

Sacred Journeys

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Today, our second through sixth grade religious education class begins a curriculum entitled “Faithful Journeys.” This curriculum leads them through a series of lessons in which they explore the ways in which they can make moral and ethical decisions and help build a better world. Looking at life as a journey of self-discovery and faith development, the curriculum uses stories from Unitarian Universalist history (both recent and long-past) to provide examples of people who have used our religion as a ground for their own decision-making.

This journey seemed to me to be too good a thing to let our children get it all to themselves.

So this year, we will be taking that journey with them. We might not go down exactly the same paths they do, but we will from time to time be inspired by those same stories, we will grapple with our own need to claim our moral and ethical voices, we will situate ourselves in a flowing stream of religious and social history, and we will embrace our power to create a better world.

Today’s story was about Toribio Quimada, who founded the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines, who pursued his dream of education despite incredible odds and who dared to proclaim a message of love, acceptance, fairness and inclusion when the religions around him preached anything but.

I will admit—I left out part of the story when I told it to the children. You see, the people who disagreed with his teaching didn’t use their words to argue with him. They used violence to silence him—in 1988, when he was 71 years old, armed thugs stormed into his house, tied him up, and shot him before setting his house on fire and leaving him to burn to death.

They resorted to violence out of fear that a religion based in equal love and fairness would seek to undermine the entrenched power structures in the society. Those interests had managed to silence the voices for justice inside the Catholic Church—the leading religion of the Philippines—by keeping the followers of Catholicism uneducated and unaware of those teachings.

But Quimada taught that everyone needed to figure things out for themselves—that everyone needed a good education, that everyone needed to learn to read, and that the Scriptures should be open to interpretation. And for that, he was killed.

Toribio Quimada knew of the dangers he faced when trying to introduce Universalism to his people. He knew that anyone who disagreed with those in power faced a life of peril. And yet, he pressed on, sure in his calling to bring what he saw as God’s unconditional love to the people of the Philippines.

Toribio Quimada intentionally set down a path in his sacred journey that was dangerous—because he was convinced it was the right path to follow.

All of our lives are sacred journeys, and from time to time in those journeys we are presented with choices of which way to go.

The labyrinth is at once a poor and a wonderful metaphor for this journey.

Unlike in popular imagination, the labyrinth is not a maze. It is an intricately laid-out pathway that twists and turns and doubles back on itself again and again. If you concentrate, and follow the pathway, it leads you directly to the center, where you can pause for meditation or prayer or contemplation before heading back out the same way you came in. There is no mystery in the labyrinth, there are no dead ends, there are no wrong pathways—since there is only one.

And yet, while the labyrinth is a single pathway, it is not a straight line for a reason.

All of those twists and turns force you to pay attention as you navigate your way to the middle. If done correctly, they help you drown out the noise in your brain that distract you. They allow you to focus because you trust that the

But even in the labyrinth, there are choices to be made. To pause or not to pause. To focus on a single question or allow the spirit to move freely through you. To sit for a while and notice what's around you. To see the sacred in the ordinary, or the ordinary in the sacred.

Sometimes, even on the single path of the labyrinth, we realize that we have been wasting time staring at rabbit poop—and we must make a change in how we do things.

Choices abound on the sacred journeys of our lives. And how do we make these choices?

Let us look to the example of Toribio Quimada for inspiration this week.

Quimada's first decisions on his sacred journey came from his head—his ability to use reason and to understand and weigh knowledge. Denied an education at first, Quimada was surrounded by questions. But once he was allowed and encouraged to study, he did so with a voracious appetite.

He learned about different ways people interpreted the Christian Scriptures. He read them for himself. He thought a lot about what he read, and discussed it with others in religious communities. He taught, and studied more. He made up his own mind.

On he went down the path.

Next, he had to rely his heart to make choices—his knowledge, deep down within him, that religion was supposed to be a healing force, a movement for good, a connection to a greater love in the

Universe. He was not finding that in either the Roman Catholic or Protestant Christian churches with which he was affiliated.

Toribio Quimada's heart told him to reject religion that divided people into groups, to rail against religion that taught of an angry, spiteful God. It told him to keep searching for a faith that embraced everyone—no matter who they were, where they were from, what they believed, or the conditions in which they grew up.

His heart led him to become a Universalist

Head and heart having helped him along, Quimada continued on his sacred journey.

It took faith for him to choose the next direction he would go—and persistence born of that faith to make it down the path. Faith is often defined as believing something that you don't have proof for. I prefer to see it as trust in evidence that goes beyond reason. In any case, Quimada had faith that he was not alone in his beliefs. This faith led him to find the Universalist Church of America, back before there was a Unitarian Universalist Association.

Having found that Universalists really existed somewhere, he was not about to give up before he connected with them. Quimada wrote letter after letter, sending them off into the unknown, hoping for a response.

In doing so, he trusted that one of those letters would find its intended recipient—he needed just one to do so. And it did. Toribio Quimada's faith was proven true—his trust in the universe was redeemed.

And still, he was not done with the lessons on his sacred journey. His path led on to another choice: the choice to stand up for his beliefs or to back down in the face of opposition and threats.

Quimada's last choice was made with courage—the ability to feel fear and not let it stop you from doing what you know is right.

My colleague the Rev. Fred Muir has written a history of Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines. Fred writes:

“He preached that a loving God is not capable of preparing a place called hell for people to be tormented forever with fire. He preached that the contradictions found in the Bible are proof that the Holy Bible is not the word of God but a great book written by great people. He preached that Jesus Christ is not the son of God, but rather a gifted son of Joseph and Mary, who delivered a message of justice, equality, and compassion.”

He preached the good news of Unitarian Universalism for more than three decades before being killed by those who felt threatened by this message.

And still, his sacred journey had not come to an end.

The final choice on Toribio Quimada's sacred journey was made by those he left behind, and was based his spirit—in the form of the legacy he left for others and the things that he had taught them.

Toribio Quimada's daughter, the Rev. Rebecca Quimada-Sienes, along with many other brave and faithful people, took up his ministry, and the UU Church of the Philippines continues to thrive.

What are the choices you are making on your sacred journey?

How are you informed to make those choices by your head? Your heart? Your faith? Your courage? Your spirit?

Who are your role models and sources of inspiration?

We travel on the path of our sacred journeys, stopping in this place at this time where our paths cross. We twist and turn through the labyrinth of life, working our way towards the center, towards fulfillment and meaning, towards passion and growth.

Along the way, we must make choices.

Where will you pause to touch the Earth? Where will you marvel at the hints that lie scattered around you in the grass? Where will you discard what you previously thought was true, and try on a new belief for size? Where will you stop for directions, for advice, for a conversation with another, for a relationship, for a moment of grace brought to you by the mind of a child?

Let us find out together.

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