

“Impressions – First, Final, and In Between”
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September 23, 2007

“I love humanity. It’s people I can’t stand,” according to a beloved cartoon character. Unitarian Universalists are generally able to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of others *in the abstract*. However, sometimes we Unitarian Universalists have trouble affirming the inherent worth and dignity of the actual *personalities* of others. Have you ever come home from a committee meeting thinking to yourself, “She talks so much! She talks just to hear herself talk!” or “He’s like Joe Friday on the old television show “Dragnet”: ‘Just the facts, Ma’am, just the facts.’ Does he have an empathetic bone in his body?” As we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of people regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, let us stretch ourselves to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of Chatty Cathy, Joe Friday, and other personalities, as well.

There are different ways to describe personalities. One of the most common is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI.¹ It is based on the work of the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung. The mother-daughter team, Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, built upon Jung’s ideas. There are 16 basic personality types, according to this view. The four key variables pertain to how we relate to the world, how we gather information, how we make decisions, and how we organize our lives.

The beauty of this approach to personality, in contrast to some other approaches, is that it does not focus on pathology. It does not focus on what is “wrong” or unhealthy or wounded about ourselves or about others. It has nothing to do with intelligence. This approach to personality implies that in a perfect world, with perfect parenting and perfect social justice and perfect psychosocial development, there will *still* be 16 basic personality types. It is shocking but true that in a perfect world, everyone will not be just the way we are. A Sunday morning worship service is not the place to go into the details of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. However, a Sunday morning worship service *is* the place to cover a few highlights because we are better together than we are alone. Personality type diversity is one reason that we are better together than we are alone.

We find meaning in life and we find the courage to make the world a better place through our interactions with each other – through conversations, projects, struggles, and sharing of joys and sorrows. Our

¹ MBTI and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator are registered trademarks of Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, California.

interactions with each other are shaped by our personalities. Come, let us drive each other crazy in a good-natured way! Let us have a good time doing it, and let us not take personality personally! The cover of the Order of Service contains letters -- E, I, N, S, T, F, J, and P – letters which having particular meanings in terms of Myers-Briggs Personality Type. The four key pairings are extravert or introvert (E or I), intuitive or sensing (N or S), thinking or feeling (T or F), and what is called “judging” or “perceiving” (J or P), though the J and P labels are misleading. Think of a J as a lover of closure, as a lover of decisions. Think of a P as a lover of options and open-endedness. The E, I, N, S, T, F, J, and P letters describe different and equally fine ways to relate to the world, to gather information, to make decisions, and to organize our lives.

In a major cosmic joke, the strongest aspects of our personality are most likely to get us into trouble. For years, I had a postcard on my refrigerator which said, “Decisions terminate panic.” One day, a good friend happened to read it. “That is so wrong,” she said. “Decisions *cause* panic!” That is a classic J / P difference of opinion. Give me one data point, I joke, and I will give you a conclusion. What could possibly be wrong with that? ;) (No, really, I believe with all my heart that P’s are people, too.) When our strengths are too strong, they become weaknesses. Decisiveness is a virtue, until the point when it is not. Flexibility is a virtue, until the point when it is not. Introversions is a virtue, and extraversion is a virtue, until the point when each, in turn, is not. Intuition is a virtue, until the point when it is not. Gathering information through senses is a virtue, until it is not. Feeling and thinking are virtues, until the point when each, in turn, is not.

This morning, the theme is “Impressions – First, Last, and In Between.” First impressions and last impressions come and go in a flash. We live in between. We live in the warmth and in the coolness of ongoing relationship. We live in a world of personalities. Let us not merely make the best of it; let us make the *most* of it. According to Roy Oswald and Otto Kroeger in their book *Personality Type and Religious Leadership*, two personality types are very different in how they relate to religion. Some people primarily want to *understand* and *explain* things. Other people primarily want to *experience* and *draw meaning* from things. Over time, a deep chasm is dug between these personality types in many congregations, they say.² Recall, for a moment, our chalice-lighting words:

“On the dusty earth drum beats the falling rain;
Now a whispered murmur, now a louder strain.
Slender, silv’ry drumsticks on an ancient drum

² *Personality Type and Religious Leadership*, Roy M. Oswald and Otto Kroeger, The Alban Institute, 1996.

Beat the mellow music bidding life to come.

Chords of life awakened, notes of greening spring,
 Rise and fall triumphant over ev'rything.
 Slender silv'ry drumsticks beat the long tattoo;
 God the Great Musician, calling life anew."

For someone who prefers to gather information through the senses, rain is wonderful after a dry spell. Rain is not a drumstick tapping out a rhythm on the earth drum. For someone who prefers to gather information through intuition, the impulse to experience rain and draw meaning from rain is more appealing than wanting to understand rain and explain rain. Whether or not the word "God" appears in a poem (or is a force in our lives) matters more to some of us than to others of us. We are not the same, and we are better together than alone.

My hope is to try to have something appealing to people of almost every personality type on almost every Sunday. That may only be possible when the entire morning and afternoon are taken together (from the Forum and Men's group to YRUU (Young Religious Unitarian Universalists) to the service to children's religious education to coffee hour and to a board meeting afterward. It is a good Sunday when there is something for those who prefer to understand and explain, something for those who prefer to experience and draw meaning, something for extraverts, something for introverts, something for those who like closure, something for people who like open-endedness, something for those who prefer gathering information through their senses, and something for those who prefer intuition. I suspect that Unitarian Universalists in general would fuss *less* about theology and liturgy (about the items included in the Order of Service) if we had *greater* appreciation of diverse personality types. One reason that we are better together than we are alone is because it is more fun to laugh at ourselves together than it is to laugh alone. Here are 16 short prayers, one prayer by each personality type. The author is unknown. Now, be fair. You can only laugh at the personality types of others if you laugh at *your* personality type, as well.

- 1) Please help me to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 11:41 a.m. and 23 seconds, Eastern Standard Time.
- 2) Please help me to consider people's feelings, even if most of them *are* hypersensitive.
- 3) Please help me to take responsibility for my own actions, even though they are usually *not* my fault.
- 4) God, please help me to stop trying to *run* everything, but if You need some help, just ask.

- 5) Please help me to be more laid back, and help me to do it *exactly* right.
- 6) Please help me to stand up for my rights (if You don't mind my asking).
- 7) Please help me to take things more seriously, especially parties and dancing.
- 8) Please give me patience, and I mean right *now*.
- 9) Please help me not be a perfectionist. (Did I pronounce that correctly?)
- 10) Please help me to finish everything I sta
- 11) Please help me to keep my mind on one th – *Look! A bird!* -- ing at a time.
- 12) Please help me to do only what I can and to trust you for the rest. (Do you mind putting your part of that in writing?)
- 13) Please keep me open to others' ideas, *wrong* though they may be.
- 14) Please help me be less independent, but let me do it my way.
- 15) Please help me follow established procedures today. On second thought, I'll settle for a few minutes with you now instead of waiting until later.
- 16) Please help me slow downandnotrushthroughwhatIdo

Within Unitarian Universalism as a movement, there have been dramatic changes in the past 30 to 50 years in terms of the personality type of congregation members.³ This shift in the balance of personality type has been even more dramatic regarding ministers. Those who are Intuitive and Feeling (NF, in Myers-Briggs terms) now predominate in terms of new Unitarian Universalist clergy, and Intuitive and Feeling people now make up a sizeable portion of Unitarian Universalist congregants, as well, according to the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal, which recently published their findings in the book *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*.

How could having a Feeling personality type possibly have a down side? The very same behavior that feels sensitive and caring to one person may seem unduly "conflict avoidant" to another person. Congregations often have a hard time managing conflict in an open and healthy manner, *in part* (not entirely, by any means!) because organized religion tends to attract those who lead with Feeling. To overstate the case, those who lead with Feeling tend to avoid conflict until some straw breaks their back, and they end up in traction and in great distress.

³ *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005.

The Rev. Peter Richardson, has written a book called *Four Spiritualities: Expressions of Self, Expressions of Spirit*.⁴ He relates personality type to preferred spiritual path, that is, to preferred manner of religious development. Rather than relating 16 personality types to preferred spiritual path, he simplifies matters and writes of four basic temperaments. Temperaments are distinguished from each other by what primarily motivates someone with each temperament. Some of us primarily seek to do our duty. Some of us primarily seek to act. Some of us primarily seek knowledge. Some of us primarily seek the ideal. We are not alike in what motivates us to become Unitarian Universalists or to remain Unitarian Universalists.

Depending on temperament, Rev. Richardson says, we may be drawn to a journey of “unity,” by which he means knowledge of all that is, or as much of it as we can know. Alternatively, we may be drawn to a journey of works, we may be drawn to a journey of harmony, or we may be drawn to a journey of devotion. *Four Spiritualities* also guides the reader into exploring underdeveloped aspects of personality. For example, those of us who are drawn toward knowledge and works might benefit from exploring harmony and devotion. Those of us who are drawn toward harmony and devotion might benefit from exploring knowledge and works.

Congregational life is often about doing more and more of what we already enjoy or do well when we first join a congregation. However, religious development is often about trying what we are not sure we will like or do well. As you consider where to place your precious energies in the coming year, consider becoming involved here in new ventures. Make that new adventures! Whatever group it may be -- Buddhist meditation, book discussion group, choir, Unitarian Universalist Movers and Shakers Group, Men’s Group, Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans or the many committees and groups that allow this congregation to flourish – there are groups that suit your temperament, and there are groups where you can stretch in a new direction.

In conclusion, Unitarian Universalism must remain accessible and meaningful to people of all personality types. Healthy congregations are focused on the world outside their walls. Healthy congregations recognize that people have different personality types. May we honor the inherent worth and dignity of each person, not merely in the abstract, but at the level of personality. May it be so!

⁴ Peter T. Richardson, *Four Spiritualities: Expressions of Self, Expressions of Spirit. A Psychology of Contemporary Spiritual Choice*. Palo Alto: Davies-Black Publishing. 1996. ISBN 0-89106-083-9. Peter Richardson may be contacted at ptemr@aol.com.