

*“Whichever the route love’s caravan shall take,
That shall be the path of my faith.”¹*

I chose this reading by Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi because I find that final line so courageous. It reminds me of the courage of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors, whose intellectual and spiritual curiosity led our denomination to become a creedless one. And it expresses the courage we 21st century UUs are called to now. It is a tumultuous century, one where love can and will guide us, if we are brave enough to follow.

As we prepare to return to our sanctuary this fall, I’ve been thinking about that sacred space, about what it means to us and how much of it we’ve brought with us into our virtual church, and who we are.

And if you’ve ever seen the inside of the sanctuary in person, then you know that the centerpiece of it is a long mural, almost as wide as the room, right behind the pulpit, with interfaith symbols from end to end. **[Slide 1]** Here it is.

It’s made of wood tiles. Anybody know how many there are? You wanna guess? Let’s see some guesses in the chat box. I want to say the mural is sixty feet long and ten feet tall, but I’m not sure ... any mathematicians among us this morning? Each square is about 4 by 4 inches, but they aren’t all the same size or shape. It’s a big number, I’ll tell you that. While you’re sharing your guesses, here are some interesting facts: each one was hand cut by the artist, Alexander Girard, and his son Marshall. They traveled around New Mexico collecting wood from old barns and other structures, and then cut it into smaller pieces. They did not add any paint. Each piece is the same color it was when they found it.

Ok, let’s see if anyone guessed right...

The mural has approximately 5000 tiles.

Many people have told me that when they came to the church for the first time, they were deeply moved by the presence of the mural.

It’s an unusual work of art for a church. Not every congregation would place an interfaith mural at the center of its sanctuary. How did we come to do so?

People are often surprised to learn that the Puritans are direct ancestors of this church. Yes, those puritans, like the ones from the classic book *The Scarlet Letter*. Well, that book is about the Puritans of the 1600s, but it was written in the 1800s by their descendent Nathaniel Hawthorne.

¹ *Find complete poem at end. A slide show, available in PDF format, accompanies this sermon, and can be found in the sermon archives at uuabq.org

In Hawthorne's time, Puritanism had led to congregationalism—which is when congregations are self-governing instead of being ruled over by bishops or other officials. And within that culture of self-governance, there were a handful of free thinking ministers—people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing— whose embrace of logic and reason led them to question whether the Bible was literally true. They found that the Bible made more sense when approached as a historical text, rather than a divinely written one. That paved the way for the transcendentalist movement, which looked to nature and other world religions for inspiration, and pretty soon there was no need for a creed anymore. So, in short, it was one of those “if you give a mouse a cookie” situations: if you let congregations govern themselves, they just might start thinking differently, and then decide that you don't need to think alike to love alike, as we say.

In the 1900's, the denomination embraced its theological diversity to the point of no longer identifying as a Christian church, even though we came to that point by way of Christianity. We did not give up the name “Christian” because we were tossing Christianity out. Rather, Unitarian Universalists took their best understanding of the Christianity they had inherited, a spirit of love, truth-seeking, and service, and allowed it to grow into something much larger in spirit.

And this church? This congregation was formed in 1949. In the 1960's, they acquired the land at the corner of Carlisle and Comanche. Which was so far out in the desert at that time that some people got mad about it and quit the church. In hindsight that seems silly to us now, but this is what I mean when I say feelings are strong in times of transition.

The architect Harvey Hoshour who designed our old sanctuary back then was friends with Alexander Girard, and recruited him to create some kind of art for the room. The congregation showed Girard a couple of smaller pieces of art they had. Both had interfaith symbols. So he used those as inspiration.

I want to walk you through the symbols on the mural. We have some photos to share. [slide 2] Here's the **whole mural** again. There are twenty symbols on it. So, we're going to have to hop along, but this will give you a sense of their meaning and how they come together.

[slide 3] The first one would be easy to miss. It isn't as flashy as the others. It represents the two stone tablets that Moses brings down from the mountain in the Book of Exodus, with the ten commandments engraved on them. This story is in both the Jewish Torah and in Christian bibles.

[slide 4] **The six-pointed star**, is most closely associated with Judaism, where it's called the star of David. This symbol is also found in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. In Hinduism, the two interlocking triangles that form the star represent the merging of spiritual elements like male and female, or God and humanity.

[slide 5] Next, **the Fish**. According to tradition, in the first few centuries after Jesus died, while Christians were being persecuted by the Roman empire, the fish was used to point Christians toward secret meeting places. It's a fish, and it's also an arrow.

[slide 6] This is an **equilateral cross**. In Christianity, it is a Greek cross. But the symbol is much older than Christianity. In pre-Christian times, it seems to have represented the four seasons, the four elements, the four directions, that kind of thing.

[slide 7] Here is a less common symbol. **Constantine's Labarum** was a symbol of Christianity, but a military one. It was used like a flag by the Roman emperor Constantine. A minute ago we saw the secret fish symbol Christians used to avoid persecution by Romans. Well, Constantine flipped the script. By adopting Christianity, he transformed it from the subversive gospel of the poor that Jesus preached to a religion associated with power. The X shape and P shape are the Greek letters Chi and Ro, the first two letters in Χριστός, or Christ. Now, if this military-empire symbol is prompting you to have second thoughts about our mural, hang in there. Remember, it's part of a bigger picture.

[slide 8] The **Letters IHS**. These are more Greek letters. They are a contraction of the name ΙΗΣΟΥΣ [“ee-soos”], or Jesus.

[slide 9] Here's the familiar **Roman Cross**, which represents the crucifixion of Jesus.

[slide 10] And, less familiar in this part of the world, a triple bar cross. This is an **Orthodox Cross**. Our website describes it as a Greek cross, but it's actually more common in Russian orthodox churches. One bar is a footrest—that's the slanted bottom part—and the other is the sign that Pontius Pilate had inscribed above Jesus's head.

[slide 11] And last among the specifically Christian symbols, the **delta and trefoil** was common in the late middle ages. The delta is the triangle. The trefoil is the shape with three overlapping rings. Three points, three rings, three personages of the Christian god: father, son, and holy spirit. Together, these Christian symbols reveal that diversity and change already existed in Christian history, long before the Puritans gave the mouse a cookie.

[slide 12] Now we have the first of two vessels containing fire. This vase of fire is from **Zoroastrianism**. In Zoroastrian temples, called fire temples, the fire represents the light of God and the illumined mind. Unlike our UU chalices, which are lit and extinguished in each service, the flame in a fire temple burns continuously. [slide 13] This **sun** is also said to be associated with Zoroastrianism. I couldn't find any sources online linking this particular symbol with the faith- there may have been some artistic license taken here.

[slide 14] This **star** is for transcendence and also for Astro Worship, those traditions that associate stars and other celestial bodies with deities. Sun and moon gods and goddesses are included here. This one is high up in the center of the mural. Every once in a while, someone sends a picture they took of me preaching with this like a crown around my head, due to its location, making me look like a celestial being. I promise you, though, I'm just a regular ol' person who talks to puppets.

[slide 15] When Alexander Girard included **the star and crescent**, it had come to be associated with Islam. However, that's because it was a symbol of the Ottoman Empire, not because of anything inherent to the Islamic tradition. In the late 1900s, some Muslims pushed back against the use of it as an Islamic symbol, saying it represented states or nationalism, not the faith. In this way, it is somewhat similar to Constantine's Labarum, which was on his military flag. In 2012 when we moved the mural from the old sanctuary building to the new one, we wondered whether it would be more respectful of our Muslim neighbors for us to replace this symbol with something else. In the end, we decided to keep the mural intact. Before the Ottoman empire, the star and crescent were symbols of astral worship. So today, they represent all of that history, and

when we tell this story, they also become a symbol of the importance of listening, letting go of old ideas, and embracing new learning.

[slide 16] The **Yin and Yang** is from ancient Chinese philosophy. It's associated with Taoism and Confucianism. It conveys how forces or dynamics that seem like opposites may actually be complementary, interconnected. It also portrays a sense of interdependence. Here it is surrounded by hexagrams from the I Ching, an ancient Chinese divination text.

[slide 17] When I first encountered this symbol, I thought it was another kind of cross. But it isn't. It's the **ankh**, an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph that means 'life.' It's also called the Key of Life. It does kind of look like a key, doesn't it?

[slide 18] **The Lotus Blossom** found in Hinduism and Buddhism represents purity, enlightenment, rebirth. It is often noted that a lotus flower begins in mud, before rising to bloom in the light. The ancient Egyptians also found lotuses to be powerful symbols.

[slide 19] This one has been turned into a lot of t-shirts and bumper stickers... it's the **Om** (or Aum, A-U-M). It is Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh. It is another multivalent one, it has many meanings. One is that when pronounced as three syllables (*aa-uu-mmm*) it refers to creation, manifestation, and destruction... in other words, the whole universe.

[slide 20] There are just a few more now. The **Eight Spokes Wheel** is for the eight-fold path in Buddhism. There are many variations on the wheel, in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism too.

[slide 21] **The torii** is from Shintoism, where it represents the gateway to a Shinto shrine, and the threshold between mundane and sacred.

[slide 22] Very large, and yet slightly off center to keep us from getting too full of ourselves, this is the symbol of **Unitarianism Universalism**. [slide 23] Two interlocking circles representing the merging of two traditions, one with a chalice, for the light of truth, the warmth of community, and—like any good symbol—other meanings, too. And one with a cross, representing our religious heritage. You'll notice that the cross, too, is off center. This is said to leave room for the wisdom of science, nature, and other traditions.

[slide 24] And finally, in the center of our mural, a **heart**, which is not associated with any particular religion. When the congregation asked Girard about it, he said it was a very important symbol because it represents our relationships with each other and the spirit of love that works within and beyond all religions.

[slide 25]

The mural really is remarkable. I've only barely touched on the meaning of these symbols. And we bring our own interpretations to the mural, too. To you, it may mean more or other things. That's part of its power, too. Art is like that.

Now, here's something that can be challenging about having an "interfaith faith." Because of all of our theological diversity, occasionally someone assumes that in a Unitarian Universalist church you can believe whatever you want. And sometimes, when we criticize certain beliefs, UUs are accused of being hypocrites. Aren't all beliefs equal? It sounds like a tough question.

But, actually, no. To say all beliefs are equal is kind of like saying it doesn't matter what we believe. But it does. It matters quite a lot what we believe. Think about it. Whether someone is considered human or not is shaped by what we believe. Who can marry, who is treated as a person and who is merely a commodity, whose rights will be defended and which ones—all are shaped by what we believe. Whose child is seen as precious, and whose will be allowed languish in extreme poverty... that is shaped by beliefs. And as we are acutely aware right now, who protects themselves and others during a pandemic, and who refuses to do so, also depends on their beliefs.

The claim that if you embrace diversity, you have to support harmful or patently false beliefs is similar to the claim that you aren't practicing tolerance if you denounce intolerance. It doesn't really make logical sense. To follow it is to allow harmful behavior to flourish. That's not what we're about.

What we *are* about is that spirit of love. That heart in the center of our sanctuary. That heart that is the center around which we gather, whether it is in our far-flung campus way out there on the corner of Carlisle and Comanche, or right here up close on Zoom. So UUs disagree with some things. And sometimes we disagree with each other. But the UU way to do so is from a spirit of love.

That heart is why we have the courage to say: *My religion is love...Whichever the route love's caravan shall take, that shall be the path of my faith.* May it be so. And may you have love, and courage, and peace in your heart.

Reading

“There Was A Time”
by the 12th century poet, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi

There was a time I would reject those
who were not of my faith.
But now, my heart has grown capable
of taking on all forms.
It is a pasture for gazelles,
An abbey for monks.
A table for the Torah,
Kaaba for the pilgrim.
My religion is love.
Whichever the route love's caravan shall take,
That shall be the path of my faith.