

## CREATIVE INTERCHANGE–October 17, 2010

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Charlie Brown says his favorite class is theology class because it's the only one where nobody knows the answers. I suppose that's maybe the good news about this talk, though maybe it's a bit churchier than you were expecting with a parishioner in the pulpit. I'll try to offer you something that will keep your attention, and hopefully one or two thoughts you can leave with this morning.

At the Meeting House we bring together many kinds of religious background, though not everyone brings with him or her in particular an exposure to UU tradition acquired over the past half-century. We have many who have been exposed to this strongly-humanist UU tradition, and many who have not, and I feel we have much to gain in sharing some of that tradition, not only by talking with each other, but especially in conversing with our children and grandchildren.

In our responsive reading this morning we read: "Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys." (REPEAT)

We UU's are dedicated to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and in its pursuit we gather each Sunday morning. We seek not just truth and meaning, though, but perhaps something beyond that, something that might be called transformation or a transcendent experience. In that connection, compelling for me beyond any of the particular words spoken are the processes at work to facilitate that search. So today I wish to speak about a kind of process theology, called creative interchange. This involves how we talk with each other, and how on our spiritual journeys together we can improve our experience together, and perhaps improve the Meeting House as well.

Before we introduce this topic, let us talk first about people. Our friend and former UUA President John Buehrens in the UU Pocket Guide says, and I quote:"To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves". End of quote.

As members of a UU connecting community, let us say that we seek three things: First, we desire to find meaning in our lives and to make sense out of our experiences. Second, we need to connect on deep levels both with our community and with the ground of all being. Third, we seek growth and change, or in another word, transformation. Let me repeat (First . . . ).

I had the good fortune to be in the Unitarian Church in Summit, NJ some thirty-five years ago when Deane Starr was minister. Deane was nationally known in UU circles, as he had been a candidate for UUA president, and some of you may have known him in other churches as well. Deane was big on Henry Nelson Wieman, and his process theology concept called creative interchange.

Wieman lived from 1884 to 1975, and was a Presbyterian who spent the final decades of his life as a UU. On the faculty at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Wieman was a philosopher of religion, an empirical theologian, and a significant contributor to liberal religious thinking in this past century.

Reverend Roberta Finkelstein suggests that “Wieman’s work gives us a way to elevate human relationships toward a level of ultimate worth and meaning.” She points to an underlying assumption in this work that people encounter the divine in those human relationships that are intentional and nurturing. As people enter into such relationships, something happens! That something, which here we call creative interchange, is the energy and synergy that are created when people get together, learn from each other, stimulate and challenge each other, and even spark off each other. People are transformed by this experience.

We seek here in this UU congregation to become more effective in bringing about just and caring communities, where transformation and learning can prosper. Thinking more broadly, if our congregations can be places where creative interchange happens consistently among the local membership, then could we extend that and become a world-changing religious movement?

So just what is this “creative interchange”?

Wieman proposes a four-step process through which creative interchange happens. In Step One we reflect on our own life experiences, not in isolation but with others. Then we communicate with these others some of what we have concluded from these reflections. When we talk to each other about our lives -- what has happened, what has been important, what has been felt most deeply – that is when we learn to attach meaning to experience. Ideally this first step could happen in Sunday services, at coffee hour, at small group ministry meetings, or one-on-one with a friend or family member.

In Step Two, after hearing and truly listening to these exchanges of meaning, each listening person is led to enrich his or her own thoughts and feelings with the meanings they have heard expressed. This step, unlike the first, is more likely to happen in solitude, such as maybe in the car on the way home from church, or from a meeting of the group.

In Step Three we integrate what we took home into our own way of thinking, responding, and living, and as a result our world expands. In this integration the range of experiences that we understand and analyze becomes larger. Wieman describes it as “. . . a range and variety of events, a richness of quality, and a reach of ideal possibility which were not there prior to this transformation . . . “ We then are able to share our expanded views with the originating individual.

Creative interchange within the group or between individuals has allowed each person to become more than any one could have been while struggling alone. This leads to Step Four, in which Wieman sees this expansion of our individual worlds leading to a similar transformation in our relations with our broader communities, which can point the way towards enhanced justice, care of others, and deepening of relational bonds.

Well, you might say, we know we should be good listeners, but what is Wieman saying beyond that? Let’s review. First, you say something, while I listen. Second, I pause to reflect on what you have said. Third, I take what I have heard you say and integrate that into my own way of thinking, and respond to you with a new thought. By this my world has expanded, and perhaps as I feed back to you, yours will as well. Thus we create something together that neither of us had before.

This third step is what I feel really distinguishes the technique of creative interchange from the effect of merely listening. We take what we have heard and reflect on it on our own, integrating that considered thought into our own way of thinking and feeling.

This is a way to make our human relationships into something that is worthy of our ultimate commitment. This can begin to affirm our membership in a UU congregation as an experience that has deep and enduring value. For, you see, this expanded range of our experience, though coming out of our own reflection on what we have heard, is not done in isolation but requires the presence and encouragement of other people, as in our congregation.

Creative interchange is not limited to the acquisition of information. One also gets, and gives, the following: appreciations, sentiments, hopes, fears, memories, regrets, aspirations, joys, sorrows, hates, loves, pieties, and other features of that vast complexity which makes up the total experience of every human being.

As the Reverend Barbara Carlson has observed, “This creative interchange is powerful stuff. And when we experience it we are changed. When you share with me your original experience and I really listen, laying aside judgments, comparisons, or other internal ways of devaluing or objectifying, and when I really listen and reflect back, and then share with you my own valid experience and you give me the gift of your deep listening, we both emerge changed. Horizons of understanding are expanded. New possibilities emerge.”

The magic we can know through creative interchange, which some of us might accept as a spiritual enhancement, is not supernatural. It is simply the whole, greater than all the parts, which happens when we truly come together, agree on the kind of community we want to create, and share both the work and the pleasure of that act of creation. Such acts of creation are truly religious experiences, in one dimension spiritual, but in another dimension are clearly derived quite naturally. As acts of creation I find them likened to what scientists and engineers experience in working a difficult problem where suddenly there is a breakthrough, a moment of “eureka”.

Creative interchange can be seen in management theory of the past several decades, which certainly speaks to the idea of effective communication and participation by those affected by decisions, of managing at all levels. Early on, social psychologists working with management trainers saw an opportunity to improve the industrial landscape through exploring personal interactions and effective decision-making in groups, and did this study of group dynamics in a laboratory mode. The University of Texas was a center of this activity, and so-called T-Groups and D-Groups were much in vogue. I was in a D-Group back then, to which was assigned an assortment of various management and technical people on the staff of the oil refinery where I worked.

We met without a trainer, as a development group of eight, and without any indicated agenda, we finally figured out some days later that we were there to learn on our own how to become an effective decision-making group. We learned to listen, to share feelings as well as views, to say how another’s behavior was affecting us, to gate-keep, and indeed learn to create a group product greater than any of us could have done alone. It was creative interchange, though it would be 15 years before I heard its name.

What I remember most about this experience was that after the initial period of our hard work to develop as an interactive, participatory group, they gave us a problem to work in competition with other groups. We had no sooner retired to our group meeting room to consider the contest than a couple of the Type A’s came forth with “OK, let’s cut the BS and get on with it”. Creative implosion, we might call it. Creative interchange requires caring and receptive people.

As we do the work of the Meeting House, let us go forward in the sense and actuality of creative interchange, opening ourselves to discussion and dialogue, and even dissent, in

finding our way together to greater truths and values for our entire congregation. Let's have congregational sharing after the sermon on Sunday mornings and creative interchange in the coffee room, and in our small ministry groups.

Let's bring creative interchange into our working relationships in doing the work of the congregation. Let's have participative management of the Meeting House, and the opportunity for involvement of everyone in discussions and decisions that affect them. The budget process, for example, is an ideal opportunity for true involvement: to let us each of us articulate our own experiences and feelings in creative interchange with others seeking the same goal of the overall good of the Meeting House, as we try to balance priorities of spending in each coming year.

Remember in the early days of the Meeting House we all gathered together at the church up the street to come up with a Vision Statement? Isn't it time to try a little Creative Interchange to revisit that experience, and thus to renew our Vision? And remember when we used to gather in Congregational Forums, to discuss those problems and opportunities most important to the congregation?

Let's not rush our annual meeting, and instead make it a time for actual involvement of the congregation, where we can get a chance to really hear from our leaders, reflect on what they say, feedback what we find significant, and offer up new ideas that may serve to bring us into a closer involvement and a stronger desire to support the Meeting House with our time and treasure.

Let us use creative interchange also to expand our outreach, as we direct our caring and resources more to support of the community and of the UUA and our District in their efforts to strengthen the contribution of our movement to the world beyond. Above all, let our Meeting House be a beacon to all who search for truth and reason in their lives, who can discover a place where people speak out and truly hear each other.

Antoine de St. Exupery said, "There is no hope of joy except in human relations." Deane Starr, at the end of his Services, encouraged us through creative interchange to go forth with "confident living". Let us do the same.

Thank you for your kind attention. I'll be pleased to respond to any comments or questions.

NOTE:

Richard M. Eccles (Dick) gave the Creative Interchange sermon on October 17, 2010. He wrote it, and proposed to the Worship Committee and Edmund that he give it on a date when Edmund would be away and he presented an abbreviated version to MUUGS several years ago. Dick envisions this approach fitting as a useful tool for UUMH congregation.

Dick writes: *"Back in the 1970's we belonged to the Unitarian Church in Summit (NJ), and Deane Starr was the minister. Deane was well known in UUA and had run unsuccessfully as UUA president. He was a devotee of Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian process theologian who espoused creative interchange, and I was taken with the concept."*