Julie-Ann Silberman-Bunn: Expressions of Sin and Hope as Part of
Lifespan Faith Development: A Response by Dennis McCarty

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Julie-Ann
Silberman-Bunn's paper on Sin and Hope in Unitarian Universalist
Lifespan Faith Development. I found her paper enjoyable and
informative. I only wish it had been available when I was
studying for ministry, as what we now call a "least you need to
know" document. That says something about the Religious Education
expertise I don't have--but it also speaks to the real value of
Julie-Ann's work.

I am so not an expert. I was uncomfortable around children
even when I was one. Childhood was a complex time for me. More on
that later.

Julie-Ann's paper introduces "methodologies used. . . in the
past," [the "how" of our teaching,'] then "move[s] on to the
theological matters of sin and hope," that is, the "what" of
teaching. (SB,2) From this rises her thesis, "how we teach has
and continues to change to meet the learning styles and
technology available to us (SB, 2)."

Fair enough. But I also propose that discussion of "how" and
"what" benefits by examining what "sin" and "hope" even are--and
who defines them. I agree with Dorothee Solle in her book,
*Thinking about God*, that different theological approaches have
different definitions of sin, but that generally sin is a kind of
separation. (TG 65). I also suggest, such definitions say as much
about the people doing the defining--as about the thing defined.
Therefore, the nature of that separation is worth deeper study

I also agree with Julie Ann's Angus MacLean quote that "The
method is the message" (SB, 8). In our long journey from uprooted
Hebrew scribes in Babylon, to today's Unitarian Universalist
classroom, I want to look past the shifting "how" and "what" of
religious instruction--to an equally evolved "why."

I suggest that to understand religion, particularly as
practiced in the West, we need a basic understanding of group

dynamics: to wit, what sociologists call the "ingroup" and the "outgroup (SAM 2008)."

Group cohesion was essential to the survival of prehistoric *homo sapiens*. We have evolved to instinctively divide ourselves into "us;" the ingroup; and "them," the outgroup. We instinctively and randomly assign positive qualities to "our" group and negative qualities to outsiders--to the point that the ingroup actually reinforces its own cohesion precisely by assigning random, negative characteristics to outsiders. This process has been confirmed by too many studies to name. We see it all the time, from Facebook to Fox News to people rooting for sports teams.

As one example from religious history, much of the energy of Hebrew law is to set standards by which the Jewish "we" separate and declare themselves superior to the Canaanite, Egyptian, and Hellenistic "them" (ABD vol. 4 258-9) (OCB 422). Famously, the root of the Hebrew word for holy, *qedosh*, means to be separate or apart. (JW)

For example, "cultured despisers of religion" like to point out the ludicrousness of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Much of Genesis is a compendium of mass murder and genocide. Yet, in the context of group dynamics, it makes perfect sense. The commandment not to kill holds *within* the ingroup but not in relations with the outgroup. Yes, we should be charitable to the stranger dwelling respectfully in our midst (which itself is quite enlightened by the standards of that day,) but that does not apply to competing cultures: "them."

Some violence, even killing, is also acceptable within the ingroup *against those who challenge the ingroup's authority* as embodied by the ingroup's God and "His" divinely ordained practices by which the ingroup distinguishes itself.

Just last month, I ran across a fascinating article in *Science Magazine*, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The cover blurb on this article says it all: "Why It Pays To Believe in a Punitive God."

After years of comprehensive research, a cross-disciplinary team of scientists have developed a theory: why so many varied cultures over such a broad time span--all came to worship what the article calls, "moralizing gods." This moralizing god concept is diverse. It ranges from theistic, as in early Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, to polytheistic, as in any number of ancient civilizations, to a kind of disembodied theism, as expressed for example, by the Buddhist moralizing principle of Karma.

The article states: "By combining laboratory experiments, cross-cultural fieldwork, and analysis of the historical record, [the so-called "big gods" team hypothesizes that] belief in those judgmental deities, or "big gods," was key to the cooperation needed to build and sustain. . . large complex society (SM, 919)"

In other words, belief in "moralizing gods" was the foundation of the large, complex ingroups essential to forming modern society. The big gods team acknowledges that more research needs to be done. They don't mention the role of group dynamics. But historically, religion in the West has strongly involved distinguishing "our" group in competition with "their" groups through the *authority* of our "moralizing god." To this day, "moralizing God" is still the authority by which fundamentalist traditions maintain standards, practices, and membership.

This takes us back to Solle's assertion that sin is separation. Sociologically, sin is separation, temporary or permanent, from the ingroup. In fundamentalist expressions, this separation comes from violating the *authority* projected onto the ingroup's Scripture and God--playing out, for example, as Hebrew law, Medieval Catholic excommunication, modern Mormon excommunication, and fundamentalist damnation--to list a range.

Fast forward to an article in *Scientific American* by psychologists Sarah Estes and Jesse Graham. They describe progress toward what they call religious "universalism." They're not talking about us. They use "universalism" as a secular term: specifically a religious outlook which reduces "authoritarianism,

dominance, and ethnocentrism," and turns "all of humanity" into our ingroup (E&G 2012).

I love this amazing little article. To me, it's not just a wonderful way for an atheist to be a universalist--although it is that. It also captures the germ of liberal religion: to abandon instinctive hierarchies, authoritarianism, and group dynamics in favor of compassion and relationship with all of humanity, even all of creation, as our ingroup. So that sin is no longer separation from the ingroup due to violation of authority. It's a lapse in relationship--a misguided separation from the cosmic ingroup of the world and our fellow human beings.

Philosopher and educator, John Dewey, contends that (JD, pgs. 7-9), education itself is the process by which society maintains its existence--by inculcating in its children the cultural standards of the ingroup. Informed by Julie-Ann's paper, I now see our religious education process not just as an evolution of "how," but also as an evolution of "what:" *from* "sin" as violation of--hence separation from--the ingroup's authoritative, "moralizing God," *to* hope. That is, aspiration toward right relations and a world in which we are all members of the ingroup.

But group dynamics are instinctive and powerful. "The method is the message." Methods and messages can be in conflict. It is all too easy for practice--that is, method on the ground--to negate even the most positive message.

As an example of this, I return to my own childhood. I grew up in the Unity School, a moderate Christian expression. In 1962, when I was twelve years old, my family moved from Colorado to Salt Lake City, Utah, where there was no Unity Church. I found myself in middle school, unchurched, in a culture dominated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: the Mormons.

Then as now, the Mormon Church was theologically distinct and technologically very modern--but at the same time, culturally fundamentalist. They were--and still are--dominated by authority: of scripture and their white, male hierarchy. Their youth did-- and do--attend religious education and social events during the

week as well as on Sundays. I submit that in Utah, they were a classic sociological ingroup.

Their message was conditionally universalist: welcome, Christian charity, and Christian fellowship to all. Driven by group dynamics, though, their practice, particularly as expressed by the actions of their youth, was precisely the opposite. As a shy, chubby,  bookish non-Mormon adolescent in Salt Lake City, and because I didn't attend weekday morning youth functions, I stuck out as an obvious outsider. I found myself coolly tolerated at best and ruthlessly bullied at worst.

I won't go into details. Suffice to say, it was an introduction to the shadow side of religion and group dynamics that remains with me to this day. It had nothing to do with the Mormon Church's message, which was welcoming and positive. It had everything to do with on-the-ground practice: a method that was in conflict with--and opposite to--the supposedly positive message. "The method is the message." Or to put it differently, in my case, the official message was drowned out by practice contrary to the message.

Religiously liberal--sociologically universalist--though we are, we Unitarian Universalists are not immune from group dynamics. Our haphazardly evolved human brains still, spontaneously, form an ingroup--"us"--which still separates from and dismisses "them." I've witnessed expressions of this during talkbacks and at coffee hour. I see one role of the Minister as gently challenging "us versus them" thinking in our Congregations. Not to avoid a sin against my authority or the Association's authority because authority does need to be legitimately challenged. But to overcome the sin of violated relationships at the fringes of our social circles.

As minister of a small congregation, I also watched this tension play out in our religious education department. As a small fellowship, our group of children had grown up together, played together, and as we grew, became increasingly resistant to intrusion by new families and new children.

Our teachers would teach our values: all humanity as our ingroup. But it became a challenge to live out those values in practice. I would like to *think* we recognized the problem early and dealt with it effectively. But in truth I'll never know how many parents stopped bringing their kids--and themselves--after a few Sundays because of subconscious cues or veiled actions by us and our children: methods that were not in keeping with our proclaimed message.

Technology changes. Theories and techniques change. But psychology remains the same. It seems to me that matching our method--our practice--to our message, is a challenge that will always be with us, however society in general--or our theology in particular--may evolve. In fact, it seems possible to me that the tension may actually grow tighter. In my view, this could be an ongoing challenge for us as we move into an ever more complex future.

ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary (1992,) David Noel Freedman editor-in chief; Doubleday, NY, NY.

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JD: Dewey, John, (1944) *Democracy and Education*; Simon and Schuster, NY, NY

JW: Wellman, Jack, (2014) retrieved from http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2014/05/24/what-does-the-word-holy-mean-bible-definition-of-holy/ "What Does the Word Holy Mean?"

OCB Oxford Companion to the Bible (1993,) Bruce Metzger & Michael Coogan editors; Oxford University Press, NY, NY

SAM: McLeod, S.A., (2008) Social Identity Theory. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html

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