

Translators

A sermon preached by Tony Lorenzen

before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA

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“What are they doing!” He exclaimed, scrambling around to pick up the discarded orders of service off the ground. “It contains the name of God! Ha-Shem! No! Stop!” But it was useless. Too many people were dropping the papers as they left the Princeton Chapel. There was no way to stop the desecration. He was a student from Jewish Theological Seminary and too many students from Princeton, Holy Cross, Saint Mary’s, and Harvard Divinity School didn’t understand that the four letter name of God in Hebrew not only couldn’t be spoken aloud it couldn’t be thrown away. It was supposed to be buried.

I witnessed this event the year I represented Harvard Divinity School in an interfaith program called Seminarians Interacting. Over the course of an academic year, at various retreat weekends, I soaked in the people, the worship, and the new ideas. I was also challenged – sometimes directly and forcefully for my Christian-ness, my white-ness, my male-ness. And yet I loved it. Others did not. Some students involved with Seminarians Interacting had a difficult time encountering religious others.

I believe the reason I enjoyed Seminarians Interacting and the reason I am still drawn to inter-faith activity today, indeed one of the reasons I, like many others, find my spiritual home in the Unitarian Universalist Association, is that I am a translator.

I was raised Catholic. Christian was my first spiritual language. Religions and spiritual traditions are like languages. The more we learn to speak, the more comfortable we’ll be as we travel about in the world. As Diana Eck, professor of World Religions at Harvard has said, “If you know one religion, you don’t know any.”

Just as English speakers can get by in our American culture knowing only English, so too is it easy sometimes to relax in the comfort of the spiritual tradition within which we were raised, be it Christian or Jewish or Muslim, or Humanist.

Just as I don’t feel superior because I am native English speaker, I don’t feel superior because I am a native Christian speaker. I sometimes feel ignorant that I am not fluent in Spanish or Vietnamese or French or Islam or Hinduism.

I grew up in a Christian setting reading the Bible. When a Muslim mentioned the Koran or a Jewish friend the Torah, I had a corresponding reality of the Bible in my own religious world to which I could relate the concept. I was baptized and had a confirmation in the Catholic Church. I learned about bar and bat mitzvahs and when I got to Harvard

Divinity School, the coming of age ceremony for Mescalero Apache girls. When people spoke of their religious beliefs and practices, I understood. I had religious beliefs and practices of my own. I had analogues in my own religious world and I translated as best as I could what they were telling me from their religious world into mine.

And yet, analogous matching of the pieces of someone else's tradition or practice to something in one's own is but the first step in understanding religious otherness. It's valuable if we continue on the road to a genuine understanding of who others are religiously. Translation is a complicated business and religion is not just a spiritual language, but the art of how we live, in a sacred manner, in this world.

The online Babel Fish Translation tool at www.altavista.com gives us some insight into just how difficult translation can be, both for language and religion. Babel Fish is a great tool for quick, brief translation, but Babel Fish is a computer program and it doesn't understand the nuances of language such as usage, context, idioms, and other things that make language art. For example, if one were to type the following sentence into Babel Fish for translation from English to Spanish:

"Do unto others as you would have them do to you"

Babel Fish gives you:

"Haga a otro pues usted hizo que hicieran a usted"

Translating back to English from Spanish Babel Fish gives you:

"Do to others because you caused that they did you."

Close, but not exactly a cigarette, as we almost say in English.

Babel Fish is doing Formal Correspondence translation, mechanically reproducing the vocabulary, features and form of the source language into the receptor language. As you can see, it sometimes misses the mark. It leaves out the art, the music - the poetry of the language.

For poetry in translation you need Dynamic Equivalence Translation, where the meaning of the original language is carried over into the receptor language. Inez Talamantez, my teacher in Native American Religious Traditions at Harvard, taught us that an Apache doesn't see Apache religion, an Apache just sees life. Just as you cannot directly translate a poem from one language to another without creating a new poem, a new work of art, you can't translate religious experience from one person or one religion to another without taking into account the unique rhythm and meter, flow and music of the sacred and the holy that makes that person and tradition unique.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* says that in the spread of epidemics, ideas, and movements translators play a

key role. According to Gladwell, translators “are the ones who make it possible for innovations to overcome...they take ideas and information from a highly specialized world and translate them into a language the rest of us can understand.” [1]

Unitarian Universalists are such people as Gladwell speaks of when he defines translators. Francis David was such a person at the Diet of Torda in 1568 where his preaching converted a king and a people to Unitarianism. John Murray and Hosea Ballou were such people boldly preaching universal salvation. William Ellery Channing was such a person preaching Unitarian Christianity in Baltimore in 1819. Olympia Brown and Antoinette Brown Blackwell were such people, opening the pulpit and ministry to women. Roy Wood Sellars was such a person when he drafted the Humanist Manifesto in 1933.

Our faith is a faith forged by theological and spiritual innovators brave enough to create a new work of art out of old forms that no longer served. Now it is our turn to be translators, carrying the living tradition forward. I am reminded of pictures from the United Nations where a person is speaking in their native language and the rest of the room is listening through earpieces, each in their own native tongue. Somewhere there is a translation center and when it comes to religious diversity and understanding, with our six sources of the living tradition, we Unitarian Universalists are it. The world needs us and we have a valuable message to bring and a valuable role to play. When war threatens constantly over the difference between the Hebrew shalom and the Arabic salaam, we are needed. When civil liberties are threatened over interpretations of Canon and Koran, we are needed.

This is not the time to demean another’s humanism or turn up one’s nose at another’s Christianity. This is a time to recognize our common Unitarian Universalist bonds of reason, freedom and tolerance. This is a time to strengthen our covenant to affirm and promote the inherent dignity and worth of every person so we can promote justice, equity and compassion both within and beyond our church doors.

[1] Gladwell, Malcom. *The Tipping Point*, Little, Brown & Company. Boston: 2000. p. 200