

UUMAN

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Show Your Work

Words to enrich the spirit...

Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart.

—Karen Armstrong

I was a senior in high school when I learned that what had been wrong with me since the 6th grade had a name: *math anxiety*. Numbers stupefied me. Worst was when the teacher asked us to *show our work*. When in doubt, which was often, I took refuge in confused calculations and perhaps a paper-tearing erasure. I guessed correctly that the teacher would not have much patience for fathoming the mess I made. I got a lot of red ink, never a gold star.

I took the SATs twice. The first time my guidance counselor decided a tabulation error had occurred. The only numbers I seemed to have gotten right were the digits in my date of birth. The next time I landed within average range, and so off I went to a college, where I studied nothing remotely mathematical for four blissful years.

I have since held a few jobs where math mattered. I did fine. I started an MBA once. Calculus gave me shortness of breath, but incompatibility with the program's values was why I quit after a year. Divinity school has no math requirement, although that's not why I went.

On average, drafting a sermon occupies from 10-15 of a minister's weekly hours. It starts with thinking. Thinking leads to research. Ready access to the internet is a blessing for those of us who turn out a weekly product. I envy the authors of books. Barring a publisher's deadline, they can take as much time as they want.

No amount of research I ever do can match the high bar set by A.J. Jacobs, author of [A Year of Living Biblically](#). There's a man who *really* shows his work.

Jacobs describes himself as *Jewish... in the same way the Olive Garden is Italian*. He'd recently had a son. He'd been wondering how to teach his son about religion and his family's Jewish roots. He came up with a book idea. What if he learned about the Hebrew Scriptures by living them for a year? He would obey the Ten Commandments. He would walk the streets of New York City, wearing sandals, a robe, and a massive beard. He was looking forward to wearing the outfit.

Before signing the contract, Jacobs consulted a rabbi friend. He wanted to know, *Do you think this book might insult atheists and believers? Might both sides stone me to death?* Rabbi

Bachman replied, *Sometimes miracles occur only when you jump in*. A.J. Jacobs jumped. The miracle turned out to be a best-seller.

Divinity school may not have math quizzes, but it's got requirements to *show your work*. There's the theological reflection paper. This is a one or two page analysis of how you got from point A to point B in your interpretation an experience or an idea you consider to be religious—and then you have to say why. There's a formula to follow. It's a lot harder to write a couple of concise pages than to rattle on for ten. Sketchy thinking will get you margins of tiny-printed critique from your professor. I know this for a fact.

In the next minute or so, I'm going to show you some of *my work*. I'll share with you a little of the background research for this sermon. It comes from The Case for God, by Karen Armstrong... and it concerns one of her scholarly specialties... Islam.

Islam means *surrender to God*. Islam came about in the early 7th century. The Prophet Muhammad was originally a merchant in the prosperous Arab city of Mecca. In 610, he began having revelations he believed came from the God of the Jews and Christians... the People of the Book... now his God too. These were compiled in a scripture known as the *Qu'ran the Recitation*, The Qu'ran was finalized a mere twenty years after the Prophet's death in 632. Estimates of just how long vary, but compiling the Bible took *decades* longer.

In the beginning anyway, the Prophet's intention was crystal clear. The Qu'ran was to be what Karen Armstrong calls an "ethical summons" to a just, compassionate way of life... not a belief system. Early Islam did not believe in belief... most contemporary Muslims still don't. God was not to be the property of a single religion. Quoting the Qu'ran, *Divine light could not be confined to a single lamp... but enlightened all human beings*. No one should be forced to accept Islam. Muslims must speak courteously to the Jews and Christians and not engage in sectarian disputes, which God told Muhammad were silly (or an Arabic word to that effect).

Recently Earl Daniels led a workshop at UUMAN on the challenges of *Islamophobia*, aided by a team from the Roswell Community Masjid. During our afternoon conversation I remembered something I read, probably in a book by Karen Armstrong. I asked, *Aren't there two meanings of jihad*? Turns out I was right.

In general, *Jihad* is the duty of every Muslim to serve God's mission on earth. Translations include *endeavoring, persevering, struggling, applying one's self to the task*. The context for jihad is the facts of life. The human condition is marked by our struggles to maintain physical and spiritual equilibrium. *Jihad* does not mean Holy War. The historical concept is complex.

In classic Islam, there are two forms of jihad. *Greater Jihad* is the inward *spiritual* discipline of Muslims responding to the Prophet's ethical summons. Practicing *Greater Jihad*, Muslims

show their work... their faith... through acts of compassion, justice and prayer.

Lesser Jihad is the struggle against enemies of the Qu'ranic way. But *Lesser Jihad* still is not Holy War. There has been no universal warfare by Muslims on *non-believers* since the early days of the caliphate. Early Muslims lived in belligerent times for everybody, just as early Jews and Christians did. Self-defense might be necessary as final recourse. But before going to battle, Muslims were expected to engage their opponents on intellectual, economic, moral, spiritual and social fronts—nonviolent practice. Warfare was not a religious duty. Muhammad is quoted saying on his way home from a battle, *We are returning from the Lesser Jihad (violence) and going to the Greater Jihad (spiritual growth).*

The ancient Arab world was extremely sophisticated scientifically and intellectually. Early Muslim scholars did not suffer from math anxiety. Instead they invented ways of applying mathematics to learn more about the world and how it ticks.

Faith doesn't concern itself much anymore with belief, theology or creed. You might even say that *religion* is no longer a prerequisite to *faith*. More and more, people are choosing faith communities that embrace *multiple* understandings of what it means to be a person of faith... understandings stretching from prayer to activism and encompassing everything in between. Now every faith is a chosen faith. In this regard, Unitarian Universalism has evolved with eye-popping speed. With *Point A* representing our history and heritage, and *Point B* representing the here and now, how did we get here? What were our forebears in liberal religious faith thinking then? What are we thinking now? *How will we show our work?*

For years I've told the congregations I serve that it's up to us down here among the grassroots to answer the last question... that somehow our local answers will trickle up to headquarters in Boston, there to be streamed into the wider UU consciousness. It's still true... more or less... with an added dimension. *Independence* has had a good long run. If we are to be an Association of *interdependent* congregations and affiliates, inspirational change has to come from both directions... down and up.

I see confusion in your eyes, notable among those of you who are new to Unitarian Universalism and may be hearing but one question, *What the heck is she talking about?*

I was encouraged to read in a blog last week that a task force of the Unitarian Universalist Association is busy imagining an overhaul of how we see ourselves as a *faith movement*.

Way to go, UUA! Show us your work! What if... rather than an Association of stakeholders... congregations saw themselves as *interdependent partners* incarnating Unitarian Universalism's mission on earth?

We'd need to surrender our dogged expressions of independence (not our individuality). We'd have to trust in invisible matters beyond our walls. Surrender control. Isn't that an aspect of faith? We'd have to stop hiding out behind over-complicated governance at all levels: structures, by-laws, parliamentary procedure. Of course we'd still need basic structures for organizing ourselves, but with only *essential* frameworks, might it not be easier to pass the torch to younger generations of leadership?

Social activists of all ages, young adults, SBNRs (spiritual but not religious)... these folks love causes and community. *Membership* in a congregation means little. To a number of them, membership equates to exclusivity. Rather than signing the membership book, how about a covenanting ritual for the whole congregation that embraces newcomers' gifts and passions for belonging to *this* community but does not tie them to static tradition?

Imagine a faith community of many people involved in many ways in furthering Unitarian Universalism's mission in the world. Our mission statement need not be a word salad. It could be as plain as this...

How about these concluding lines by Howard Thurman's Christmas benediction. May the mission of our liberal religious faith be...

to find the lost,
 to heal the broken,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the prisoner,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among [the people]
 to make music in the heart.

Be thoughtful, be kind, be bold, and be willing to *show your work*.

