



Threads of Unitarian Universalism: The Greeks

Reverend Annie Foerster
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-1564
October 17, 2010

I was talking with my daughter on the phone last week. She was relating an incident at work in which two co-workers, confronted by an unfamiliar situation, blindly followed a set of procedures that created chaos and confusion. *Had she been there*, she concluded, *she would have taken a more logical, rational approach to the problem*. She lamented, "People just don't think." I commiserated and agreed, and my mind jumped to a somewhat related problem: "By the way," I said, smoothly, "have you visited that Unitarian Universalist church near you?" "I should," she said, taking the bait. "Maybe I could find people who think."

Well, we like to think so. It's one of our primary values--thinking. We've long upheld the rational approach, the thoughtful path, the insistence that we can still behold new truths out of our own efforts. Samuel Longfellow wrote the poem we sing: *Revelation is not sealed; Answering now to our endeavor, truth and right are still revealed. That which came to ancient sages, Greek, Barbarian, Roman, Jew, Written in the soul's deep pages, shines today, forever new.*

I've been thinking about thinking. Why is it so difficult for some people? Why isn't there more of it? Why doesn't it have social support? Among conservative groups, the teaching of children to think for themselves is considered to be a part of the "liberal agenda," designed to separate children from their families. Thinking is a pathway to change, and change is scary. To change an idea is to admit you may have held it erroneously.

In the continuation of his metaphor of the cave, Plato has the prisoner who has been freed and learned to see in the sunlight suddenly remember the comrades he left behind in the cave. He hastens back to save them from their misunderstandings, but when he re-enters the cave, he can no longer see in the dark. He can't even make out the shadows on the walls. So his comrades don't believe him. He can't see what's before him; how could he be telling them the truth about something outside and beyond the light

they know?

But even if we agree that people should learn to think for themselves, we have to admit to an inherent difficulty in the process. Thinking new thoughts is not all that easy. We are products of our culture, our learned prejudices, and are bound to the familiar by habits of comfort. Sometimes, thinking as hard as we can, we do not see a new truth, a possible alternative, even when it is pointed out to us. It's like looking at the pictures in the *Magic Eye* books. *There, don't you see it? Blur your eyes. Tilt your head. Don't you see the hidden picture?* And you don't always. Or it gives you a headache.

Seeing hidden pictures and thinking new thoughts require great faith. You have to believe there is a hidden picture before you can change the way you look at it. You have to believe that thinking will get you beyond the perceived reality for the thought to bear fruit.

Throughout history there have been people who thought independently of the crowd. They haven't always been treated well. Down the ages there have been groups of people who upheld independent thought as a means of salvation. They had detractors. And there have been periods in history where thinking was a positive value. One such period took place about 500 years before the Common Era--that is before the birth of a man called Jesus, before the calendars were renumbered to start at One. During a one- or two-hundred-year interval, we find Buddha, Confucius *and* the Ancient Greeks, all of whom have had a profound influence on the thinking that followed them. Only now are we in the West beginning to understand the impact of the Oriental philosophers, but the ideas of Ancient Greeks are very much with us today, and it is partly their philosophy that clouds our efforts at new thought. Although some of the conclusions of Greek philosophy have led to more conservative assumptions, a great deal of Ancient Greece thought is embraced whole by Unitarian Universalists and other liberal religious bodies without our giving much consideration to its origin or evolution.

Until the fifth century before the common era, most religious thinking relied upon myths that had been created to explain cause and effect, to answer questions about life, to regulate society, and to teach people their place in the world. Myths were the truths of the people who told them and heard them. and you went along to get along.

But the Greeks seemed to think that they could get beyond their myths. They had a strong sense of their own physical abilities, and their mental abilities as well. Perhaps it was because they had created their gods to a more human model than the ancient Hebrews had. They endowed the deities with the same foibles and weaknesses they saw in themselves. They didn't think the gods had all the answers and they believed that their own rational minds--their *logos*, that is, their reason--could come up with the answers to some heretofore unanswerable questions. For starters, they separated thinking from religious belief, and they called it philosophy--from *philo*, to love; and *soph*, wisdom--the love of wisdom.

The earliest of these original thinkers are called the Natural Philosophers, because they got their ideas by observing nature. The first empirical thought they agreed on was, *Nothing comes from nothing.* It made them ponder the origin of things. Their next

mutual observation was that nature is in a constant state of flux--things are always changing; new things are being created. Plants arise out of soil; babies fall out of wombs; winds blow from an empty sky. Change, they agreed, was natural, but there had to be some primary element from which everything arose and then changed, because *nothing comes from nothing*. For about a hundred years, philosophers subscribed to a one-element theory--claiming it to be alternately water, air or fire.

Notice the improbability of a completely independent new thought. It wasn't until a critical mass agreed on one answer that another new thought was introduced. New thinking relies upon abandoning the common response to what had been thought before.

Out of this line of thinking, then, Heraclitus forged two ideas: the theory of flow and the theory of opposites. ANature is in a constant state of flux,@ he agreed. Nothing stays the same. AI cannot step in the same river twice for both I and the river are changed.@ This constant changing he reasoned, is set out for us by the existence of opposites, which are god=s way of defining the universe for humanity. If there were no winter, we wouldn=t know spring. If there were no hate, we couldn=t know love. While his oriental counterparts were creating the idea of the yin/yang, a circular metaphor for change, he and his friends were creating the continuum, either/or connected by their opposition, but separated for life by long poles of increasing or decreasing values. We, of European descent, are pretty much stuck with Heraclitus=s way of thinking. It takes a great deal of effort to embrace both/and thinking, or discard our either/or mentality. Think about it.

Greek philosophers embraced the one-element belief for about 150 years until Empedocles (460 to 370 BCE) had a break-through idea that there might be four basic elements--earth, air, fire and water--that constantly combined and recombined to create other objects and create change itself. In another 50 years Democritus suggested that these elements could not only be combined, but broken down until they reached the smallest, unbreakable unit of existence, the atom. Yes. As early as 400 years before the common era, the Greeks spoke of atoms. We need to be reminded from time to time that this latter idea was not created as part of 20th century science, but was handed down as a legacy of 2,300 years. It took that long for scientists to think beyond the framework of the atom and smash it literally, as well as figuratively.

One idea of the Natural Philosophers that has given us trouble through the ages is Fate, or predestination. All things, from illness to accident, they concluded, were planned long before our lives began. This construct of fatalism was incorporated by John Calvin into Presbyterian theology. Michael Servetus, the early Unitarian martyr, was burned at the stake for disagreeing with Calvin. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles today state, AWe affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,@ implying that we take responsibility for the turns of our lives.

In the fourth century before the Common Era, Protagoras claimed that AMan is the measure of all things.@ The Greeks in Athens, however, believed that the individual can=t

know everything, even if he uses his rational mind. We need, they concluded, to concentrate not solely on *I*, but on *us*. Out of this new philosophy came the idea of democracy, the voice of all the people as equal leaders of their fate. In order to make democracy work, there had to be an educated populace that could make informed decisions, and the study of rhetoric--the art of discussion and persuasion--would be required to help change people=s minds.

Ideas wax and wane, gain popularity and lose it. But the idea of human autonomy and the use of democracy has pretty much shaped western history and has been a very strong part of this denomination. The acceptance of Protagoras=s man-as-measurer certainly was the impetus behind the Unitarian acceptance of religious humanism during the early part of the last century. It still enflames the rational/spiritual debate today.

A survey of Greek philosophies would not be complete without Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Let us consider the gifts and liabilities their thinking has contributed to ours. Socrates loved a good discussion. If he were a member of this church, he would be chair of the Adult Religious Education and Enrichment Committee. He didn=t like lectures because he believed that everyone had it within him- or herself to understand all things. Everyone, he said, can grasp philosophical truths if they use their innate reason, if they reach down inside themselves and discover what is there. To this end Socrates played the fool, pretending to be more ignorant than he was. Instead, he asked questions and goaded people into coming up with the answers on their own.

Socrates and his method of teaching irritated a number of people. They didn=t like his gadfly approach, stinging them into creative thought or change of mind. While we celebrate such original methods of teaching today by encouraging our children to think for themselves, I probably should remind you of what happened to Socrates. He was sentenced to death for Aintroducing new gods and corrupting the youth.@

But his idea that there was a voice within him that demanded from him more than what his personal comfort desired--a conscience and a truth that was of a higher value even than life itself--is an idea we continue to defend and practice. AHe who knows what good is, will do good,@ Socrates proclaimed. The Unitarians believed that evil would be destroyed when people were taught to think about the truth. A A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.@

Plato came along next and gave us not only the philosophy of his teacher Socrates, who wrote nothing down himself, but some new thinking of his own. He harkened back to the earlier discussion of change and said, AYes, but something has to stay the same.@ What, he asked, is permanent and what is changing? What is eternal and what immutable? Twenty-two hundred years later, Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker asked what is *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity?* With this lecture and book, he got into a lot of trouble, and changed the flow of the Unitarian religion for the next century and a half.

Plato concluded that there are two regions of reality, the world of senses and the world of ideas. In the sensory world, everything flows, grows, changes-- nothing *is*; in the world of ideas, the forms of things are eternal. Humanity he says is a creature of duality, a body that flows and is of this world, and a soul that lives forever. The soul he thought, existed before the body and will outlast it. For many today, other ways of thinking are not just heretical, but impossible. The body/soul duality idea is a shadow on a cave wall, emblazoned by centuries of belief.

Aristotle refined Plato's theories into his own distinction of form and substance. Form includes the categories of things, while substance points to their individual traits. Aristotle was the first categorizer, putting everything neatly in its place and giving birth to the taxonomies beloved by 20th century science. His explicitness about forms, also gave us a process by which to think more precisely. He is the father of logic, a form of thought which has shaped our social thinking more than we might imagine. While we cannot deny its benefits, we must also realize its detriment to the less easily defined process of human intuition, and admit that the two have long been at war in our own philosophies.

I will forego railing against Aristotle's beliefs that women are incomplete men and that genetic inheritance is transferred only from the male sperm, to offer you his philosophy on happiness. He held that there are three forms of happiness: the first is a life of pleasure and enjoyment; the second, a life as a free and responsible citizen; and the third, a life as a thinker and philosopher. Was this the definition that Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he included the *Pursuit of happiness* in our Declaration of Independence? It makes sense.

Aristotle believed that all three elements of happiness must be present for an individual to find fulfillment. I can almost forgive him his chauvinism for this and his advocacy of balance in all things. *Not liberal enough is miserly; too liberal is extravagant,* he wrote. But if we are to balance our happiness by including thought and philosophy in it, we ought to do it with intentionality and an understanding of the process.

We need to remember where the ideas we already include in our beliefs came from and what their antitheses were. We need to remember that we are inheritors of ideas as well as propagators. Before we can create new ideas, we should examine the beliefs we hold as scrupulously as those we intend to discard or discredit. We need to ask what prejudices thwart our progress and what self-interests propel us blindly forward. We need to remember that an individual cannot know everything, and to consult with one another along the way. We need to disagree carefully and agree cautiously. Even if we find people who think, we must remember that their conclusions may not be true. Even the ideas you hear at the Unitarian Universalist church require further consideration from you.