

Finding Patterns, Finding Context, Finding Direction

My talk today was prompted by two funerals and two books.

First the funerals.

I attended both of them this past June. They were *alike* in that both were suitable tributes, honouring people who had lived long and good lives. They were *different* in various ways, one of which was their religious content. In the first funeral, religion and religious imagery played a small role. This was congruent with the life of the individual, and the wishes of the family. In the second, the service was *focused* on religion. This was in accordance with the life of *this* individual and the wishes of the family.

The two services within a two week period presented a real contrast. As I sat through the second one, on a hot summer afternoon, the religious imagery and, in particular, the music were familiar from my childhood. Some of the hymns were sung by a fellow with a wonderful deep voice and others by hundreds of people in attendance. The sound of the band transported me back to my early years, when I'd visit my grandmother, and my aunt would play those same hymns on her piano with similar gusto, and we'd all sing them together.

I was struck the afternoon of that funeral by the power of the **emotional associations** being conveyed through the gospel stories, other narratives, religious imagery, and songs. I wondered where the powerful emotional associations are in our UU religion? What gives the *oomph*, the *feelings*, that drive our motivations, our decisions, our actions.

Well, I wasn't sure. As soon as I got home from the funeral, I headed to a copy of the hymnary to look over the principles and sources again. It was reassuring for me to reread the principles and reaffirm that the worldview they expressed was congruent with mine. However, that afternoon, I was left feeling dissatisfied with the **sources**.

They are all relevant sources of information contributing to my worldview. In comparison to the narratives, imagery and worldview I had been listening to earlier in the afternoon, the UU sources are general and aimed at being comprehensive. But something was missing. I wondered what would make them feel compelling to me; what would convey more directly and in an emotionally motivating way, the patterns, context and direction of my religious perspective.

What sources might convey that for me ?

If I think of the UU principles as goals to be achieved, what **sources** help me learn how to achieve them, to work towards them?

What are my central **beliefs** in this context, and where do they come from?

And not only, what are my beliefs, but **what provides the emotional associations that breathe life into these ideas, that can fuel my motivation to move in those directions,**

to pick myself up when things do not go well and try again, to persist in the face of difficulty, to show courage in the face of danger or opposition, or to recognize a need to change direction - to not be ashamed to bow, to bend, to turn - to get to the land of love and delight.

This is where the two books I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, came in. This one about Charles Darwin (show), and this one about Rachel Carson (show).

Finding, as in finding patterns, context and direction, can have a meaning of ‘coming upon after a search or study.’ It can also mean to ‘come upon by accident.’ As we experience in our lives, much of *finding* involves some combination of the two. That is likely the case with these books I *happened* to read earlier this summer.

The patterns of the two lives described in these books and their link to my quest for sources of my beliefs and the emotional associations that fuel them, only became apparent to me later. But there *are* some patterns, some context, and some direction.

I appreciate the opportunity this morning to tell you about what has emerged in my quest these past few months. Preparing the service has given me some additional direction, and I know that hearing other’s perspectives later, will add to my understanding and ability to integrate the findings in my life.

Darwin and Carson both had some Unitarian connections. In Darwin’s case, both his mother’s and father’s families were Unitarian, and Darwin and his siblings started their lives attending Unitarian chapel. However, Darwin’s mother, Susannah Wedgwood, of the UK pottery family, died when Darwin was only eight years old, and his father, subsequently enrolled him in Church of England schools. Carson began life as a Presbyterian, and only came to Unitarianism later in her life. UU minister, Duncan Howlett, comforted her during her terminal illness with breast cancer, assisted her in setting up a foundation to carry on her work, and followed through with her wishes for a simple Unitarian memorial service.

Both Darwin and Carson had an early fascination with nature. They spent a lot of time when they were children observing creatures large and small, and their environments. As they grew older, both looked for patterns in what they saw and developed a practice of writing. They reflected on the relationships among the different forms of life they observed and tried to put these into context. Both developed creative ways of perceiving and describing what they studied, working diligently to express their ideas in scientifically accurate ways that would appeal to the general public, and withstand the arguments of their critics.

A Nobel laureate physicist, Jean Perrin, stated that the key to any scientific advance is to be able ‘to explain the complex visible by some simple invisible.’

One of the insights Darwin provided, was to explain the parade of specifics in the fossil record and the diversity of living organisms as products of natural selection over eons of time. Darwin and Carson both used their intimate knowledge of a great array of creatures to

help reshape our thoughts about the *interdependence* of all creatures, and our human place in this vast creation.

And Darwin and Carson both emphasized *feelings* as well as facts, in our relationship to the rest of the natural world. Their work, and their *lives*, demonstrate how a curious, patient and intimate relationship with the rest of the natural world can offer us, not just a transformative understanding of our world and our place in it, but an understanding of ways to *live* our lives in harmony with this interdependent world. Theirs were not perfect lives, not single models serving all purposes, but their lives do, in my view, provide inspiring examples. And I'd like to provide just a glimpse into their stories.

Darwin came to his life's work through an interesting path. He started medical school to become a doctor like his father, but was turned off by surgery. His father became concerned about his lack of progress and had him enroll in theology at Cambridge to become a clergyman, a profession thought suitable for someone from his background. While Darwin did well academically, he was more interested in his biology courses, than the theology ones. After graduation, when he was 22 years old, rather than settling into a clergy posting, he looked around for an opportunity to travel. The opportunity came when he was recommended for a position as a naturalist and companion to the 26 year old captain of the HMS Beagle. The ship the Beagle was headed to South America on a mission to update coastal maps. Darwin's father was not keen on this, but one of the Wedgwood uncles provided arguments in favor and Darwin's father was persuaded to underwrite his son's expenses for the trip. Others have since commented, in jest, that Darwin would not likely have received a research grant for this scientific endeavour.

What was intended as a two year voyage, took five years and extended around the world. Darwin suffered from seasickness during the journey, but two thirds of his time was spent on shore, and he had many opportunities at sea and on shore to study marine life, insects, birds, and animals. He was a careful and patient observer and kept extensive notes. After returning from this voyage, Darwin spent the rest of his life in England. He married, raised a family, studied nature, fossils, and geology, and wrote. He had periodic bouts of illness throughout his life. These may have been caused by a tropical disease picked up during the voyage, or been of psychological origin. His gardener apparently thought he would be better off if he spent less time thinking and more time doing. He was also greatly affected by the death of his eldest daughter when she was ten.

The most famous of his books is *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859. He had developed his theory about natural selection by 1838, but knew it would be seen as heresy, and spent many years accumulating evidence and support from others to ground his findings. Comparison of versions from 1842 and 1844, with the published 1859 version also shows that over that time his writing style became simpler, more elegant, and better integrated an emotional element.

At the end of *The Origin of Species*, he conveys his sense of the dignity of a vision of the diversity of all living creatures as the products of natural selection over a very long time span, with the words:

“When I view all beings, not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed to the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled.”

In the next and final paragraph of the book, Darwin invites readers down to the riverbank and into his process,

“It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.”

And quoting from the final words of that paragraph:

“whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning *endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful* have been, and are being, evolved.”

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Rachel Carson was born in 1907, about a hundred years after Darwin. She grew up in rural Pennsylvania, and although her family was poor, she was able to attend university by working to pay her way. After graduation she took a job as a scientific writer for the Bureau of Fisheries and became the breadwinner for others in her family.

She also had a creative side to her writing and, in 1941, her first book for general readers was published. The stories in *Under the Sea Wind*, reflected what scientists knew about the life cycles and migrations of sea creatures. Without resorting to scientific labels or technical jargon, Carson exposed her readers to elements of what would become known as the new ecology. The book was a departure from traditional writing about the seas because Carson told her stories from the perspective of the creatures themselves.

Over the years, her ecological vision of the relationship of humans and the rest of nature deepened. Speaking to journalists in 1954, she expressed her belief that ‘the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.’

As she became aware of the harm from how humans were using DDT and other pesticides and chemicals, she undertook an advocacy role in helping the public understand the problems and what needed to change. Her final book, *The Silent Spring*, published in 1962, started with a parable of an American town, where the arrival of spring was silent. No birds sang. People had overused chemicals and killed birds and other living things we take for granted. In the book, she called into question the paradigm of scientific progress that defined postwar American culture.

She knew while writing the book that her facts needed to be accurate, and she asked respected scientists for help in providing information and support. She struggled to complete the book, being a slow writer at the best of times and dealing with breast cancer at

the time. She also knew that with the book, she would have to pay a personal price, as some of her friends found the implications of this work unpalatable.

Not surprisingly, her views were countered and her credibility challenged. A 1963 *CBS Reports* broadcast on the topic, presented various views, but gave her the concluding words. She said:

“We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven’t become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. I think we’re challenged as mankind has never been challenged before, to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves.”

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Another example of someone who was a careful observer of nature, and helped change our understanding of the natural world and our place in it is Jane Goodall. She, like Darwin and Carson, was interested in nature from an early age. I have told the story here before of a time when Jane’s mother became panicked that her young daughter was lost, and it turned out Jane had been sitting quietly for hours inside the hen house behind her home to find out how hens laid eggs.

Jane also had an adventurous spirit and after saving money from a waitressing job, headed off to Africa at the age of 23 to visit a friend. While there, she managed to get herself a job as secretary to Louis Leakey. Although she did not have any university training, Leakey was impressed by her knowledge of nature, observational skills and patience. He subsequently assigned her to observe chimpanzees in a natural habitat the Gombe Park. She spent hours quietly observing the patterns of interaction among the chimps, and taking notes. Her descriptions provided a fascinating look at the interactions among chimp families, as well as their other social interactions, and things like their tool-use and tool-making. She deviated from accepted scientific practice at the time, by giving the individual chimps names, rather than the numbers thought necessary by others to make the research ‘scientific and objective.’ She was distressed when she later witnessed violence among the chimps, although she did not shy away from reporting these observations.

Not only has Jane Goodall helped us understand how much we are like chimps and they like us, she has also worked tirelessly for decades helping children and adults around the world understand our human responsibility to protect chimps and their environment, and to change our practices with respect to research animals.

She has helped us expand our consciousness about our kinship with other species and our responsibilities as humans, because, like Darwin and Carson, these were not dispassionate issues for her – she understands and conveys their **emotional significance** in ways we can relate to. For example, she often starts her public talks with the calls chimps use to greet each other.

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I’d like to mention a few other people who were careful observers, and whose insightful description of patterns can help us build, not just an intellectual, but an emotional foundation for achieving some of the UU Principles we affirm.

Katherine Briggs, and her daughter, Isabel Myers, were the originators of a widely used approach to understanding personality and temperament. The materials they developed have been translated into 16 languages and are used by more than 2 million people a year.

Both Katherine and Isabel were home-schooled until college, and both grew up with the idea that you could learn and do things, even if you had not formally studied them. They were astute observers of human nature, and thought if people had a better understanding of their own personality and that of others, they could use their own gifts more effectively, learn to work with their personal limitations, and cooperate and interact more successfully in a wide variety of settings. They hoped, too, that better understanding of diversity and differences among people could prevent recurrence of the destruction and waste of the two World Wars.

Both worked diligently over decades developing a human temperament indicator; compiling information, identifying patterns, checking them out through additional data collection and analysis, revising as necessary, enlisting others in the iterative effort, and putting the findings into context so they could be helpful to people in different spheres.

I was first exposed to the Myers-Briggs theory and indicator about 25 years ago, when Rev Glenn Turner gave a weekend workshop on it to our Fellowship. It was a real ‘aha’ experience for me.

The essence of the theory underlying the Myers-Briggs type indicator is that much seemingly random variation in the behaviour of individuals is actually quite orderly and consistent, being due to basic differences in the ways individuals prefer to use their perception and judgment. Perception involves all the ways of becoming aware of things, people, happenings, or ideas. Judgment involves all the ways of coming to conclusions about what has been perceived. If people differ systematically in what they perceive and in how they reach conclusions, then it is only reasonable for them to differ correspondingly in their interests, reactions, values, motivations and skills.

The Myers-Briggs indicator involves individuals identifying their basic preferences in each of four areas:

- First: whether they prefer to focus on the outer world or their inner world, and in effect whether they draw their energy from outside stimuli or inward processing;
- second: whether they prefer to focus on the basic information they take in or prefer to interpret and add meaning,
- third: when making decisions, whether they prefer to first look at logic and consistency or at the people and special circumstances, and
- fourth, in dealing with the outside world, whether they prefer to get things decided or to stay open to new information and options.

The Myers-Briggs instrument has people answer questions which indicate their preferences in these four domains. The interactions among the four sets of preferences lead to 16 personality types.

Studies have indicated, for example, that more than 90% of UUs in the samples had a preference for perception styles involving interpretation and adding meaning, rather than

focusing on the basic information, compared with only 25% of the general North American population with that preference. Searching patterns and context seems to be common among us.

A considerably higher proportion of UUs than is found in a typical North American population tend in their perception style to focus on the inner world.

UUs are more evenly split when it comes to the other two sets - a preference for logic and consistency or people and special circumstances, or for closure compared with staying open. These findings can provide one approach to helping us understand dynamics in congregations, and in UUism as a whole.

The Myers-Briggs work emphasizes that none of the preferences or personality types are better than others, all have advantages and limitations; and the approach recognizes that people *have and can further develop* skills in areas other than their preferred way of perceiving and coming to conclusions.

I think this work has helped a lot of people and organizations understand and appreciate the worth of people of all temperaments, accept one another, and act toward one another with more compassion and justice. It also encourages me that we are capable as UUs of strengthening our ability to communicate our messages, while remaining true to our liberal religious center.

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Virginia Satir was a pioneer in family therapy and change processes. She was born in 1916, the eldest of five children in a rural Wisconsin family. There were difficulties in the family, including her father's alcoholism, and she apparently decided when she was five that she wanted to become a children's detective on parents. She later explained "I didn't quite know what I would look for, but I realized a lot went on in families that didn't meet the eye."

Virginia initially trained to become a teacher, and taught in the public school system for several years. During her early years, she married and divorced twice. She returned to university for a masters degree in social work; and then went on to become an early pioneer in family therapy. Her own, sometimes difficult, family experiences, as well as her detective skills underlay her ability to perceive and describe patterns of emotional interaction in families in new ways, and to develop interventions to help people make positive changes. She emphasized the importance of nurturing, self-esteem and clear communication, not just for children but people of all ages. Later in her life, she became an advocate for world peace, believing that it started with peace within, and extended to peace with others.

I attended one of her workshops in 1988. She had just come back from 3 weeks of leading training workshops in Russia – during the Cold War. I had read her books but found participating in sessions she led was in another league – the experiential opportunity for learning was phenomenal. I found out shortly afterwards just how lucky I was to have attended that workshop in June, as Virginia was diagnosed within a month with pancreatic cancer, and died that September. She was, for me, a very inspiring person, and I believe she

had a significant positive influence in our understanding of how emotional patterns of interaction develop and can change.

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 Mary Ainsworth studied psychology at the University of Toronto and shared in the spirit that permeated the department – a belief that the science of psychology was the touchstone for great improvements in the quality of life. Near the end of her life, she wrote that “Although this belief now seems naïve, we all firmly held it then, even in the midst of the Great Depression – and it has never entirely deserted me.” She moved to England, Uganda and the United States, following her husband’s career path, and found research opportunities in each location.

She devised simple, yet innovative, ways of observing and characterizing the interactions of infants and toddlers with their caregivers, and determined how different patterns of interaction influenced the child’s levels of trust, confidence and self-esteem, and how these children subsequently tended to relate to others. Ainsworth helped us understand what children require from caregivers to establish a sound foundation for lifelong patterns of healthy emotional development.

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 I believe each of the individuals I’ve spoken about today provide useful lessons of people who lived their personal life as a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Their work has helped shift the context – so we can see humans as part of a magnificent interdependent web.

We also have a better understanding of the emotional responses we develop as a result of our long evolutionary history, our temperament, our early experiences with caregivers, and our subsequent interactions with others.

It is clearer how these emotional responses, not just our thoughts and beliefs, must be actively involved, constructively and realistically, if we are to reach a goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

I am not suggesting that their work forms the foundation of our society now, but I am suggesting that it does have the potential to do so.

Darwin, Carson, Goodall,
 Briggs, Myers, Satir, Ainsworth

In addition to their family ties, all of them cared deeply about their work, cared deeply about the interdependent web, and worked with great commitment over decades to help others understand and care about our place as humans in making this world better for all.

These lives and their direction, as well as the patterns and context I’ve described, are but a sampling – a very small sampling from the last 200 years in the Western world.

I, like many other Westerners, am coming to better understand the value of seeking out perspectives from other parts of the world. For example, Buddhist approaches to achieving equanimity, balance and responding to suffering and change. Although mindful, as the

Dalai Lama has stated, the world does not need more Buddhists, it needs more people with compassion.

The world also likely needs more of us, UUs and others, to simplify our lives, to use our gift of freedom to pursue learning as a spiritual practice, to let go of what we don't need from the past, and to turn, turn til we come down right – to be in the valley of love and delight.
