“The religious way is the deep way.”
Sophia Lyon Fahs

Reflection, in the religious sense, is learning to think theologically. The goal is not to arrive at certain conclusions, rather it is an adventure of the intellect and a journey of the soul. Theological reflection engages the great wisdom traditions of the world. It moves beyond surface understanding to plumb depths of insight into the realities of human existence. Art, literature, poetry, theatre, and film – along with traditional scriptures – act as mirrors, reflecting back to us enduring truths to be found in our own experiences. There we find timeless themes of good and evil, sin and redemption, suffering and death, hope and despair, love and compassion, resurrection and rebirth.

Theological reflection integrates heart and head. It honors the feeling dimension of experience without requiring the suspension of reason. Theological reflection draws us out of ourselves and into connection with the wisdom of the ages. It reawakens a sense of wonder and awe while reconnecting us with our deepest sources of knowing and inner wisdom.

Part of a tradition of inquiry that emphasizes intellectual openness as a practice of faith, theological reflection has roots going back into the sixteenth century. Freedom of individual conscience in religious and spiritual matters is the hallmark of liberal Protestantism. All forms of authoritarianism in matters of faith are subject to question and doubt.

Theological reflection is firmly rooted in the liberal religious traditions that formed the Unitarian Universalism we know today. What began as a radical reformation of the Christian church has grown to be inclusive of wisdom and truth found in many sources. These many sources provide a breadth of religious exploration. Theological reflection invites depth.

Like all spiritual practices, it takes discipline. It means swimming in one lake, rather than testing the waters of many – not necessarily forever, but long enough to become fully acquainted with all the lake holds. It means spending enough time with one source so as to know it’s stories, symbols, and images – to know it’s many layers of nuance.

It can mean exploring one of the world’s sacred texts – the Bhagavad Gita, the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, or the Buddhist Sutras. It can mean exploring the history and heritage of Unitarian Universalism in depth, a heritage full with words, deeds, and stories of prophetic women and men.

To know one’s religious heritage with depth is to have a wellspring of resources for coping with life’s struggles.

The religious way is the deep way. May we engage it together.

Yours in the spirit, Diane
The Tradition of Hospitality

We have all been strangers: The sperm that entered our mother’s womb was at first a stranger. The fetal creature that developed entered the world—a hostile and fearsome place—at first as a stranger. When we on timid wings first leave the nest of our family to venture on our own into a place of otherlings, of cold and heat and hunger we long for hospitality, whether or not we can express the need. Anywhere we go, at all stages of life, we yearn for welcome, for acceptance—for hospitality.

The Biblical tradition of welcoming the stranger is described in a Passover sermon by the Rev. Lisa Ward of the UU Fellowship of Harford County:

“Elijah’s chair present [at the Jewish Passover Seder] in the remembering of that journey [wandering in Egypt], keeps the sense of uncertainty alive. It also reminds those given freedom that responsibility comes with that freedom. As the Hebrews were strangers in a strange land, so must the covenanting community be ever open to welcoming the stranger. Elijah’s reserved chair at the Seder table is a visual reminder of the religious discipline known in welcoming the stranger. In fact, the health of the community demands that you do so.”

And it follows that the willingness to stretch our hearts enough to hear new things and invite new wisdom prepares the way for that Messiah, that pathfinder of Enlightenment present in our hearts to enter our lives.

“In Hebrew, the word for “stranger” is also the root of the word “border,’” writes Eliezer Shore. “Whether it is an individual, a nation, or an alien philosophy, the stranger stands outside the borders of our perspective . . . And because (the stranger’s) existence contradicts our definition of reality, upon which our sense of self is built, (she or) he presents a threat to our very being...”

“...We are all individuals, coming to the table with various stories and baggage, different hungers and tastes, mixed appetites and agendas, unknown resources of abundance. If we would but leave a space open in our minds and hearts for the stranger that would deepen our understanding and broaden our sight....”

Since we all at one time or another—at a new school, a new church, a new town, a new job—have had the experience of being an outsider, empathizing with the stranger should come very naturally. Extending hospitality should be an inborn skill. Extend a hand, brighten your face with a smile, offer an invitation for coffee, show the way to an appropriate space. Parents are seeking kid-friendly activities. Be ready with information about the day’s doings without overwhelming a tentative seeker. Above all radiate your enthusiasm for our faith community and your pleasure in welcoming this visitor—like Elijah, like all of us—a repository of the indwelling divine.

Joyce Hardin

Transforming Times is organized around theological themes. Each theme plays a part in the development of a well-grounded religious and spiritual life. The church’s offerings are by no means limited to the themes. They do provide common ground for community conversation, a way to gain more meaning and depth. We want to hear many perspectives on each theme. You are invited to submit your original poetry, artwork, or short essays of 350 words or less. Be warned: seriously engaging these themes could transform your life!

September: Diversity  
October: Hospitality  
November: Reflection  
Dec: Contemplation  
January: Trust

February: Justice  
March: Discernment  
April: Credo  
May: Ritual

June: Beauty