



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Down the Rabbit Hole”

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Centering Thoughts

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice.

“I knew who I was this morning, but I’ve changed a few times since then.”

One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree.

“Which road do I take?” she asked.

From ALICE IN WONDERLAND, by Lewis Carroll

Sermon

Sometimes I feel like I’ve awakened into an alternate reality, a Wonderland or even a Twilight Zone. Sometimes I no longer know who I am or where I am, as if the ground beneath me has given way and I’ve fallen, like Alice, into a strange new land.

One Christmas when I was young my parents gave me a copy of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. I eagerly began reading it, but I couldn’t finish. The book contained too many strange and angry characters behaving in disturbing and unpredictable ways. A time-obsessed white rabbit, a hookah-smoking caterpillar, a Cheshire cat whose grin remained after his body vanished – and these were the most agreeable characters I encountered. Not so the Queen of Hearts who terrified me by shouting at the slightest provocation, “Off with her head!”

Despite my negative childhood reaction, I embrace Alice’s adventures now. It’s the perfect analogy for my time in seminary, and even our time, now.

My seminary adventures began when I entered Wesleyland, or Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. I could have gone to a Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago or Berkeley, but that wasn’t convenient from my home in Fairfax, Virginia. Besides, I thought going to a United Methodist school would be good for me, you know, like taking nasty medicine to get well.

I don’t mean Methodists are nasty, but I don’t describe myself as Christian or theistic, so I had some trepidation entering into a culture that was not my own and where I knew my internal religious translator would get heavy use. Because I was raised Unitarian Universalist I thought it would serve my ministry well to be immersed with committed Christians who might help me get past my simplistic, narrow view of Christianity, a view formed primarily by Biblical fundamentalists, creationists, and anti-GLBT Christians. I sought a more authentic understanding

of America's dominant religion to facilitate my building bridges between our differences. Maybe my example will help you build any needed bridges.

Convinced of the wisdom to follow wherever the Wesley rabbit might lead, I emptied the vial marked "Drink Me." The first clue that I'd entered an alternate reality came during the new student orientation dinner.

We were asked to sit in denominational groups. Professors sat one per table to mingle with us. Three other UUs and I randomly selected one. Like Alice joining the tea party, at our table I encountered the Mad Hatter – a.k.a. the systematic theology professor.

Why the Mad Hatter? Because he speaks as if in riddles to this religious liberal. *Systematic* is not a term usually associated with Unitarian Universalist theology.

Christianity is mostly systematic. It has specific doctrine and unchanging truth about the nature of God and Jesus. Unitarian Universalism is not terribly specific, we have no defined creed, we accept a variety of truths, and some of us are proudly unsystematic in our thinking. Unlike the Nicene and Apostle's creeds, our Six Sources and Seven Principles are broad guides. A living tradition, we don't insist on one belief and we accept that new ideas and experiences may change what we believe. Because we're open to change ours is a theology in *process*.

When the Hatter asked why a UU would choose Wesley, I mumbled something about the diverse student body. But a fellow UU volunteered, "I don't think this is a place non-theist UUs would choose. They wouldn't fit in." She obviously assumed all UUs at the table were theists. Hello! Non-theist here, thank you very much. Oh so kindly I pointed out that I expected Wesley to fit me just fine. And by the way, "Off with your heads!"

Undeterred, I entered my Hebrew Bible class, a less pejorative Christian-centric naming than 'Old Testament.' Silly girl, another rude awakening awaited me. The first thing this professor did was hold up a Bible and she said to the class, "This is the word of the Lord." And without any prompting, the class responded, (*invite congregation to fill in*) "Thanks be to God."

Huh? Did I miss something here? How come I didn't get the script? Take back that bottle marked "Drink Me!"

Actually, don't. After that mind-blowing moment, the professor provoked students into reflecting on the nature of the Bible. Was it the error-free word of God? Was it the error-filled word of man about God? Or was it something else? / Wesley teaches that the Bible is inspired by God, but not the direct word of God and not without error. It was written during specific times, at specific places, by specific people, for specific purposes. The professor emphasized that the context of the writings should never be separated from how we read and understand the Bible today. She also taught us how different translations can make a big difference in its meaning.

For example, I learned that the Genesis creation story wasn't written as a science textbook but to comfort the ancient Hebrews. They had suffered defeat by the Babylonians who then forced them into exile. Their lives were upside down and they feared God was not with them in their new home. Their basic reality had been altered. The story of Genesis assures the people that God is in control, that despite how bad things seem, God will order the chaos. Creationists who read the text literally to learn how the world began ignore thousands of years of Jewish history, rabbinical purpose, and *midrash*, or reading between the lines of text for greater understanding.

These and other revelations about the Bible helped me appreciate it in ways I couldn't earlier. The Bible I dismissed as worthless became a rich source of inspiration, wisdom, and beauty.

That's not to say that everything in the Bible is without controversy. We should be troubled by some of it. But if we consider its time, place, and purpose, we can better understand if it contains a relevant message for us today or not.

Reality felt a little more stable now that I understood the Bible better. It didn't last. Along came prayer. Constant prayer. Some classes began each session with a prayer, or ended with one. Some people offered up a special prayer just before exams. They asked Jesus to help them do well. Did they really think God or Jesus would perform a miracle to improve their grades? What mushroom had they nibbled?

Once I got over my initial smug reaction, I started listening more closely to their prayers. Yes, they wanted to do well on exams, but what they were really praying for was to become better pastors and messengers of God's word. My words may be sourced elsewhere, but I hoped doing well on an exam meant I would be a better minister, too.

Their opening prayers were no different from our taking an intentional moment to light a chalice or drop a pebble in water. They gave thanks for the professors' gifts of wisdom or sacred offerings for their own holy work. They even offered prayers for fellow students who were sick or challenged in some way, much like our Joys and Sorrows substitute here for communal prayers for each other. Once my translator began working, I responded to their prayers with a hearty, "Amen!"

There were other moments at Wesley when I felt like Alice. Not every professor welcomed the UU students because we didn't fit with their narrow purpose of making good Christian pastors to fill Christian churches. Even so, I never felt I had to compromise my own truths. The Administration welcomed our presence, just as they welcomed charismatic Pentecostal students at the other end of the spectrum. Together we challenged each other to question our assumptions, our realities. In the testing and reflecting we learned and grew our faith or understanding. Not only was it good practice for seminary students, it's good for us here. We can be respectful as we honestly engage with one another over our differences, and we may both change as a result.

Alice changed many times during her adventure in Wonderland. The mushroom, cake, and drink caused Alice's physical changes. But her encounters with strange situations and creatures which were nothing like her home reality made Alice question who she was. So it was with me at Wesley. I had to rethink what I thought about a God who was no longer limited to being supernatural deity in the sky. I had to reevaluate my whole understanding of Christianity, prayer, sin, and religious ritual. My Wesley medicine cured me of narrow thinking, as I hoped it would.

Whenever you and I encounter new experiences and new ideas we change. We can stick our heads in the sand and try to remain immune from challenges to our way of thinking, but if we do, we won't grow. We may not need to learn how to play croquet with flamingos and hedgehogs, but we can build resiliency and cope better with an ever-changing world if we listen and try to learn from each other.

This past week you may have paused to remember the horrific events of 9/11 thirteen years ago. On that day I recall disbelieving what I was seeing. That morning our world shifted into something we couldn't recognize, something that required us to adjust our thinking about who we are, what our place in the world is, and how big the capacity of humans to do evil is.

More recently, we have witnessed atrocities by yet another group wrongly justifying evil acts with religious beliefs. The Queen of Hearts' frequent command has lost its humor in light of

ISIS or ISIL's barbaric killing of two American journalists. Yesterday we learned they murdered a British journalist, too. The President announced this past week that the US is about to enter a new phase in the fight or war against terrorism. Are you, like me, falling down a tunnel into a world you would rather not enter?

Closer to home the polarization of both political parties serves to obstruct rather than construct solutions to our nation's problems. Politicians are the mad hatters speaking illogically and in riddles – red and blue alike, and whether they host tea parties or not. Until they understand how to compromise, the Queen of Hearts is welcome to them.

Normal reality seems unrecognizable when I see teenagers shooting at schoolmates, patrons of bars and elementary teachers packing guns, and us putting 'No Weapon' signs on our building. Pluck whatever headline you want, how did our world come to this? Sister, wake me up from this horrible dream.

Alice returned from Wonderland. Perhaps there's hope for us too. We can work towards a more just and peaceful world. We can abhor terrorist tactics, but they tell us something about failed states and despots. Those of you who plan to attend the Athens Pride Festival this afternoon, by showing you stand on the side of love will move our world towards greater justice. I will miss this year's event because I am participating in the ordination of Charlotte Arsenault, a UU chaplain at Athens Regional Hospital. Fortunately, I see many of you wearing "Standing on the Side of Love" t-shirts, so I know we'll be well represented there.

We do what we can, when we can, to make our world a better, more peaceful place. It may seem small at the time, but added together, all our steps can make a difference.

May you and I continue to use our hands, hearts, and heads to change this current nonsensical reality. And, may the world wake up soon.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What journey, past or present, led you to unexpected places or required unexpected changes of you? Did you resist going down that path? Please share.
2. How have your beliefs changed over time? What contributed to your making that change?
3. What emotional or spiritual challenges do you find most difficult to face? Please share.