

Is Unity Changing?

In January of this year I invited questions and offered to answer what I could in service. There were more questions than time so this one I saved for a more specific review. Is Unity changing? Or how is Unity changing? I thought one of the best ways to examine this is to go back to how Unity started. In 1931 Myrtle Fillmore made her transition but Charles, who was 8 years her junior, lived until 1948. So 1931 seems like a place to begin with what was Unity at a point in which it was still being shaped by the Fillmores?

The Statement of Faith pamphlet has a total of 32 statements, plus a version of the Lord's Prayer and a poem by Clinton Bernard, *If Jesus Christ Were Here*. I'm going to use screen sharing so you can see the statements and not have to just look at me the whole time. I'm not going through all the statements but want to highlight some of the foundational concepts. Also the slides will be posted on the website.

One thing is pretty clear, although Charles Fillmore professed to not have a religious background, Unity began firmly rooted in Christianity. It has depended on the Christian Bible as its text. It has made Jesus Christ the central figure in its theology and interpretations. The first four statements of faith are a sort of metaphysical interpretation of the foundational Nicene Creed Trinity. The Nicene Creed is the formula of beliefs agreed to in the early church at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and adopted by both the Catholic and Protestant churches. Charles and Myrtle began as Christian Science practitioners. I can tell you the awkward language in statement 3 about Christ Jesus has significance to Fillmore. I learned in seminary his distinction among Jesus, Christ, Jesus Christ and Christ Jesus. I'm not clear how relevant those distinctions are in conveying a sense of how to claim spiritual power in everyday life.

I would say currently there are some divides in the Unity Movement. One camp focuses on the archaic Fillmore language as the only true statements of faith, embedded in Christianity. Another camp has focused on the "Practical" aspect of Practical Christianity and has sought to more liberally interpret the fundamental ideals in a language that is less "Christ" centered, more spiritual than Christian and more application than theory. We are experiencing the growing pains of a movement outliving its founders. After 100 years, organizations have to re-invent themselves or perish. We'll see how this goes.

Statement 6 brings us to the 12 Powers. This is a central system within Unity. Sort of akin to the Chakra system found in Hindu and some Buddhist writings. Fillmore places the 12 spiritual faculties at energy centers within the body associated with health and well-being. The work with the 12 Powers isn't usually focused as much on the body centers as Chakra work however. The 12

Powers continue to be a popular way in Unity to explore how spiritual energy and power can express through our humanity. With some overlaps and vagueness in the Fillmore writings, we continue to use the 12 Powers in spiritual practice and exploration as well as art and music.

Statement 8 represents Charles Fillmore's commitment to including science in spirituality. He was fascinated with the science of the atom and the work that was being done in the early 1900's to begin to unlock the secrets of this infinitesimal unit of energy. Perhaps this also led to Unity's inclusion of medicine as a tool of healing, splitting from their beginnings in Christian Science. Unity continues to see spirituality in quantum physics and science in general.

Statement 10 presents Unity's belief in the power of the spoken word and this statement also hints at Fillmore's absolutism about cause and effect. Today there is a heavy emphasis on the power of our words but without the absolutism of the past. You may remember several years ago a Dr. Masaru Emoto from Japan had experiments that alleged words could alter water, with positive words purifying the water. Although scientific examination has discredited the water study pictures that were so pretty,

other credible science does substantiate the effect of negative emotions and words on our own bodies and immune systems.

Unity remains a bit divided on the absolutism. Although Fillmore says we'll be accountable for our "lightest word" or casual conversation, he also has to scramble a bit in the realm of "race consciousness" to explain adverse events impacting the most innocent of non-verbal children. Most people lean towards the need for conscious awareness around our language and its impact and the flow of multiple energies that impact events.

Statement 13 begins with the power of prayer as the great healer. It uses familiar language around "save," "resurrect" and overcome death. You have to know how to metaphysically interpret sin for it to become more meaningful to us today. Unity today is solidly based in the power of prayer to heal. Most people shy away from the older language of saving and resurrecting the body. Statement 19 is an indicator of Fillmore's belief that immortality would involve a physical body. I really don't hear that in Unity today. I speak about complete regeneration or the spiritualization of the body as ending when the soul no longer needs a body. For me, the transcendence of Jesus took him out of the earthly plane so I'm not sure where Charles got the concept of immortality being in the material plane. This is where we say that Charles was surprised by his death. He thought he would achieve immortality before death consumed his body.

Statement 20 is the Fillmore's metaphysics of the Eucharist. This is again the backdrop of traditional Christianity that Unity was founded on. Even though Unity never really practiced the Eucharist, as the Fillmores tended to shun ritual. Today few Unity churches refer to the Eucharist at all. Fillmore's ideas of the physical blood and body of Jesus show up in some of his books as the concept that death released the atoms of his body into the ethers and that atoms of his blood are the basis of our divine dna. Interesting.

Statement 22 is the affirmation that the Fillmores believed in reincarnation. This is a concept that has danced in and out of Unity publications of Fillmore books and in and out of favor. Over the years Unity has been sensitive to its reputation as a cult. Sometimes we are intentionally trying to appear more Christian mainstream. Since the Fillmores were against creed and dogma, even publishing Statements of Faith did not indicate you had to believe each statement as presented. Unity people today believe what they want about reincarnation.

Statement 28 is their stand for vegetarianism. In the 1920's the Fillmores established Unity Inn at the 9th and Tracy location as a vegetarian cafeteria, more for the educational value than commercial success. In 1923 they published a Unity Inn Cookbook with dietary guidelines and recipes. They were not vegan and included eggs, milk and cheese in the diet. At its peak, the Inn provided 10,000 meals per week. It was difficult to maintain vegetarianism in the Midwest, even in the Fillmore home. Mother Fillmore, Charles' mother, regularly served chicken to the children. Today, like reincarnation, although healthy eating is a conscious practice Unity encourages, there is no requirement to be vegetarian.

Statement 29 is Charles' belief that celibacy conserves the life energy in one. While being conscious of how we tend to our physical urges and sense consciousness remains a discussion in Unity, I don't hear much about celibacy today.

Statements 27 and 31 reinforce the metaphysical, non-literal interpretation of the Bible and the various traditional Christian creed and doctrinal statements. Today there are many who question whether or not Unity should continue to hold itself out as Christian—given our distance from many of the doctrines and practices getting media attention as being "Christian" in nature. I would say there is definitely a trend towards calling Unity "spiritual" rather than "Christian" or "religious". And there are those who contend that moving towards more modern language and less absolutism is "watering down" the beliefs.

I personally question the usefulness of a faith tradition that few understand and even fewer can apply to everyday life. So where are we going?

At Unity Headquarters there is movement towards greater inclusion of spirituality. Basic Unity concepts are being interpreted in modern language and applied to current life situations. We are reaching out to people who may not have a Christian background or any real faith tradition but who are spiritually open to beliefs in a Higher Power, personal accountability and empowerment and a sense of mystery and awe. There are those who feel this broader inclusion is again a watering down of our beliefs. If you appeal to a group that is familiar with the energy centers of the Chakras and present the 12 Powers, I'm not sure that weakens the teachings of the 12 Powers. Unity Worldwide Ministries is trying to figure out who they are and what they are here to do in serving ministries. Unity Headquarters serves all spiritual seekers and humanity, while UWM narrows that focus to those served through Unity ministries. They had sort of an implosion this past year so we'll see where they end up. They have cancelled the summer conference and said they will conduct no business, including board elections, until June 2021. This period of intensive working remotely and streaming all services is opening up some new vistas and possibilities at Unity Headquarters, even as some familiar ones are not practiced. As a board member I am eager to see how this unfolds.

What is the future for Unity of Lehigh Valley? That is entirely up to you! What are you learning during this pandemic? What do you believe? What makes you think and what feeds your soul? Who do you want to reach and who do you serve? What tools are best suited to ULV? I am also excited to see how this unfolds for you, even if I won't physically be here. I suppose after 11 years of inhabiting the building and speaking words, there might be a little of my dna left behind in ULV. I will always be a part of you. So we'll see how we all grow forward.