sermons that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the literal from the metaphorical use. An added complexity is that story is sometimes used as a technique or theme. Story metaphors include images of pages and report (figure 4.8). In this section, I begin by describing story as metaphor and end with some examples of its other uses as a point of comparison.

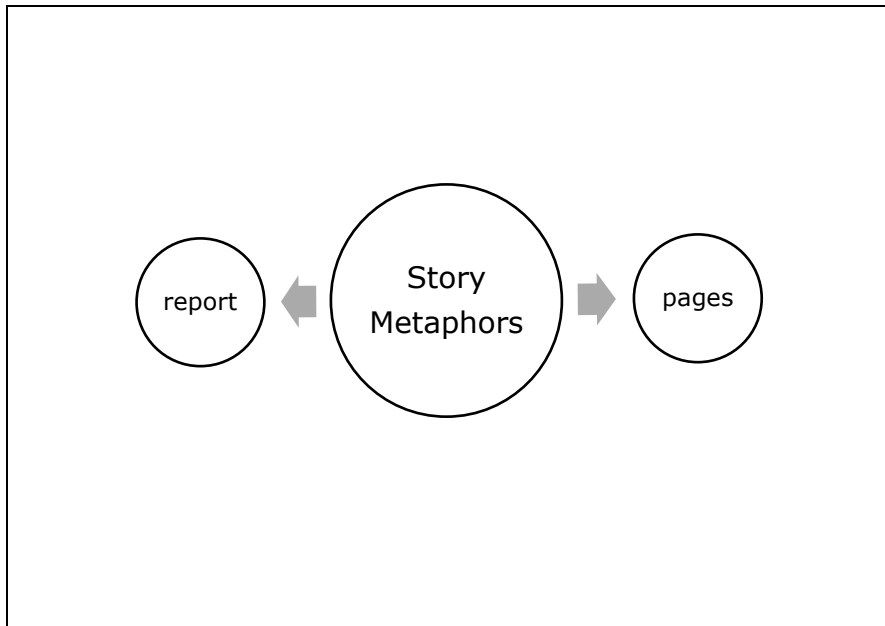


Figure 4.8 Story Metaphors

Pages

Rev. Alison B. Miller’s sermon, “Re-Storying Hope,” most boldly illustrates story as a metaphor. Midrash and retellings of traditional stories illustrate the ways that recasting stories can create new understanding and fill gaps of meaning. A central metaphor in this sermon is **life as pages of a story**. The sermon invites listeners to consider how to tell their own stories and emphasizes how stories create reality. The metaphor is elaborated in the following quotation:

The stories we tell matter. They have the power to shape who we are and who we are becoming. As Unitarians, we lift up stories that call us to live into the spark of divinity, or the depths of humanity, that resides in each of us. As Universalists, we lift up stories that

call us to act out our belief that all life is interconnected and our fates are intertwined. As religious liberals, we choose guiding stories from myriad sources—sacred texts, literature, science, nature, the prophetic deeds of ancestors, and out of *the pages of our lives* [emphasis added].¹⁷¹

The sermon asserts that “Unitarian Universalists are always on the lookout for new narratives that invite us into a greater wholeness than we know today.” The listener/reader is challenged to consider whether the stories they are telling are generating more healing and kindness and, if not, to “find a new story.”¹⁷²

Report

The untitled sermon by Rev. James C. Leach uses Czeslaw Milosz’s poem, “Report,” as his sermon text and employs the metaphor of **ministry as a comprehensive report**. Ministers, Leach says, witness disappointments and weariness in their vocation, but are ultimately summoned to “an undiminished wonder of [their] calling.”¹⁷³ The sermon challenges ministers to “step back to see the beauty of the forest and reflect on a more comprehensive report.” The preacher provides a list of ministerial gratitudes and invites other ministers to make their own report, saying, “That’s my list—a bit of my list. And yours?”¹⁷⁴

Other Uses of Story

The untitled reflections by Revs. Walter LeFlore, Josh Pawelek, and Mitra Rahnema use story as a technique. LeFlore declares, “I refuse to assume we all heard the same story once it

¹⁷¹ Alison Miller, “Re-Storying Hope” (sermon, Sunday Morning Worship Service, 2015 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Portland, Oregon, June 28, 2015), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2015/worship/hope>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ James C. Leach, sermon (Opening Worship, Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Charlotte, North Carolina, 2011), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uuma.org/page/MD2011Video1>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

passed through our ears and became ingested in our heads and hearts.” Later, he says, “we all know perspective matters.”¹⁷⁵

In the sermon, “Whatever Works,” Rev. Rod Richards explicitly points to the importance of story, incorporating its language as part of his theme. Equality, says Richards, is sharing and telling meaningful stories from a variety of perspectives. Drawing on the work of Barbara Ehrenreich, the sermon asserts that “we all want a meaningful story we can tell about our lives” and poses the rhetorical question, “Are we not called to raise up the stories *behind the story* of the American Dream?”¹⁷⁶ Elsewhere in the sermon, “the fairytale world of . . . economic thinking” is blamed for creating economic inequalities. The metaphor is referenced through the additional story-related terms *translate* and *message*.¹⁷⁷

Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern’s sermon, “Learning Some Other Country’s History,” also incorporates story as a theme. The sermon describes the many stories that comprise the nation’s history, reminding the listener/reader that “the word ‘history’ means ‘story.’ What stories we have in our minds influence how we see events—the way we define our country. And those stories aren’t all the same.”¹⁷⁸

Story is also mentioned in these phrases: “the dominant culture, who belong to that dominant story,” “the stories we tell are the same as the stories in the history books,” “people who live in the dominant culture particularly need to hear others versions,” “those in less dominant subcultures get two versions from the start,” and “these contrasts between the versions of history that we hear can be crazy-making and enraging, although the different, contradictory pieces do point to a fuller version of the truth.”¹⁷⁹ The sermon encourages hearing

¹⁷⁵ LeFlore.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Richards, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Richards, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Morgenstern, 1.

as many stories as possible because any one story only conveys partial knowledge and hearing a diversity of narratives increases one's grasp of reality.¹⁸⁰

Other Metaphors

Several sermons have major operating metaphors that can be found in only one of the selected sermons (figure 4.9). It is impossible to know if these are truly isolated metaphoric instances or merely unique to this sampling of sermons. I can easily imagine that these seemingly isolated metaphors might fit into a category or pattern. For example, a clean white shirt could be a clothing type of metaphor, and a ruck march could be a journey or military type of metaphor. However, because they are one-offs in this study, these metaphors have been grouped together as “Other.”

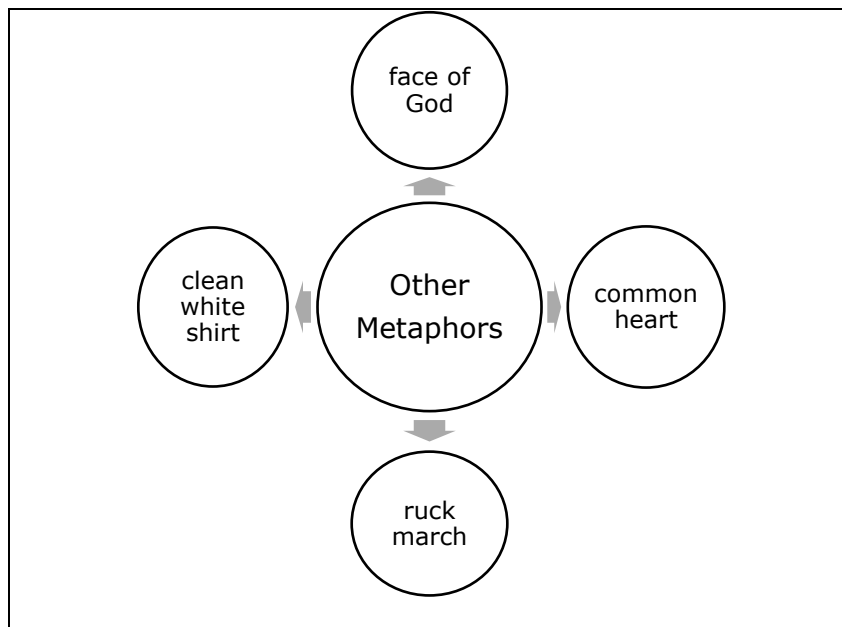


Figure 4.9 Other Metaphors

¹⁷⁹ Morgenstern, 3–4.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

Face of God

Rev. Dr. Michael Schuler addresses the question of ministerial authority in his sermon, “The Face of God or a Face in the Crowd.” While authority is an important subject of conversation in Unitarian Universalism, it is not touched on in other sermons in this group. In terms of its subject matter, this sermon is unusual. The metaphor seems to be **ministers** “[wearing] the face of God” as integrity. While at one time, being “the face of God” was conferred on ministers by virtue of their position, according to the sermon, that is no longer the case. Today, ministers risk becoming disrespected or irrelevant unless they “earn [personal authority] through love and trust and authenticity and partnership.”¹⁸¹

Common Heart

Rev. James C. Leach’s sermon, “the infinite enlargement of the heart,” draws the metaphor of **“the common heart”¹⁸² as the common good** from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s reading, “The Over-Soul.” Emerson’s reading refers to the common heart through the phrases, “this unity of thought, in which every heart beats”¹⁸³ and “the infinite enlargement of the heart.”¹⁸⁴ Emerson’s common heart metaphor gets applied to the common good, which, according to the sermon, is a “radical notion” of interdependence and “an ideological, idealistic message” of Unitarian Universalism.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Michael Schuler, “The Face of God or a Face in the Crowd” (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2011 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Charlotte, North Carolina, June 2011), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2011/worship/184429.shtml>.

¹⁸² Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” 174.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 177.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 183.

¹⁸⁵ Leach, “the infinite enlargement of the heart,” 2–3.

Ruck March

Rev. Rebekah A. Montgomery, a military chaplain, uses the military language of ruck marches, which are long walks, in the sermon, “Walking with the Other.” The major metaphor is **faith as a ruck march**. Ours is a “faith walk,” says Montgomery, exhorting us to “pick up your ruck, scan the horizon, we are all on this journey together, living this one wild and precious life. Pack your rucksack carefully, with only that which sustains you and brings more light and healing to this bruised and hurting world.” The sermon also refers to “your journey” and “this rocky path.”¹⁸⁶

Clean White Shirt

In “Oh What a Piece of Work Are We,” Rev. Parisa Parsa uses the metaphor of **the clean white shirt as the ideal of human perfectibility**. The shirt image is derived from June Jordan’s poem, “It’s Hard to Keep a Clean Shirt Clean.” The sermon describes how Unitarian Universalists allude so often to how humanity is “full of power and potential” and “wrap ourselves in that vision, or one like it, like a clean white shirt and, with a purity of intention and the fire of possibility, we take up the work of getting there.” That vision of ideal community, according to the sermon, is not only unattainable but also damaging. True community arises from the possibility that people can “clothe” themselves “in glory, in new patterns of community that make space for us all.” The emphasis is on striving and progress, often accompanied by

¹⁸⁶ Rebekah Montgomery, “Walking with the Other” (sermon, Service of the Living Tradition, 2014 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Providence, Rhode Island, June 2014), accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2014/worship/295426.shtml>. The phrase, “one wild and precious life,” is a reference to Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day,” which ends with the question, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?”

experiences of personal failures and shortcomings while, at the same time, finding a tendency to be quick to criticize others who fail to live up to the expectations of achievement.¹⁸⁷

Conclusion

In this chapter, the metaphors and metaphoric patterns in the selected sermons have been presented and described. In the next and concluding chapter, I reflect on the implications of these findings for Unitarian Universalism now and into the future. The metaphors reflect Unitarian Universalist values but in unexpected ways. They also suggest that the Unitarian Universalist ethos is heading in new directions that emphasize human-centered issues and social justice over transcendence and spirituality.

¹⁸⁷ Parisa Parsa, sermon (2013 Ministry Days, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Louisville, Kentucky, June 18, 2013), accessed July 25, 2017, <https://uuma.site-ym.com/?2013VideoTuesWorship>.

Chapter 7: Implications

Overview

The metaphors in the selected sermons point to a de-ontologized and de-cosmologized emphasis in Unitarian Universalism that favors a human-centered and issues-based religion. This could arguably be described as a move toward the prophetic. Some Unitarian Universalists may in fact laud such a shift and see it as a moral imperative, given the current state of congregations, the nation, and the world. At the same time, the shift may raise serious concerns and questions about the direction of Unitarian Universalism, and, in particular, what may be absent and/or underexamined in the religion.

Even those who may favor the de-ontologized and de-cosmologized shift in ethos may benefit from a closer examination of the nature of this change, which emphasizes struggle and a conflictual view of life. The approach is one of hyper-vigilant moralism. The metaphors appeal to guilt and failure, admonishing people to do better and strive harder. Puritanical strains can be heard in a liberal religion that has long distinguished itself with a hopeful and optimistic outlook. These strains of self-righteousness coupled with self-recrimination thread through the sermons with no obvious correlation to geography. The selected sermons have been preached in cities and states across the United States. The sermons are not products of the New England Region where Puritanism first took root nor are they linked to geographic areas known to be religiously and/or socially conservative.

Besides emphasizing conflict, the metaphors, by emphasizing issues, have the effect of eclipsing the fuller range of “big” theological questions that are typically addressed by religion. In fact, one of religion’s distinctive functions is to offer guidance and insight into theology. One might well wonder whether Unitarian Universalists are adequately engaging these theological imperatives and if, in fact, theology, as broadly conceived, is losing its relevance for Unitarian Universalists. If so, questions necessarily arise as to the deeper, long-term implications for the

spiritual grounding and faith development of Unitarian Universalists. Even a human-centered, justice-focused faith necessitates a theological and spiritual framework.

An additional concern is the rhetorical simplicity of the metaphors. The metaphors, for the most part, are not only commonplace but also have too much closure. The importance of metaphor lies in its ability to open the human imagination and allow multiple ideas to flourish. Because the metaphors in the selected sermons so often stipulate narrow interpretations, the metaphors are more one-dimensional and didactic than might be expected or desired in Unitarian Universalist sermons.

In some cases, a metaphor is so over-explained that it becomes more of an allegory, its meaning over-extended and literalized. Even an intriguing metaphor, if over-interpreted, can lose its richness. A good metaphor, one that is surprising, needs air to breathe. Given space, a metaphor can reverberate in the listener's imagination, encouraging multiple perspectives and generating startling new insights. Such a metaphor serves as muse.

Fortunately, metaphors are not the only rhetorical devices available to preachers to be used in the sermons. In the selected sermons, the stories and readings often do more work than the metaphors. This tendency seems to reflect a devaluation of metaphor in favor of a rhetorical trend toward story-telling, narrative, and memoir. Personal stories tend to do the preponderance of the pastoral work in the selected sermons.

To paraphrase my project supervisor, Dr. Lee Barrett, sometimes “what is not there” is as important as “what is there.” In the case of this research, what is and what is not there both prove to be relevant, significant, and perhaps, for some, troubling as well. In the next two sections of this chapter, I explore in more detail what is suggested by the metaphors and metaphoric patterns present in the sermons and what is suggested by the absence of others. I begin with what is visible.

What Is There

The sermon metaphors reflect basic Unitarian Universalist values. While the metaphors reflect those values, what is surprising is that they tend to do so polemically rather than aspirationally. For example, they indicate how an ethic or ideal is being thwarted rather than how it is being upheld. This approach suggests that the moral, spiritual, and political life is hard, containing challenges and obstacles, and that overcoming them requires hard work, resiliency, and faith. It also indicates that individuals and religious communities are falling short of achieving their ideals in small and large ways, personally and systemically. The metaphors seem designed to serve as wake-up calls that provide heightened consciousness and deeper engagement in the issues confronting religion and society. Confinement is the obstacle preventing wholeness and truth. Struggle leads to transformation of the individual, religious community, and society.

The metaphors further disclose a religion that is tough on itself and its people. Despite affirming the worth and dignity of every person, a perfectionistic stream of expectation and demand underlies the metaphorical language. The ethos suggested is one of social critique and, at times, censure. For a faith that seemed to turn away from original sin and guilt, there is an underlying sense of falling short. This emphasis may reflect the faith's increasing awareness of the ways in which its aspirations of openness and inclusivity have not been realized and, to the contrary, the focus on best intentions in meeting them may be getting in the way. In other words, the religion's action and impact may be viewed as inadequately living up to its distinctive set of ethical principles. The metaphors suggest that life has meaning and purpose only in so much as the individual and religious community are politically and ethically active.

Whether such an approach will succeed has yet to be seen. Some people may be spurred to action while others become overwhelmed or resistant. Some individuals may be attracted to such a religion while others grow disaffected. It is possible the message has been taken too far,

shifting emphasis from inspiration to agitation and from encouragement to admonishment, in a way that ultimately wearies rather than emboldens people.

Ultimately, these two perspectives—social justice and theology—need not be at odds. Fundamentally, the religious community needs to engage both. The challenge is how to provide theological and spiritual grounding and sustenance that makes it possible to more fully embody the ethical and justice values of Unitarian Universalism.

It is possible that because the selected sermons are drawn from highly visible sermons and large gatherings that they foster a more polemical and critical approach than what is being preached in individual congregations or elsewhere. In local congregations, the preacher and congregation have a pastoral relationship that does not exist in the same way between the preacher and larger assembly. The tendency for the annual gatherings themselves to emphasize justice and the business of Unitarian Universalism may also prompt and reward the specific patterns of metaphors in these selected sermons. The award-winning sermons for justice-oriented contests, for example, would be expected to emphasize issues. Even taking into account the possible variances between preaching at the local versus denominational level, a metaphor retains the potential to do the unexpected. That the metaphors in this study retain a continuity of focus reinforces my claim that the overall Unitarian Universalist ethos is directed at issues and social justice. A diverse study of sermons across our ministries and congregations would be an interesting and elucidating undertaking for comparison and further exploration.

In the selected sermons, the poetic language points to conflictual human relationships both within and beyond the faith. The metaphoric focus, while sometimes interpersonal, is primarily communal. The metaphors address the unfulfilled longing for community and unity. The sermon metaphors insist that the religion is at a dangerous precipice. Society is too. People are falling down waterfalls. The waters are stormy. The sense of confinement, danger, and alienation are palpable. The startling part is that the danger lurks within the religious community as much as in the world beyond it.

In terms of specific types of metaphors used, architectural images are prevalent. Their appearance is noteworthy in itself, but the way these images are used is also telling. The architectural metaphors convey confinement as well as secret-keeping and the longing to be freed from various forms of imprisonment, whether spiritual, physical, or emotional. Confinement is self-imposed as a way to avoid conflict and be accepted. It is also imposed by the community's expectations of what is and what is not acceptable, whether that means certain identities or certain ideas are welcome or unwelcome. In other situations, breaking out of confinement is not only a matter of truth-telling and self-revelation but also a matter of survival. As a freedom-seeking people, Unitarian Universalists seem anything but free, based on these metaphors.

The use of architecture, whether closets, doors, or boxes, suggests an inside and outside, and that there are insiders and outsiders. Some people are in and some are out within religious community and in society. The architectural elements used in the sermons encourage reflection not only on those who are in or out but also on what is in or out. Despite a pluralistic society, polarization is intense, both politically and spiritually, making the question of what is and is not permitted tension-laden. Where and how the lines get drawn and who draws those lines are additional considerations. Ironically, the metaphors, which long for reconciliation among humans, tend to dichotomize.

In the case of the architectural metaphors, what is at stake is genuine human connection and community. The metaphors are insistent reminders of the failure to be inclusive and to engage with others across differences. The use of architectural metaphors to illustrate inclusion and exclusion do seem to draw the line at fundamentalism, but generally exhort Unitarian Universalists to be in dialogue and relationship with a more diverse group of people. Interestingly, metaphors that explore religious literalism do not rely on architectural metaphors.

Among the architectural images, closets feature prominently in this small selection of sermons. I remember once in an interfaith clergy group sharing a conflict over the use of a

closet. Everyone laughed and nodded, having had a similar experience at some point. The group concluded that “it’s never about the closet.” It has more to do with who has the power to decide what can be stored in the closet and who can use it. Despite these seemingly common religious scuffles over closets and the larger metaphorical implications, closets are also designed to store things. They have a utilitarian function, which is neither explored nor allowed in their use in the selected sermons. Clergy store their vestments in closets. Liturgical items are routinely stored in closets. So, too, are vacuums, tools, and office supplies, which are kept in closets until they are ready to be brought out for use.

While the closet metaphors in the study focus on self-revelation, the metaphor begs the question of not only what authentic and vital parts of ourselves are hidden away in closets but also what unwelcome behaviors and deceptions are hidden. Clergy misconduct, for example, is a painful, ethical violation of trust requiring a different kind of coming out than one’s ideas, political views, or stance on reproductive choice.

The metaphors of the airport gate and sandpaper use confinement differently. In these cases, the architectural element creates the possibility for real relationship. The temporary closure of an airport gate, for example, brings people together in a time of crisis. Doing so fosters a shared world. In the case of sandpaper, relationship develops when people are stuck with each other, and their rough edges get smoothed out.

Given the popularity of sports, it does not seem surprising that sports metaphors would be found in sermons. What is surprising is that the sports used are not the most popular ones, such as football, basketball, or even soccer. Instead, the sports are wrestling, darts, paragliding, and gambling. The use of sports metaphors raises some intriguing questions about what kind of sport religion is. Religion is compared to high-stakes gambling, gliding solo above the earth, trying to hit the center target of a dart board, and a combat sport. Some sports, like wrestling, leave people physically injured and spiritually transformed. Gambling and paragliding find delight in the risk aspect of faith. In the case of gambling and paragliding, the sport is

pleasurable and also affords the possibility of an even greater payoff for a whole community and, beyond that, the world. Overall, the sports metaphors seem to have more to do with risk than with combat.

As with architectural metaphors, sports metaphors suggest insiders and outsiders, in this case, winners and losers. The preachers exhort people to get in the game or sport, take more risks, and even choose sides. For religious liberals, that is uncomfortable territory. Taking a side, risking, or winning represent paths to justice in these metaphors. When religious people refuse to play, they are permitting others to define the rules and maintain systems that are unjust and contrary to their espoused ethical values. Allowing others to win, at the expense of those who are traditionally marginalized, is to shirk one's religious responsibility. The sports metaphors in these sermons hold the potential to convey other meanings, which are not cultivated. In fact, other possible meanings are restricted by the specificity with which the metaphors are described.

Natural metaphors are plentiful in the selected sermons. In a religious tradition with nature lovers and environmentalists, that seems unremarkable. The way the natural metaphors are used, however, is worthy of further consideration. Natural metaphors are not used to convey mystical ideas or concepts of the divine. Instead, they relate to social relationships. Even an interdependent stand of aspens is used to convey human relatedness. A metaphor drawn from Buddhism of garbage and roses is recast to describe the ways that each person is both beautiful and flawed. Water turns out to be a source of danger, uncertainty, and risk, rather than a blessing or symbol of rebirth. Even a climb to the mountaintop is not an encounter with the divine so much as the prospect of a greater perspective. The web, a decidedly Unitarian Universalist image drawn from earth-centered traditions, becomes a political metaphor for democracy and the common good. Images of fire, used to describe the call to ministry, come closest to alluding to divinity and the divine-human relationship.

Based on the selected sermons, the contemporary Unitarian Universalist understanding of awakening seems to revolve mostly around paying attention to issues. The metaphors of awakening draw on dystopic societal portrayals in literature and popular culture. They also reflect the slang term “stay woke,” which is a call for awareness of and vigilance to justice and injustice. Some metaphors of awakening do reflect Eastern understandings of spiritual enlightenment that are popular in contemporary Unitarian Universalism. In fact, the metaphor of awakening was arguably bequeathed to Unitarian Universalists by the Transcendentalists and the influence of Eastern spiritualities on their philosophy.

Transportation metaphors invite people into truer, more intimate community, seeking to overcome barriers to inclusion. These metaphors indicate a desire for more genuine acceptance and appreciation of difference among Unitarian Universalists, though at least one metaphor suggests that Unitarian Universalists also need to broaden their welcome beyond their own religious communities.

Story appears as both a theme and metaphor in the selected sermons. Story metaphors reflect the postmodern emphasis on telling one’s story and honoring everyone’s voice. Each person is the writer and storyteller of their own life. That means each individual has a choice about how to tell their life story, how to understand that story, and how to listen to other people’s stories. The stories are often personal, frequently drawn from the preacher’s own life. This practice has become popularized, and nearly mandated, ever since Ralph Waldo Emerson preached in his “Divinity School Address” in 1838 that

the true preacher can be known by this, that [the preacher] deals out to the people [the preacher’s] life—life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from [the] sermon, what age of the world [the preacher] fell in; whether [the preacher] had a father or a child; whether [the preacher] was a freeholder or a pauper; whether [the preacher] was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of [the preacher’s] biography.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” July 15, 1838, in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986), 103.

Even in the case of sermons in which no operative metaphor is identified, the sermon relies on story, whether conveyed through readings, wisdom tales, poems, or other quotations. Cataloguing the readings and stories referenced could itself be the basis of a research study. Most preachers overlay several readings and stories. Some texts are shared within the body of the sermon and others are used as sermon readings. There is a tremendous intertextuality at work, which creates a pluralism of voices within the selected sermons and across them.

These stories and readings are drawn from a wide range of writers, philosophers, theologians, religious traditions, and texts. Included among them are:

- Religious scripture, primarily Biblical but also Buddhist, Taoist, and Native American
- Poems from poets such as Wendell Berry and Rainer Maria Rilke
- Writings of prophetic historic figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Black Elk
- Writings of prophetic contemporary figures such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Thich Nhat Hanh
- The works of leading contemporary thinkers and analysts such as Barbara Ehrenreich, Brené Brown, and George Lakoff
- Works by religious thinkers, writers, and scholars such as Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong
- Unitarian Universalist texts by religious thinkers and scholars such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, A. Powell Davies, Clinton Scott, and Dorothea Dix
- Stories from the news and current events
- Other sources such as videos, cartoons, fairytales, histories, and children's books

What seems curious is that despite the diverse sources drawn upon, the metaphors operate within a narrow range. The contemporary affinity seems to be to visual imagery and story,

perhaps more so than to metaphor. The reliance on a narrative arc is a contemporary trend. When it is relied on to the exclusion of creating memorable metaphors, there is a potential loss to the faith community. Metaphors spark the human imagination in unique ways. They awaken curiosity beyond what is known. Because metaphor is an avenue to open meaning and insight and to do so in ways that are ever unfolding, it is a much-needed rhetorical tool.

While most of the metaphors easily fall into categories, a few do not. These one-off metaphors have been grouped in this study into one category labeled “other.” If another fifty or one hundred sermons were studied, these metaphors might each become part of a category. For example, a clean white shirt could be part of a pattern of metaphors labeled “clothing.” It seems possible, but unlikely, that a clothing metaphor is used in only one sermon.

What Is Not There

It is tempting to assess the metaphors by looking only at what is visible. However, the kinds of metaphors that are absent are equally instructive. Metaphors of transcendence are largely absent. The experience of the holy as a transcendent force or mysterious presence is hardly to be found. The mystical oneness described and evoked by the Transcendentalists is conspicuously absent. Rather than exploring the divine and/or divine-human relationships, the metaphors offer social critique and relate to human-to-human encounters. There are no family metaphors for God as mother, father, or parent. Non-metaphorical references to God as masculine are nonexistent and the rare references to God as feminine or goddess are in passing rather than serving as primary metaphors.

The absence of metaphors for the divine suggests a de-ontologization of Unitarian Universalist spirituality. It is neither oneness with nature nor experiencing the holy that takes precedence, but instead social analysis and human relationship. In what seems like more an exception than the rule, a metaphor drawn from the Bible, which alludes to the wine of

astonishment, is suggestive of a transcendent experience. In this case, the cosmos is what offers awe and wonder. The cosmos holds humanity despite the fragility of life.

At a time when global climate change is threatening planetary survival, it is striking that environmentalism and nature get little more than an occasional glance. When they are mentioned, the emphasis is on the human dimension and not creation in and of itself. The natural metaphors do not disclose human interdependence with the natural world, celebrate human oneness with nature, or examine a planetary ethic. Instead, they invoke a hostile world filled with dangers and trials. These metaphors advocate for more risk-taking and leaps of faith, but not to save the planet or animal life so much as to preserve and sustain humanity and religion.

Consistent with Unitarian Universalism's embrace of postmodernism, mechanistic imagery and machines do not appear metaphorically. This finding is consistent with the prevailing postmodern worldview in which mechanization is no longer the driving force. The sermon metaphors do not depict the world as a great machine or mechanical clock.

The architectural metaphors, as already indicated, speak to confinement, not comfort or freedom. What they rarely do is to suggest foundation or shelter, the prominent imagery featured in the first hymn in the current Unitarian Universalist Association hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. That hymn, "May Nothing Evil Cross This Door," which is based on Louis Untermeyer's poem, "Prayer for This House," offers a comforting message of what a caring community might be when society and the outside world are hostile. The prayer, as adapted for the hymn, asks:

May nothing evil cross this door,
and may ill fortune never pry
about these windows;
may the roar and rain go by.

By faith made strong, the rafters will
withstand the battering of the storm.
This hearth, though all the world grow chill,
will keep you warm.

Peace shall walk softly through these rooms,
touching our lips with holy wine,
till ev'ry casual corner blooms
into a shrine.

With laughter drown the raucous shout,
and, though these sheltering walls are thin,
may they be strong to keep hate out
and hold love in.¹⁸⁹

Religious communities, as evidenced by the current sermon metaphors, have awakened to a new level of honesty about the degree to which that comfort is or ever was a reality in Unitarian Universalist community. The metaphors question who is held in love by the sheltering walls and who is not. The challenge for Unitarian Universalism is to learn to broaden its inclusion to those who have found themselves too often excluded. One of the religious community's aspirations is to offer an invitation for those who are weathering the storms of suffering, loss, and injustice—both inside and outside congregations and the religion as a whole.

Interestingly, the first hymn in the Unitarian Universalist Association hymnal supplement, *Singing the Journey*, also incorporates an architectural metaphor, one of home. The lyrics to “Morning Has Come” are as follows:

Morning has come, arise and greet the day!
Dance with joy and sing a song of gladness!
The light of hope here shines—upon each face.
May it bring faith to guide our journey home.

A new day dawns, once more the gift is giv'n.
Wonder fills this moment shared together.
The light of peace here shines—upon each face.
May it bring faith to guide our journey home.

¹⁸⁹ Louis Untermeyer, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door” (No. 1) in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

Open our eyes to see that life abounds;
Open hearts to welcome it among us.
The light of love here shines—upon each face.
May it bring faith to guide our journey home.¹⁹⁰

The metaphor of home is broad-based and can be interpreted as the physical space of worship but seems more oriented toward the human community or planet as a whole. This hymn suggests a shift from the more inward congregational focus of “May Nothing Evil Cross These Doors” to a wider societal focus that welcomes a more expansive togetherness.

The use of architectural metaphors in the selected sermons may ultimately reflect a disillusionment with faith in modern times where people are experiencing the breakdown of human kinship. Not only are people disillusioned by the breakdown in society but also by the divisions within religious community. The metaphors in this study express the pain and dissatisfaction of fractured relationships.

Logos and Mythos Redux

At a time when Unitarian Universalism is emphasizing embodied spirituality and when religious communities are turning and returning more and more to silence, rituals, meditation, and sensory-rich worship practices, there continues to remain a hunger for sermons, at least among some religious people. Yet tension exists among the incredibly varied demands of worshipers, including not only their differing expectations but also their real lived needs. Tension also exists between what preachers have been trained to deliver and the demands of the changing landscape of religion and society.

Among Unitarian Universalists, the sermon as lecture has been largely criticized and rejected. Yet, ironically, the concentrated attention on social issues that plague the world predominate in the metaphors in these sermons, making the conveyance of information difficult to

¹⁹⁰ Jason Shelton, “Morning Has Come” (No. 1000) in *Singing the Journey: A Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005).

avoid. The metaphors incline toward education and they advocate positions. This tendency has the effect of demoting the poetics of metaphor-making, giving it a secondary focus compared to explaining the metaphors with lengthy descriptions to convince, rather than inspire. In other words, the emphasis on evidence and persuasion seems to run counter to the general interest in embodied spirituality and poetics. Even personal stories run the risk of being designed as teaching moments that get carefully over-interpreted to make a specific point, rather than offering experiential encounters for contemplation and enlightenment.

Karen Armstrong's distinction between *logos* and *mythos* offers some insight into this dilemma.¹⁹¹ Despite conversations among Unitarian Universalists about the need to reclaim the world of *mythos*, *logos* retains a powerful foothold. The dearth of unusual and striking metaphors suggests as much. The sense of urgency to make a point and effect immediate change, given the urgency of justice issues, may be a factor in the struggle to trust poetic language to create meaning, inspiration, and change. Given the enormity of the issues and the urgent need for change, cohesion among Unitarian Universalists may be more valued than open-endedness and inquiry. In other words, open-ended metaphors may militate against the very consensus required for effective, collective social action.

One of preaching's important roles is to rise beyond the ordinary discourse of *logos* and enter the world of creative imagination. Sermons accomplish this by moving beyond ordinary language and deeper into the realm of metaphor and poetics. In this way, preachers can more fully engage the imaginations of their listeners/readers. Though metaphor is only one of the many tools available to preachers, it is one that linguists have shown to be powerful, much more powerful than often acknowledged. Metaphor-making is an art that preachers do well to work toward understanding better, striving to incorporate their use more fully and more creatively. As David Buttrick argued, "preachers who wish to transform human lives will have to grasp the

¹⁹¹ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 119–122.

sheer power of metaphorical language.”¹⁹² They will need to trust metaphor’s creative potential to transform people and the world and to innovate in unexpected, startling, and revelatory ways.

Reflections on Historical Sermons

While not part of my formal study, I reread, for comparison purposes, several historical sermons in liberal religion that marked a turning point. Three landmark sermons, one each by William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker, are well-known to Unitarian Universalists. These sermons, as historian Conrad Wright explains, “occasioned widespread controversy.” They also represent “turning points in the history of [US] Unitarianism.” Plus, they were “influential far beyond the confines of the religious body which produced them.”¹⁹³

It is Wright’s assessment of why such classics are unlikely to recur that is most striking to me in considering the sermons I have studied. Wright notes that there is no longer a concentrated audience for sermons, and pluralism means sermons are less likely to spark controversy. However, most prescient was Wright’s assessment of Emerson’s “Divinity School Address”:

Emerson’s audience responded alertly to the doctrinal implications of his poetic utterance; today it would concern itself but casually with theological issues, no matter how basic, since we now use a secular rather than a theological vocabulary when issues really seem worth arguing about.¹⁹⁴

As a student of literature and theology, I remain indebted to Emerson. Emerson was mystic, poet, theologian, and scholar. His poetic language is inventive and startling. His vocabulary is decidedly theological. Preachers can yet learn from Emerson to craft metaphorical

¹⁹² Buttrick, 123.

¹⁹³ Conrad Wright, introduction in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986), 3–4.

¹⁹⁴ Wright, 5.

language. It was Emerson who produced the evocative metaphor that “the word Miracle . . . is Monster.”¹⁹⁵ Who would not want to craft such a metaphor? God, says Emerson, is “the fountain . . . of the established teaching in society.”¹⁹⁶ And of humanity, he declares, a human is “a wonderworker.”¹⁹⁷

Final Thoughts

I am a product of a seminary education where the study of theology was not casual but essential and where religious language was understood to be metaphorical and poetic. The increasing shift from theological to secular language in Unitarian Universalism, and I suspect in many religious traditions, and the increasing theological illiteracy in our culture strike me as untapped opportunities. Religious people, particularly clergy and preachers, would do well to give these areas greater attention.

While the need for social change is profound, the need to make sense of everyday life is no less important, and it is a need people have experienced since earliest times and will continue to experience. Religion has been the institution that has sought to address that need by reflecting on the big questions. Those big questions certainly include exploring values related to social commitments and community. However, those questions also include exploring the meaning of life, the purpose for one’s own life, the existence and nature of God, what happens after death, how to die well, how to live with gratitude and hope, how to lament, how to celebrate, how to forgive, and so much more.

Has Unitarian Universalism left behind the very foundational exploration of such basic theological questions in favor of not only secular language but also an issues-based religion? The current global and national condition may be directing the attention of liberal religion toward

¹⁹⁵ Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” 97.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 107.

promoting social justice commitments over theology and equating spiritual growth with the elimination of social prejudices. For this preacher and Unitarian Universalist, these efforts are inextricably linked, and neither can flourish without the other, nor can a religious community thrive without celebration, nurture, and self-compassion.

The loss of innovative and rich metaphorical language represents a true loss to religion. Just as good metaphors expand the capacity for new insight, their absence diminishes possibilities to astonish and ultimately inspire people to re-interpret and re-imagine their lives and the world in unexpected ways. At a time when novelty, creativity, and innovation are more essential than ever, metaphor holds an unfulfilled role as muse. As muse, metaphor could help to inspire the Unitarian Universalist faith and move hearts and minds beyond what is yet known into deeper and unexplored realms of imagination, curiosity, and hope.

GLOSSARY

linguistics. Linguistics is the study of language and its structure. This project draws on linguistic theory for its central claims about how language functions and more specifically how language is used in preaching.

metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing represents or symbolizes another. In this project, the term “metaphor” is used to refer to poetic language, inclusive of images and clusters of images, that expresses non-literal meaning. Based on the work of Max Black, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson, I focus on metaphors that achieve ontological significance by generating insight or possibilities that alter understandings of reality. Black calls these “interactive metaphors”¹⁹⁸ while Lakoff and Johnson call them “new metaphors.”¹⁹⁹

model. There are many meanings of the term *model*, including the miniature or scale model representations used in science. In this project, I adapt the concept of models to clusters of metaphors, categorizing metaphors by types, as well as examining them individually, to analyze how they “generate new possibilities.”²⁰⁰

modernism. The modernist period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was marked by scientific, objectivist ways of explaining reality. The modernist period is linked with an emphasis on metanarratives and universal ideas, which I have largely rejected in my study.

myth. While in popular parlance, a myth has come to be deemed a fanciful or untrue story, Karen Armstrong provides an historically informed definition that is more useful. According to Armstrong, the purpose of a myth is to help us explore aspects of our lives. It can help us to “[transfigure] our fragmented, tragic world, and [help] us to glimpse new possibilities by asking ‘what if?’ Myths function similarly to metaphors by entertaining “different possibilities” and creating ‘imaginary worlds.’”²⁰¹ Myths not only help us explore our lives, says Armstrong, they also help us to explain aspects of our lives, as demonstrated by creation stories, for example. The connection between myth and metaphor is helpful to understanding how metaphor functions in creating meaning and also how metaphor may, like myth, be devalued in the contemporary world.

narrative. While in general terms, a narrative is an account or story, postmodernism, through the work of Jean-François Lyotard, distinguishes two categories of narrative: metanarratives and micronarratives. An underlying premise of this thesis is that micronarratives promote the multiplicity of perspectives as well as the truth and meaning making aims of Unitarian Universalism.

¹⁹⁸ Black, 35.

¹⁹⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, 139–146.

²⁰⁰ Black, 237.

²⁰¹ Armstrong, 7–9.

Postmodernism views **metanarratives** as inadequate because they do not reflect the diversity of people's experiences. Metanarratives make overarching interpretations based on disparate individual experiences and stories. The resulting universal themes are said to apply to everyone. Examples include the Enlightenment, Marxism, capitalism, the progress of history, and the knowability of everything. Metanarratives privilege certain cultural ideas over others. Particular religions and religious worldviews function as metanarratives when they claim absolute truth.

In contrast to metanarratives, Lyotard advances the idea of **micronarratives** that celebrate polyvalent perspectives, localized subjective reality, and a multiplicity of truths. This approach to understanding the world embraces cultural diversity and takes a relativist view of knowledge, truth, and cultural norms.²⁰²

postmodernism. The term *postmodernism* is used to describe the period that emerged after modernism. The term is attributed to Lyotard who rejects the totalizing metanarratives characteristic of modernism. As a philosophy, postmodernism departs radically from objectivist and scientific ways of understanding reality in favor of the diversity of experience and perspectives affirmed by micronarratives.

Unitarian Universalism. By Unitarian Universalism, I am referring to the movement which emerged from two separate denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism, both rooted in Judeo-Christianity. Unitarianism is named for the anti-Trinitarian doctrine out of which it developed. Unitarianism rejected the trinity as unbiblical, rejected miracles as unwarranted supernaturalism, and applied a historical-critical interpretation to Biblical texts. Universalism got its name from its doctrine of salvation, which held that all souls would ultimately be reconciled with God. These two denominations merged in 1961 as the Unitarian Universalist Association. Since then, the religion has continued to evolve into a theologically diverse tradition that incorporates religious humanism, religious naturalism, theism, agnosticism, and liberal Christianity, among other theologies.

The religion is congregational in polity and covenantal in approach. Individual congregations freely associate with other congregations, but each one has autonomy to make its own decisions. In practice, many congregations align with the overarching goals and mission of the Unitarian Universalist Association and rely on the larger institution for guidance and resources in church life.

Unitarian Universalism is non-creedal and has no test of faith for joining a congregation. With the lack of clear lines of authority between the associational institution and individual congregations and the absence of a creed, it can be difficult to identify a core of the faith. Of help in providing some sense of a unifying center are the Unitarian Universalism Principles and Sources. Unitarian Universalism affirms and promotes seven Principles, which are "[held] as strong values and moral guides" along with six Sources from which to draw "wisdom and spirituality."²⁰³

²⁰² Lyotard, introduction, xxiii–xxiv.

²⁰³ Unitarian Universalist Association, front matter, x.

These principles and sources were adopted in 1984, and have remained mostly unchanged since then. They are re-evaluated periodically. Revisions can only be made through a vote of congregational delegates at the annual national gathering of Unitarian Universalists. In 2009, a revised statement of Principles and Sources was narrowly defeated in such a vote. This year, 2017, two changes have been proposed to the principles and will be considered at the June General Assembly. The first would change Principle 1, replacing the word “person” with “being.” The second would add a Principle 8 to include antiracist, anti-oppression, multiculturalism language.

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