



October 2, 2022

Head, Heart, and Hands: How We Inform, Form, and Transform in Faith Community

Homily - Rev. Sara Lewis

Part One: The Head

How many of us are living like that head that had no body? How many of us can identify with the saying “being stuck in your head?” We Unitarian Universalists have a reputation, possibly well-earned, for being a “heady” bunch, with jokes like this one floating around out there:

Why are Unitarian Universalists bad at congregational hymn singing? Because they are reading ahead in the lyrics to make sure they agree with them before they sing them.

Or another joke at our expense: Why don't Unitarian Universalists get to Heaven? Because right before the gates to heaven there was a sign that said “Discussion About Heaven This Way” and they all chose that instead.

Of course, it's not always a bad thing, to be a Head. Our heads do some very important things, like Thinking, Learning, Communicating, Dreaming, Visioning, Remembering, Imagining, Experimenting, and Observing. In our lives as a faith community, we use our heads to create good policy and procedure, to plan and organize, to problem solve together, and sometimes to engage in healthy disagreement.

And in our spiritual journey as individuals, the Head is an important place of Big Questions and Important Ideas. Where did we come from? What is the purpose of life? What is the nature of the cosmos and our place in it? What do words really mean? I love exploring those ideas and those questions, and I love learning new things. Being up in my head is a happy experience for me. It's not a bad thing at all to have a Head.

In the Chalice Lighting words that we say in the children's classes here, we say “this is a church of open minds”. Here we seek to learn new things, welcome new experiences and ideas. And ideally, we are not just open the way the British Museum is “open” to housing the treasures of the world. We aren't just collecting

ideas and sticking them into our existing frameworks. Our openness to new ideas also means being open to changing our minds. When we know better, we do better, as Maya Angelou says.

Yes, it is not a bad thing at all, to have or to be a Head.

Part Two: Heart

In this community, we say we are sharing from our hearts. This language began last year as we moved away from the old language of “Joys and Sorrows” to instead acknowledge the huge complexity of feelings we may be holding and bringing into this space: confusion, fear, anger, disappointment, trepidation, and much, much more.

In her book *The Atlas of the Heart*, author Brene Brown shares that her organization has surveyed thousands of people asking them to name all the emotions they could name and recognize as they were having them. And the average response was three: just Mad, Sad, and Glad. Brown goes on to write:

When I think about this data, I think back to a quote from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that I came across in college: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” What does it mean if the vastness of human emotion and experience can only be expressed as mad, sad, or happy? What about shame, disappointment, wonder, awe, disgust, embarrassment, despair, contentment, boredom, anxiety, stress, love, overwhelm, surprise, and all the other emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human?

As humans, we are emotional beings. And, to be literal, we know these emotions aren't really housed in our hearts – our actual heart is just pumping away and moving vital blood around our bodies. But those emotions aren't just a matter of brains either – really we feel with our whole bodies, and the body experience, also called the somatic experience, can be an important place of knowing and wisdom for us if we let it.

These questions of feeling are powerful questions for a faith community. They can form the basis for our sense of calling, of mission, and of purpose. They often are at the core of answering Why we do what we do. I am not motivated to earth care

because of what I believe or think, as much as I am motivated by what I love and value. Faith itself is a quality of the heart much more than the head, something that is felt rather than understood.

As a faith community, we are fond of the apocryphal quote credited to Francis David: We need not think alike to love alike. We may have different ideas, but we try to align the callings of our hearts. In our children's chalice lighting we say “this is a church of loving hearts”. We make a practice of love, offering love to ourselves, each other, the wider world, and all of existence.

We are a people who have big hearts.

Part Three: Hands

What does it mean to join together in service to something greater than ourselves? Just what does this faith

community call and equip us to actually Do in the world?

In our children's chalice lighting we say "this is a church of helping hands". Not just hands, of course, but hands are such a lovely metaphor for the work we do in the world. Hands that weed or plant or repair or build. Hands that cook or clean. Hands that serve, that heal, that comfort. Hands that make or mend. Hands that reach out to grasp the hands of others, even across distance or difference.

As a faith community we can live into the old saying that many hands make light labor. By sharing, by coming together, we can end up accomplishing so much more than we would if we were working alone. Through the work we do, we can manifest our thoughts and feelings into something real in this world.

In the preface to the book *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, Thich Nhat Hanh's students share that he would say that meditation was to look deeply into the heart of reality, to see things that others can't see. And he also said, that once there is seeing, there must be acting, for otherwise what is the use of seeing?

Our hands are, literally and metaphorically, how we act on the world.

Here, we are a people of helping hands.

Part Four: Informing, Forming, Transforming

When we put all of this together, we have something called Praxis. Praxis, in common dictionary definition, simply means practice, as opposed to theory. But praxis, as an educational concept, is an iterative, reflective approach to taking action. It is a movement back and forth between theory and practice, where each inform and influence each other. Praxis is sometimes called "informed action", with the actions taken being informed by theory and learning, and then the action in turn informs and can cause change to the theory.

This is how humans have learned for as long as we have been human, I expect. We have had an idea, tried it out, then learned from the results or the experience and ended up with a new idea, which has led to a new action, etc. It is a cycle, an ever ongoing interdependent dance between our head, heart, and hands.

In our faith community, we have opportunities for all of this. We have learning and education programs, and other ways to engage our heads. And we have spiritual practice and community life and other ways to engage our hearts. And then we have many ways to serve and to act on our faith and other ways to engage our hands. No one way is better or more important than any other, although some of us may have our own preferences or typical ways of being. Some of us may be more dominant as Heads, or Hearts, or Hands. But all of us are also all three, and we can cycle through our own praxis with each informing the others.

We are whole people, a blend of it all. In more academic language, our being is a blend of cognition, affection, and volition – or will to take action. In very academic and Christian language, which some of you will need to mentally translate and some of you may just choose to let this wash over you, Thomas Groome writes in his text

Sharing Faith:

It seems appropriate to its history and adequate to how it is likely to be heard to propose “wisdom in Christian faith” as the learning outcome of Christian religious education. Like conation, wisdom can be used to refer to a holistic human activity that includes cognition, affection, and volition and engages and shapes people’s whole being in ways that are historically responsible and life-giving for self and

others. Wisdom pertains to one’s identity and agency, it is realized in one’s very being. Such wisdom arises from reflection on one’s own life, from dialogue and the example of other wise people, and from reflection on God’s wisdom as revealed through Scripture and tradition; it requires the context of dialogue and testing of a “wisdom community”. Pedagogically Christian wisdom presents the task of informing, forming, and transforming people in the character of Christian faith. And the truly wise are those who so live.

Let’s unpack that.

Groome calls it wisdom, which seems like a good enough choice of word to describe the goal, or “learning outcome”, of our own faith development programs and our UU faith community.

Then Thomas Groome says that “wisdom can be used to refer to a holistic human activity that includes cognition, affection, and volition and engages and shapes people’s whole being in ways that are historically responsible and life-giving for self and others.”

So in other words, wisdom is our thinking, our feeling, and our will to act, and it shapes our whole being, making us into people who are historically responsible and life-giving for ourselves and for others. We think, feel, and act and by doing so in wisdom we make the world a better place.

Groome goes on: Wisdom pertains to one’s identity and agency, it is realized in one’s very being.

So wisdom is not something we just think, or just do ... it’s something that literally transforms who we are and becomes part of our core identity. Wisdom is not a shallow practice, but an entire way of being.

Then Groome says: Such wisdom arises from reflection on one’s own life, from dialogue and the example of other wise people, and from reflection on God’s wisdom as revealed through Scripture and tradition; it requires the context of dialogue and testing of a “wisdom community”.

So one of our sources of wisdom is reflection on our own life and our own experiences, but this still isn’t a solo act. We also are informed by dialogue and the example of other people, by our understanding of other sources of wisdom

such as scriptures and teachings, and it all requires being in a faith community that can be a place for us to bounce these learnings off others and have our wisdom tested and informed by others in our community.

Groome finishes this thought, and again in very Christian language but we can translate to other faith lenses: Pedagogically Christian wisdom presents the task of informing, forming, and transforming people in the character of Christian faith. And the truly wise are those who so live.

So for us, our pedagogy, or learning and teaching methods, has the task of informing, or giving us new knowledge, experience, and ideas. It also has the task of forming, or shaping who we become as we grow. And finally, transforming, or changing us, sometimes radically so, when we find wisdom that contradicts how we were before. All of this in the service of moving us toward a character of faith that is responsible and life-giving for ourselves and others.

And the truly wise are those who so live.

The truly wise among us, and I believe we can all be truly wise, are those who live as Heads, Hearts, and Hands. The truly wise way to be is a holistic, whole self, with thinking, feeling, and doing. The process is a cycle of reflective thought and action, each informing each other. And it's all done in community, where we can support and challenge, as needed.

OUUC has all of these opportunities, and the community of support and challenge. Sign up for a class or a Study Circle, come for worship and spiritual practice, find community at a dinner or in a social group, volunteer on the book sale or the grounds clean up or to help cook dinner. Join the new Antiracism or Economic justice teams or the existing Environmental Action Team to work on moving our faith into action in the world. Reflect on how your learning leads to your actions and vice versa. Discuss your ideas and your learnings with others.

This is praxis. This is our practice. May we move forward in ever growing wisdom and wholeness. So May it Be.