

# *Winnie the Pooh's Cottleston Pie Principle*

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**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

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In case you didn't notice, I'll say it out loud: This is our annual Canvass Kickoff Sunday in the Unitarian Church in Summit. If you are a visitor or a newcomer to our church, you will be especially interested in this sermon, for two reasons. First, it's a pretty non-threatening situation, because we don't want your money. We recognize that giving -- giving anything, in fact -- is an expression of personal commitment. If you are not committed to the well being of this church community, we do not expect you to pledge your financial support. (Neither, of course, would we ever lay a guilt trip on those who are -- er -- committed.)

Second, I think you'll find this sermon interesting because the way in which people talk about their money, the way in which they call upon and allocate their resources, says something important about their value commitments. Budget time is priority-setting time. We see this in individual lives, but also in groups, such as the church. "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." You've heard that before. The great strength of this church is that so many people carry it in their hearts -- literally carry it in their hearts.

So we are to build a major new structure, bringing us together under one roof: Then we must ask, Who are we now? For as Winston Churchill once said, "We make our buildings, and then our buildings make us." What will we become? That depends on the commitments we make now. So we seek to settle a new parish minister. When potential candidates look to us to tell them who we are, what will we say? Our actions in this canvass will speak at least as loud as our words.

For the rest of us, well, in the first place we have no reason to find this subject a turn-off, or "threatening" to our pocketbooks, because we have known from the time that we first became members or friends of this church that stewardship, including responsible financial support, came with the territory. My old friend and colleague in our ministry, John Wolf, put it classically: "There is only one reason to join a Unitarian Universalist church, to support it." What a shock that sentence is to some people, for they had thought that the church was there to serve and support them -- that it was a kind of spiritual gas station, where you drive in and say "Fill 'er up" with enough spiritual good stuff to hold you for a week -- or maybe a few.

Now, lest you think that "supporting it" only means financial support, maybe John Wolf's words should be modified a bit: There is only one reason to join a UU church, to support the shared purposes of its shared ministry. And we do this in many ways:

\* By our presence in the gatherings of the whole community (as for instance the Sunday morning services).

- \* By our personal commitment to be on a path of spiritual and moral growth.
- \* By our readiness to speak and act upon the values of Unitarian Universalism in our daily lives and in the week-by-week work of our church community.
- \* And finally, last but not least, by our financial support, our generous financial support of the church and its vision of what it can become.

No, must become, if it is to exist at all in years to come as a vital center of liberal religion in this community.

In my previous interim ministry, I sensed that there was a lot of un-clarity (if not downright difference of opinion) about the role of the minister, and until greater common understanding could be reached, the congregation would not be prepared to call a new settled minister. So in a large discussion session I asked, "What expectations do we hold of the minister of our church?" A woman -- she is both a singer and a social activist -- said, "To help us internalize out Unitarian Universalist principles." I like that. She was referring to the Principles that are here on the back of our own order of service. I thought this was an excellent way of naming "the shared purposes of our shared ministry."

I say: We are a community that honors the spiritual freedom of each person and affirms the universal love that embraces all, both here and everywhere. And how powerful we would be if we fully "internalized" and made our own the Unitarian principle of spiritual freedom and the Universalist principle of universal love!

When you know who you are, you do not have to beg and cajole, as if you were a worthy charity. The church is not a charity to which we give; the church is us, and we support it in the same way we support our own households. For this is our household of faith.

These are three key questions for each of us as individuals, and equally for this (or any) church community: Who are you? What have you got to work with? What do you seek and hope for? We need to be able to answer these questions as a congregation, as much as any individual person does.

There is a song that names precisely these three questions, in A.A. Milne's classic storybook, "Winnie the Pooh." This song is sung by "the bear of little brain," Winnie the Pooh himself:

How can you get very far,  
 If you don't know Who You Are?  
 How can you do what you ought,  
 If you don't know What You've Got?  
 And if you don't know Which to Do  
 Of all the things in front of you,  
 Then what you'll have when you are through  
 Is just a mess without a clue  
 Of all the best that can come true  
 If you know What and Which and Who.

No, that's not the Cottleston Pie song, but it just may hold the key to un-riddling the song and discovering the Cottleston Pie Principle (so called by Benjamin Hoff, if not A.A. Milne). To coin a phrase: If the Cottleston Pie Principle is the answer, what are the questions? They are the capitalized phrases in this nameless song: Who Are You? What You've Got? And Which to Do -- of "all the things in front of you."

Before I read "The Tao of Pooh," I had forgotten my Winnie the Pooh lore, and I hadn't known that A.A. Milne's "bear of little brain" was actually a new incarnation of Lao-Tsu, the ancient Chinese sage from whom Taoism first arose. But Benjamin Hoff's book makes it quite clear: "Eeyore frets, and Piglet hesitates, and Rabbit calculates, and Owl pontificates. Pooh just is." Pooh doesn't fret or hesitate or calculate or pontificate: He is blessed with an indefinable something, a grace that gets him past all the anxiety-driven craziness of those about him. He is what Edwin Freedman called "a non-anxious presence in an anxious situation" -- if only because he doesn't think very far ahead, maybe not beyond breakfast. He redeems every situation. He lives in the present. He goes for the sweet stuff, the honey. Blessed are those who go and do likewise.

Pooh's nonsense songs are songs of uncommon sense, though it may seem hard to get at, like the honey in the very bottom of the honey pot. The songs are spiritual riddles. You heard me sing "Cottleston Pie." (You see, after my brief foray into "the very model of a busy modern minister," with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan, I'm getting bolder.) Benjamin Hoff gives us a "Tao of Pooh" interpretation of the three riddles in the song. May I remind you how it goes?

Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie,  
A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly.  
Ask me a riddle and I reply ...  
Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie,  
A fish can't whistle and neither can I,  
Ask me a riddle and I reply ...  
Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie,  
Why does a chicken, I don't know why.  
Ask me a riddle and I reply,  
Cottleston, Cottleston, ..."  
you know what.

First riddle: "A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly." Nonsense or uncommon sense? People are forever striving to be what they are not because they ignore "the clear reality of Things As They Are." The Cottleston Pie Principle says: Know your Inner Nature. Do not be alienated from yourself, forever in tension, trying to make yourself into something you are not. Accept that you are acceptable at the deepest level of your being. Come as you are. Cherish your integrity. Be attentive to your spiritual life. Seek your center, the place where your freedom resides. Take time, at regular intervals, to relax into yourself and appreciate your Inner Nature.

As yourself, when you need reminding, How could I ever have not known that "a fly can't bird but a bird can fly"? Let yourself laugh at yourself sometimes. And you'll begin to enjoy other people more, too. You'll know that they have Inner Natures of their own, and you'll enjoy the differences between you rather than being distressed by them. Let go of control sometimes. Rather than joining in Rabbit's clever scheme to drive Kanga and Roo out of the forest because they are different, you'll join in creating a community of mutual respect and enjoyment -- and compassion for the thorn-pierced foot.

Second riddle: "A fish can't whistle and neither can I." According to Benjamin Hoff, "Coming from a wise mind, such a statement would mean, 'I have certain limitations, and I know what they are.' ... There's nothing wrong with not being able to whistle, especially if you are a fish. But much is wrong with blindly trying to do what you aren't designed for."

In "Winnie the Pooh," Tigger and Roo are walking through the forest one morning and Tigger is talking about all the things Tiggers can do: " 'Can they fly?' asked Roo. 'Yes,' said Tigger, 'they're very good fliers, Tiggers are, 'stronry good flyers.' 'Oo!' said Roo. 'Can they fly as well as Owl?' 'Yes,' said Tigger. 'Only they don't want to.' " A little later, Christopher Robin and his friends have to rescue Tigger from the limb of a tree onto which he has climbed, letting him drop into a blanker, ker-plop!

Maybe you have known people like that. Or maybe you've had to be rescued from a limb or two you've climbed out on yourself. I know I have, and I have been rescued from perilous perches more than once. People who cared cushioned my fall. Here's another way the personal side of life is linked to the community: We are forever bumping up against our limitations in unexpected ways; but with the caring concern of others, we can learn from these bumps. Knowing that "a fish can't whistle and neither can I" does not deny the possibility of learning and growth; owning your limitations is the basis of spiritual learning and growth.

Pooh's third Cottleston Pie riddle asks: "Why does a chicken, I don't know why." Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side. Why does he want to get to the other side, or wherever a chicken might want to go? We don't know, and I suppose the chicken doesn't fully understand it, either. Instinct is the scientific-sounding answer; but appeal to instinct really means: We don't know, and probably nobody else does, either. We could as well say: The chicken is acting in accord with its Inner Nature and its Limitations. But then we'd need to add: Even these do not determine what it will do, for the chicken does what it wants to do, we know not why. In the end it is unlimited, at liberty. And so are we who live within the Unlimited, a reality that is mysterious and transcends us absolutely. Lao-Tsu calls it the Tao. The freedom to choose what we will do and what we would become is our clearest link to ultimate reality; we may even call it the image of God.

Did you ever feel stuck in the status quo, which is Latin, Father Divine said, for "the mess we is in"? Then affirm "the best that can come true": You can do it. For if "you don't know Which to Do / of all the things in front of you, / Then what you've got when

you are through / Is just a mess without a clue ..." Which brings us back to where we began, namely to the principle of hope -- hope for "all the best that can come true / If you know What and Which and Who."

Have I changed the subject from a community concern to a personal concern? Well, when we discover the wisdom of Winnie the Pooh at the personal level, we will discover it also at the church community level. It's the same thing -- a key to unlock the spirit we seek both within ourselves and for our life together, among friends: being at one with our own Inner Nature.

To ask "Which to Do" is to ask about the vision that draws us forward. I say it is the vision of a community of spiritual freedom and universal love we hold not only for ourselves but for all people everywhere.

To ask "What We've Got" is to ask about the gifts that are ours -- the talents, the concerns, the energies that are ours in abundance. And that we count on each other to share generously. Including (ahem!) our financial gifts.

To ask "Who We Are" is to ask about the Inner Nature of this church community, the whole body of which we are members. The other day in our discussion after the service, Dick Wagner said a marvelous thing about our "inner nature." He said that the wonderful thing about a Unitarian Universalist church -- about this church -- is that it enables the "I" to become a "we." Here the individual finds a community that respects and nurtures the individuality of each of us, and thereby enlarges and strengthens its community.

A Zulu proverb speaks volumes about the intimate relation between the "I" and the "we": "When a thorn pierces the foot, the whole body must bend down to pull it out." Only you must decide, friends, that you are a member of the whole body. And when we do so decide, we will know that we cannot stand aside, we cannot not bend down with the whole body to deal with the thorn. Then we will pledge generously, so we may again go forward as one body, upright and strong. It will be our Inner Nature.

The whole attends to the part, the community to the needs of the individual. So too the individual attends to the need of the community, as the hand serves the body's need to be rid of a painful thorn and again walk upright. Come to think of it, we could make this the short version of a new mission statement: "When a thorn pierces the foot, the whole body must bend down to pull it out."