



Soul Matters

May 2015

*What Does It Mean To Be
A People of Tradition?*



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What Does It Mean To Be A People of Tradition?

Tradition. It's not had an easy road among us Unitarian Universalists. For much of our history, we've seen it as a threat. UU preachers and theologians have talked about it as "chains," "tethers," even "a jailer." And that's certainly how it's felt to many of us at times. We know what it is like to be bound tight by tradition. Suffocated by rules and rituals that limit what we can think or who we can love. So, rightfully, our UU message has long been: "Don't be afraid to throw tradition out!"

But we also know it's more complex than that. We are not always perfect at it, but for a while now, we've also recognized that tradition can be a gift, not just a threat. We're more and more likely to agree with W. Somerset Maugham, who wrote, "Tradition is a guide and not a jailer." And not just a guide, but a connection to the wisdom and wonder of the past. We're even coming to recognize that tradition can be a source of freedom. Voices of the present oppress and mislead as much as voices from the past. Sometimes, allowing the voice of tradition to speak is the only way we make our way safely through the shallowness of modern day "wisdom." G.K. Chesterton captured this perfectly when he wrote, "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy who merely happen to be walking around." And then there's the way that tradition helps us imagine the new. As the poet Carlos Fuentes reminds us, "There is no creation without tradition; the 'new' is an inflection on a preceding form; novelty is always a variation on the past." Aware of these many gifts, we UUs have brought more nuance to our relationship with tradition. Sometimes the task is to throw it out; other times what's needed most is to listen. And so our message regarding tradition has also become "Choose carefully."

But one wonders if even that message is nuanced enough. Watching the speed and fullness of our days, it's difficult to see any place for tradition at all. Forget throwing it out. Forget choosing carefully. Most of the time, it seems we're not thinking about tradition at all. We talk about traditions that were valuable to us as kids, but we speak of them as memories more than practices we protect and carry on. We would have liked to make that thanksgiving recipe that mom always cooked at Thanksgiving, but it's been an awfully busy week so the store bought dish will have to do. We value the wisdom of voices from the past, but it's much easier just to quickly read the latest two-paragraph post from our favorite blogger. We envy our religious neighbors practices of Lent and Ramadan, but that takes a lot of time and our schedules just don't have room. Truth be told, in modern day life, tradition is not so much oppressive as it is absent. Out of sight and out of mind.

And so a new UU voice is emerging. Yes, "Don't be bound." Yes, "Choose carefully." But maybe most important of all: "Hold on and make room!" This is the voice we are invited to listen to this month. People of tradition know that tradition guides, heals, inspires and connects us. People of tradition also know that these gifts of tradition can't live on without our help. So, this month, friends, let's make some room. Let's invite it back in. Let's make tradition more than a memory. Let's allow it to be a gift.

Our Spiritual Exercises:

Option A:

Mess with Tradition

Sometimes honoring a tradition requires that we approach it anew, even “mess with it.” And this is the perfect month to make “old” traditions come alive. Mother’s Day and Memorial Day can be a time of going through the motions. What might you do this year to make them matter? Come to your group with your story of how you made it matter or plan to make it matter...by engaging it in a way you’ve never done before.

Option B:

Take a Second Look at Somebody Else’s Tradition

There is a reason others hold on to tradition even if it we don’t understand why. Use this month to explore a religious tradition that seems foreign to you but essential and precious to those maintaining it. Learn more about why the Amish still refuse to drive. Why do some young, modern Muslim women still wear the traditional headscarf? Do you really understand Lent? Or why pilgrimages transform people so deeply? One source of inspiration might be this recent bestseller:

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Year-Living-Biblically-Literally/dp/0743291484>

Come to your group ready to share what you learned and what you are going to do with that learning.

Option C:

Holding On To The Traditions That Help Us Hold On To Ourselves

This one is straightforward: What tradition helps you remember who you are? Come to your group and share a tradition or a ritual that helps you hold on to a precious value, insight or memory.

Option D:

Prove that Kitchen Traditions are Spiritual

Food produces more traditions than almost any other element of our lives. From the outside these traditions of cooking and eating can seem sweet and sentimental. But we know they are much more than that. We know that there is a deeper reason we fiercely defend homemade birthday cakes or eating the same food every year at Christmas or Thanksgiving. Why is it that you cook Great-Grandma Elaine’s chicken soup every time you’re sick? Why won’t you throw away that old skillet your mom left you? There is a deeper meaning – a life-giving meaning – to traditions of the kitchen and dinner table. Come to your group with a story that proves that is true. (And maybe even a dish that proves it is true!)

Option E:

A Hope Chest of Tradition

Whether it is an elegant wooden hope chest handed down from family or just a cardboard box in the attic, many of us have a “hope chest” that carries and contains our memories and traditions. Use this month to re-visit what’s in yours. Bring one of the items from your “hope chest” to your group. And tell the story of how pulling it out again transformed your month.

Your Question:

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single question. Instead, simply pick the one that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

1. Do you still have a score to settle with traditional religion? What would it take to move on?
2. How have your parents' traditions made you who you are? Are those traditions a legacy you are grateful for? Or are they still a source of struggle or pain? How have your own new family traditions been a reaction to those of your parents?
3. Are you proudly traditional in any way?
4. Are you "traditional" in ways that aren't easy to see?
5. Has breaking with tradition ever saved your life?
6. Has holding on to tradition ever saved your life?
7. What one tradition do you want to pass on to your children?
8. Do you know where you come from? When did that stop feeling like an important question to you? Does it even feel like a question you might need to ask once again?
9. In our resources section, Rev. Jack Mendelsohn argues that our UU religion is "not bound by tradition." Has your own UU faith been formed by feeling free from tradition? Or do you owe a bit more thanks to tradition than you've previously recognized?
10. What traditions still imprison you?
11. What traditions do you fight against because they imprison others? How have you engaged that fight lately?
12. Are you oppressed by the present? As G.K. Chesterton says, "Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy who merely happen to be walking around." How has tradition and the voices of the past helped you find your way through the dizzying shallowness of voices of the present?
13. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be “a people of tradition.”

Tradition (n.)

1. the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc. from generation to generation especially by word of mouth or practice

2. a long-established or inherited way of thinking or acting

Synonyms: belief, culture, custom, ethic, folklore, habit, law, myth, ritual, wisdom

Wise Words:

“Tradition is the source of religious authority most suspect to Unitarian Universalists.”

--Soul Matters Minister

“Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.”

--W. Somerset Maugham

“There is no creation without tradition; the 'new' is an inflection on a preceding form; novelty is always a variation on the past.”

— Carlos Fuentes

“Because something is traditional is no reason to do it, of course.”

--Lemony Snicket

“The less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it.”

--Mark Twain

“Tradition is the illusion of permanence.”

-Woody Allen

“Part of my ancestry is Cherokee. And in that tradition you become an adult when you're 52.”

--Alice Walker

“A ritual takes what happened a long time ago and drags it into the present so you can experience it here and now. [The tradition of] rituals keep us from forgetting what must not be forgotten and keep us rooted in a past from which we must not be disconnected.”

--Tony Campolo

“Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

--James Arthur Baldwin

“Tradition does not mean a dead town; it does not mean that the living are dead but that the dead are alive. It means that it still matters what Penn did two hundred years ago or what Franklin did a hundred years ago; I never could feel in New York that it mattered what anybody did an hour ago.”

— G.K. Chesterton

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy who merely happen to be walking around.

— G.K. Chesterton

The Larger Circle by Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,

And the hands of those who come after us.

We enter the little circle of each other's arms

And the larger circle of lovers,

Whose hands are joined in a dance

And the larger circle of all creatures

Passing in and out of life

Who move also in a dance

To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it

Except in fragments.

"We have inherited quite a religion. ...It is lived. It is not just a set of bromides and pietisms. ...It is free, not bound by tradition, inheritance, geography, or the passing parade. It is first-hand; a personal experience. ...It is growing. It never thinks of itself as perfected and final.
— Rev. Jack Mendelsohn (adapted)

Videos & Online:

"Tradition" from the movie/musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (with subtitles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRdfX7ut8gw>

When Tradition Makes Way for Love

A particularly moving story shows a young gay couple adopting a child and creating a new tradition of family.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvHGKSqBVjs&feature=share>

Homophobia Takes a One Two Punch

A wonderful comedic spoof from duo Key and Peele about how one family breaks tradition to plan a wedding for a gay family member. (warning: adult language!)

<http://www.upworthy.com/homophobia-takes-a-one-two-punch-in-this-hilarious-clip?c=upw1>

Why America is Not the Greatest

A clip from the popular HBO show *The Newsroom* on breaking with the traditional belief that America is "the greatest country in the world."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMqcLUqYqrs>

Things Black Men are Tired of Hearing

An inspiring call to challenge the harmful traditions and stereotypes of racism.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a8oiGP2IAU>

Articles:

Photo Series of Seniors Shatters Stereotypes

Damon Scheleur and Yagana Shah
Breaking with the traditional stereotypes about aging!

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/15/senior-photo-series-stereotype-aging_n_6478726.html

Should You Change Your Name After Marriage? The Woman's Surname Quandary

Nell Kathleen Gibbon

A well-articulated piece about the complexity of challenging traditions.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nell-kathleen-gibbon/should-you-change-your-name-after-marriage-the-womans-surname-quandary_b_6940000.html

An Accidental Family Tradition

Michelle Richards

<http://blogs.uuworld.org/parenting/2013/08/26/an-accidental-family-tradition/>

New Family Traditions: Creating Rituals with and for Children

Meg Cox

<http://www.uuworld.org/2003/04/feature2.html>

Odd Similarities Between Young and Old Relatives

Donna Sapolin

An article about how tradition is passed down through the way we resemble our relatives, or not. The pictures alone are worth a click.

<http://www.nextavenue.org/blog/odd-similarities-between-young-and-old-relatives>

Alaskan Indian Woodcarver Revives Extinct Totem Art

BBC Magazine

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16539482>

Movies:

Chocolat
Bend it Like Beckham
Slumdog Millionaire
The Hundred-Foot Journey
Far From Heaven
Fiddler on the Roof
Pleasantville
Revolutionary Road
Singing in the Rain
True Grit
Maleficent

Books:

The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible

By A.J. Jacobs

http://www.ted.com/talks/a_j_jacobs_year_of_living_biblically?language=en

The Book of New Family Traditions

By Meg Cox

This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories that are Blocking Progress

By John Brockman

Ishmael

By Daniel Quinn

Rituals of Celebration

By Jane Merededith

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

by Daniel C. Dennett

From our UUA's Beacon Press:

The Spiritual Emerson:

One of our UU tradition's guiding lights.

At Home in Exile:

An eloquent, controversial argument that says, for the first time in their long history, Jews are free to live in a Jewish state—or lead secure and productive lives outside it.

A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects:

S. Brent Plate takes a fresh and much-needed approach to the study of religion by exploring five traditional types of religious objects—stones, incense, drums, crosses, and bread.

Understanding the Bible:

A thoughtful, warm, and witty reconsideration of the traditional view of the Bible by John Buehrens. In making accessible some of the best contemporary historical, literary, political, and feminist readings of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, it encourages us to see our biblical heritage as an ally, not an enemy, in the struggle for a more just and humane world.

May Events & Tradition:

Beltane (May 1): Resources

Mother's Day (May 10): UU Materials

Memorial Day (May 25): UU Materials

Buddha's Birthday (May 25): More here

Coming of Age (often celebrated in May or June): UU Materials

NEXT MONTH'S THEME:

REVELRY

If you've enjoyed this packet and are not a part of Soul Matters or a Unitarian Universalist congregation, please learn more about how to join us at

www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com

Join the Soul Matters Facebook page to engage in the theme with participants from all around the US and Canada:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>