

Crafting Theology: Toward a Theory of Literacysmiths

Natalie Saleh | Baylor University

This ethnography focuses on the literacy practices of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waco (UUWaco), a liberal faith-based community whose congregation includes members with various religious beliefs. To learn about this community's literacy practices, I collected discourse-based interviews and participant-observations. My findings suggest that since UUWaco members do not endorse one set creed, they create their own theologies while relying on what I have come to call "multi-religious literacy," or in-depth understanding of multiple religions and religious texts, through which UUWaco members craft new, individualized theologies. Guided by Deborah Brandt's "literacy sponsors" and Alanna Frost's "literacy stewards," I propose a new term to describe UUWaco members, "literacysmiths." Literacysmiths are people who seek out a variety of literacy sponsors and then borrow aspects of these sponsors' literacy practices to create new literacies unique to their own discourse community. This term provides a new lens through which scholars can view literacy practices in religious communities, classrooms, and workplaces.

Introduction

Many scholars research context-specific literacies, as introduced by the New London Group's concept of "multiliteracies." Multiliteracies address aspects of literacy beyond the "mere literacy" of language, instead acknowledging that literacy is culturally situated and takes on new meanings in different communities (New London Group 64). An understanding of multiliteracy is necessary in exploring the complex multitude of existing literacy practices. Since the conception of the New London Group's multiliteracies, many scholars have examined literacy practices in niche communities, particularly the literacies of minority groups (Fishman; Frost; Haneda; Mahiri and Sablo; Lyons; Moss, "Phenomenal;" Moje). As minority groups certainly have unique literacy practices, so do different religious groups, as demonstrated in recent articles addressing religious literacy (DePalma; Gallagher; Goodburn; Heath; Eakle; Moss, *Community*; Rackley).

Rackley, for example, examined the social and cultural forces shaping religious literacy in Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, emphasizing the importance of sacred texts in religious literacy. Similarly, Eakle examined how Christian literacies play out in school. Much research usefully addresses religious literacy in a Christian context; however, this focus provides an incomplete definition of religious literacy.

To address the lack of research on minority religious literacies, my article examines the literacy practices of Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism is a theologically liberal religious group, established in 1961 through the merging of two Christian denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism. Though Unitarian Universalism has Christian roots, Unitarian Universalists do not necessarily identify with Christian theology and practices. Instead they come from all faith backgrounds, whether Buddhist, Muslim, Atheist, or Agnostic, among others, and do not endorse any one religion or

sacred text. Instead they are bound by Seven Principles, emphasizing love, respect, and the individual search for truth. So long as Unitarian Universalists agree with these broad principles, they can believe whatever they choose and are encouraged to craft their own theologies. Mark Harris, a reverend in Massachusetts who has published many books on Unitarian Universalism, says that “we are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious. ‘Heresy’ in Greek means ‘choice’” (Unitarian Universalist Association). This emphasis on choice pervades Unitarian Universalists’ lives and is at the center of their religious literacy practices.

My ethnographic research focuses specifically on the literacy practices of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waco (UUWaco), a religious community in Waco, Texas, whose religious literacy practices differ from those dominant in the Bible Belt. UUWaco explores all religious beliefs and philosophies, welcoming people from every faith background. Beyond the Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles, UUWaco does not endorse any one creed. Instead, members of the congregation explore sacred texts from all religious traditions, whether or not they believe in these texts. I am calling this theological approach “multi-religious literacy,” which is defined as the in-depth understanding of multiple religions, including their texts and literacy practices, and the ability to converse fluently using the language of different faith communities.

This essay addresses the following question: What role do the literacy practices of other religions and philosophies play in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship? To answer this question, I believe a new phrase is necessary to describe the nature of UUWaco’s literacy practices: *literacysmith*. I

define literacysmiths as people who seek out a variety of literacy sponsors and then borrow aspects of these sponsors’ literacy practices to create new literacies unique to their own discourse community.

Previous studies address how literacy skills acquired in one context can be adapted and applied in different contexts (McCarthy; Roozen; Walvrod and McCarthy). However, literacysmiths are different in that the literacies they collect from other religions and philosophies are not applied merely to conform to existing practices in another context but rather to create new literacy practices. This process parallels the work of metalsmiths, such as blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and coppersmiths. All of these smiths are craftspeople who use metals to create new tools and art through a variety of methods, such as forging, hammering, and welding. In the same way that a smith takes metals to form new tools, literacysmiths take a variety of literacy practices and craft new literacies, welding together meaningful literacy practices and reshaping them to fit into their own discourse communities. In this way, Unitarian Universalists spend their lives pursuing multi-religious literacies to continually forge new literacies.

This paper addresses ways that UUWaco members act as literacysmiths. I specifically examine literacy practices that occur in Reading Circle, a book club, and their Sunday service. Beyond these events, I also explain how literacysmithing occurs in UUWaco members’ use of religious language, and in the way that UUWaco draws from both religious and nonreligious literacies.

Theoretical Framework

My analysis of literacysmiths is guided by Deborah Brandt’s “literacy sponsors” and Alanna Frost’s “literacy stewards.” Brandt

defines literacy sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (46). Based on this definition, UUWaco’s religious literacy sponsors include religions, churches, sacred texts, and people who inform UUWaco members’ religious literacy practices. Brandt says that sponsors provide literacies that are in their own best interest (59), and for religious literacy sponsors, the goal of sponsoring literacy is often to convert people to their religion or strengthen the faith of their own members. Unitarian Universalists, however, have a unique relationship with their religious literacy sponsors, because they engage in religious literacy with no intention of converting to a sponsor’s endorsed religion. Instead Unitarian Universalists seek a variety of religious literacy sponsor to understand people better and to borrow aspects of religious literacies that contribute to their own spiritual development. This practice is a form of “literacy appropriation,” in the way that Unitarian Universalists borrow literacy practices from sponsors to apply in different contexts (Brandt 59), but literacysmithing is not synonymous with literacy appropriation. Rather, it is a certain type of literacy appropriation. Literacysmiths are distinguished by taking an active role in appropriation, intentionally seeking literacies and sponsors with conflicting values for the purpose of creating new literacies. Literacysmiths do not appropriate literacies by convenience but spend time collecting literacies and craftfully shaping them to best meet the needs of their discourse communities.

Furthermore, Unitarian Universalists’ unique relationship with literacy sponsors is similar to that of “literacy stewards.” Frost

defines a literacy steward as “any individual who demonstrates persistent dedication to the practice or promotion of a literacy considered traditionally important to his or her community. The traditional literacy that a steward engages in is notably alternative to those that are institutionally and economically dominant” (56). Literacy stewards frequently navigate “complex negotiations” between dominant and traditional literacies (Frost, 56). Such negotiations also play a role in the Unitarian Universalists’ individual journey toward truth. As they continually craft theologies, they learn about other religions, and in doing so assess how these religious views relate to their own. As literacysmiths, Unitarian Universalists are constantly navigating the “complex negotiations” of acquiring multi-religious literacies, while evaluating how these literacies impact their spiritual development. The Unitarian Universalists are similar to literacy stewards in their devout adherence to alternative literacy practices. Though multi-religious literacy is traditional in Unitarian Universalist communities, it is alternative to popular religious literacy in the Bible Belt. UUWaco members diverge from stewardship, however, by fostering innovation of new literacy practices. While stewards actively preserve alternative literacies, literacysmiths actively create new ones. These dynamics appear in UUWaco’s Reading Circle book club, their multi-religious education, and their use of religious language. The findings of this study are significant to literacy studies, because they provide a new lens through which scholars can view literacy practices of discourse communities.

Methods

Upon beginning my project, I had little knowledge of Unitarian Universalism. The concept of a religious community that did not promote a single religion intrigued me, particularly when thinking about literacy. I wondered what literacy was in a community that was not centered on a single religious text, unlike the religious traditions I was more familiar with (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.). To learn about UUWaco, I collected ethnographic data through interviews, a questionnaire, and participant-observation. First, I attended “Reading Circle,” UUWaco’s monthly book club. I also attended their Sunday service and coffee hour directly following the service. At all events, I took notes on the setting, people, texts, and literacy practices. In addition to site visits, I interviewed four members of UUWaco, each lasting between one and one and a half hours. I selected these four members because they are all from different faith backgrounds. In addition to the interviews, I collected demographic questionnaires and literacy artifacts from each participant. The literacy artifacts were mostly books about Unitarian Universalism or other religions. This study was IRB approved, and all participants chose their own pseudonyms.

To triangulate my data, I read over the interview transcripts, questionnaires, and field notes many times, looking for patterns and themes. During this process, I paid particular attention to any instances regarding reading, writing, and religion, in order to determine what literacy practices are most valued in UUWaco and how these practices shape their spirituality. At some point in all of the interviews, UUWaco members mentioned being a minority in the largely conservative Christian community, so I also looked for instances when

members discussed practices that they saw as alternative to mainstream religious literacy in Waco. I also analyzed literacy artifacts and identified ways they related to the field notes and interview transcripts. In my analysis of literacy artifacts, I focused on *Building Your Own Theology* by Richard S. Gilbert, a part of UUWaco’s adult religious education.

Some limitations of this study are the population size and the amount of time I spent in the community. In addition, I only interviewed white, middle-aged women. However, I still believe my results are revealing, because the women I interviewed are representative of the UUWaco community and because they come from varied faith backgrounds (Atheist, Agnostic, Humanist, and Liberal Christian), which is the most important factor in understanding the multi-religious literacy practices in UUWaco.

Results

I focus on four aspects of the literacy practices enacted among Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waco members: collecting literacies in the “Reading Circle” book club, redefining religious literacy by exploring non-religious texts, forging multi-religious literacy practices including reading religious texts and attending religious services, and appropriating religious language in UUWaco.

Collecting Literacies in the “Reading Circle”

Unitarian Universalists frequently seek opportunities to learn about other worldviews and religions, because they value the individual’s journey toward truth and understanding. In doing so, they collect the aspects of these various worldviews and religions that are valuable to their own spiritual development. They also engage a variety of literacy sponsors that shape the way that

literacy is created within UUWaco. This approach to learning plays out in the “Reading Circle,” a book club in which members share and discuss whatever books they are reading that month. Instead of requiring a single text that all members read and discuss as in a traditional book club, in Reading Circle each member brings whatever text(s) he or she is reading at the time, even if no one else is reading it. When I observed, their sharing followed a typical pattern. The person sharing first summarized the story, then they said what they liked and/or disliked about it, and, finally, they assigned the book a letter grade. The books that members brought ranged from science fiction, to parenting, to mystery, to statistics. With each person bringing different texts to share, Reading Circle functions as a “literacy event” (Heath) that not only transfers knowledge on a variety of subjects but also fosters interpersonal understanding amongst members of the discourse community.

In addition to UUWaco members learning about each other, they also learned about the viewpoints of various authors. Some book club members picked certain books despite or even because they disagreed with ideologies in the book. However, even when book club members did not think a book was interesting, they typically saw some value in the book and frequently assigned A’s. Their exploration of opposing viewpoints mirrors the fourth Unitarian Universalist principle, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” (Unitarian Universalist Association). In *Building Your Own Theology*, a popular Unitarian Universalist workbook that UUWaco uses for adult religious education, Richard Gilbert further explicates the fourth principle: “In our vaunted freedom we are responsible to know the alternative paths available to us, responsible to consider

them intelligently, responsible to our fellow seekers with whom we share what we have found” (x). This conviction of responsible learning shapes Unitarian Universalists’ interaction with and about texts and contributes to their ability to craft innovative new literacies. The UUWaco members I interviewed all discussed their open-mindedness to various worldviews. This attitude allows them to gather knowledge that can later be implemented in crafting new literacies. In other words, Unitarian Universalists collect literacies and store them, similar to how blacksmiths store tools in a toolshed. Then as they craft new literacies, they can choose among their collected tools. While some tools may be insignificant and never leave the shed, other tools may be used frequently. However, having a large store of tools leaves more room open to creativity and the innovation of new or improved products that may require the use of unconventional tools. Similarly, a literacysmith picks literacy practices, or tools, that best fit the needs of the discourse community, and by collecting an array of literacies, has more tools to draw from when creating new literacies.

In addition to collecting unfamiliar literacies in Reading Circle, UUWaco members generate new ideas and discuss philosophies different from their own, a practice that allows them to refine their individualized theologies with new texts in mind. Frequently, conversations about beliefs stemmed from somebody’s description of a book. For example, one woman brought *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Paine, which led members to discuss the privileges and advantages they have relative to people in poverty. In this way, book discussions functioned as a springboard for conversation and reflection. Furthermore, sharing books allowed the opportunity to

create new literacies, by transferring knowledge from Reading Circle to other domains. After one woman in the group shared *The Unwinding* by George Packer, the minister, Kris, asked to borrow the book to incorporate it into the Sunday sermon, a literacy event unique to UUWaco which draws on music literacy, an understanding of popular culture, and multi-religious literacy. Kris borrowing from her congregant for the sermon demonstrates how collaboration fosters the creation of new literacies. In a traditional book club, lending of books for other members to read is common. Kris' intentions, however, are not limited to her own entertainment, as she intends to incorporate this book into another of UUWaco's literacy practices, the Sunday service. This action demonstrates how a single text may function differently depending on the setting. Kris acts as a literacysmith because she interacts with this text in one discourse community and discovers a way the same text can serve different goals in another setting.

Though Reading Circle members were all curious about each other's ideas and dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual truth, desire to read was not a requirement for belonging, contrary to traditional book clubs. In this way, the Reading Circle was more inclusive than a traditional book club. It allowed people to pursue their own reading interests, yet still have the opportunity to share. Though the group was well-read, it would still be accessible to people with less education or who do not like reading. Graham, for example, did not bring any books with him. Despite this, he was still able to interact with the group by asking thoughtful questions and commenting on other members' books. Furthermore, when Graham's turn came, he decided to tell a story about a trip he recently took, though he had not

brought a book. Everybody interacted with Graham's story the same way they would with a book. Graham's story demonstrates that though not everybody in the group loved to read, they did all love sharing stories and learning from each other. Thus literacy in Reading Circle does not require everybody to actually read books, but instead requires the ability to summarize a story, whether from a book or not, and a desire to understand each other's opinions.

Redefining Religious Literacy by Expanding the Sacred

While it may seem that the books discussed in Reading Circle do not relate to religion, Unitarian Universalists approach all reading and writing as potential sources of spiritual growth. UUWaco's core values reflect this inclusion. One states, "We value science, philosophy, literature, and the world's great religions as sources of wisdom" (Unitarian Universalist Association). Thus UUWaco members are not bound to find religious truth and wisdom solely in "religious" texts, but can find it from myriad sources. This conviction is unconventional in a religious community, because, according to Emile Durkheim, most religions have a sharp division between the "sacred," meaning anything that is significant to one's religion, and the "profane," anything that does not relate to one's religion (37). Contrary to many other religious communities, UUWaco does not polarize this relationship. Instead, objects, practices, and beliefs that are often viewed as profane can be interpreted as sacred if they contribute to a person's spiritual development. Furthermore, in a community that recognizes all sources of information as potentially formative, the only things that may be considered profane are those which do harm to other people. Even atheism can

be classified as sacred at UUWaco, as many congregation members find atheism to be a meaningful belief that guides their spiritual development. By expanding the sacred realm to include engagement with multiple religious and non-religious texts and literacy practices, Unitarian Universalists challenge what it means to be religiously literate.

This expansion of the sacred realm pervades UUWaco's literacy practices and is apparent in their Sunday service, which I refer to as a literacy event, because various texts and religious traditions are included in the service. On one occasion, Kris gave a sermon that drew from the works of bell hooks, Steve Jobs, and Mike Rowe's TV show *Dirty Jobs*. At UUWaco these sources took the place of a sacred text. That is, secular texts functioned as a substitute for the religious text (i.e., Bible, Koran, Torah), not an addition to it. The congregation also sang hymns at the beginning of the service, which included hymnals similar to Christian hymnals. However, the lyrics lacked religious language and explored themes of loving and respecting other people rather than praising God. In this way, the Sunday service is a multi-religious literacy event formed by repurposing the literacy practices from other sacred and profane realms: UUWaco took the form of a Christian church service, the text of a social activist, and the message of a television show, and forged a new literacy from these sources of sponsorship. This new literacy requires understanding religious rituals, as well as current events, literature, music, and television shows.

Redefining the profane as sacred is an act that not only occurs in UUWaco's communal events but also on a personal level. Linda provides an example of how she developed her spiritual beliefs from reading

nonreligious texts. She grew up in a nonreligious family in Michigan and had never considered attending church until she discovered UUWaco. In our interview, she recalled reading *Gone with the Wind* and *Roots* as a young adult and the impact it had on her:

"I read *Gone with the Wind* and *Roots* both when I was 19 or 20, and at that point, I think I was—I think I was loud-mouthed and know-it-all and sarcastic... Yeah, it humbled me to read about those experiences, and I think before I read those books, I was pretty racist as well against black people, which I didn't really realize. Of course, I wouldn't have admitted that. But I realized after reading those, I guess, just what a different experience the world is for a black person than it is for a white... It's just awful. So that had a big impact on me as a young adult. And I can just remember feeling sorry for all the ugly things I ever said to people or about people."

Reading these books contributed to Linda's conviction: respect everybody through words and actions, no matter how different they may seem. As is apparent in Linda's reflection, a key component of UUWaco members' belief systems is the openness to learning from new and unfamiliar texts, even when they challenge already held beliefs. Linda realized her own faults through reading a perspective different from her own. This practice of reconsidering already held beliefs is particularly novel, because people tend to make moral judgments emotionally and then rationalize these judgments after-the-fact (Haidt). UUWaco members, however, combat this tendency, and instead allow themselves to be impacted by a variety of literacies, actively dampening their immediate assumptions, and instead making fair, rational judgments of the texts and practices they encounter.

Multi-Religious Literacy in Forging New Literacy Practices

Coupled with the Unitarian Universalists' openness to finding truth in non-religious sources is the importance of understanding and seeking literacy sponsors with opposing viewpoints. The purpose of this approach is twofold. One, Unitarian Universalists seek to gain a better understanding of others and thus learn how to better respect and love people who lead different lifestyles. Two, exploring a variety of philosophies contributes to one's lifelong pursuit of truth, which is a key tenet of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Furthermore, this active search for literacy sponsors outside of familiar communities is a vital part of crafting literacies. Through exposing themselves to experiences and ideas beyond their own communities, UUWaco members collect experiences that can later be used in constructing new literacies. One way that Unitarian Universalists expand their understanding of other religions is through reading texts from a variety of religious traditions. Kris, the minister, believes she is obligated to know about many religions in order to understand both congregants, who identify with various religions, and others. She said she is currently reading a lot about Buddhism and has adopted many Buddhist values. Kris also reads the Bible regularly but disagrees with many of its teachings. Despite her disagreement with some scriptures, she still finds value in the biblical verses that do align with her own beliefs. Not only does Kris learn about multiple religions through reading, but she also plans on attending a Presbyterian seminary in the future though she is Agnostic. In studying a variety of religions and philosophies, Unitarian Universalists disagree with many beliefs and practices they encounter, just as Kris disagrees with Christianity, but

they still acknowledge the valuable aspects of religions they reject and even draw from these religious traditions when constructing new literacies.

According to Kris, many congregants at UUWaco come from Christian communities that they have previously abandoned because they felt hurt by the community in some way, an issue that can complicate how members interact with multi-religious literacies. UUWaco is a unique Unitarian Universalist community, because it is housed in the Bible Belt, where most of the congregation's neighbors are Christians who "live inside the Bible," meaning all their interactions are guided by a Biblical understanding of life (Carter 576). Unlike members of Unitarian Universalist churches in more liberal parts of the country, the members of UUWaco face a unique set of challenges, being a theologically liberal community in a city with a large population of conservative Christians. Because of the perceived dichotomy between conservative Christian values and progressive values of UUWaco, tensions frequently arise in UUWaco members' day-to-day interactions. Despite this tension, members of UUWaco actively seek to understand their neighbors who disagree with them by reading their religious texts and visiting their church services. Linda, for example, is in the process of reading the entire Bible even though she is Atheist:

"I'm not completely done with it. I'm in the process. I'm trying, and I really don't like it. And there's so many books in the world. I have a queue a mile long. I love to read, and I want to read, and I don't have a lot of time. So to spend it on that laborious hunk of an awful book is really hard to do, but I want to do it."

Linda continued to tell me about ways she has been hurt by Christianity, and still holds on to prejudices against Christianity and the Bible. While her prejudices contradict many of UUWaco's established values, such as open-mindedness and acceptance of other people's opinions, Linda attempts to combat this prejudice. Linda's persistence in reading the Bible demonstrates the extent of her devotion to multi-religious literacy, despite the anger she feels toward Christianity. Though she does not enjoy reading the Bible, she wants to understand its impact on American society. Throughout the interview, she mentioned instances when she felt unfairly judged because she is an Atheist. She was particularly angry about situations where people she talked to equated Christianity with morality and integrity regardless of the hypocrisy she sees in many Christian communities. Despite this conflict, Linda has many friends who are Christians and actively tries to understand this religion that has hurt her.

Another multi-religious literacy practice in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship is visiting other religious communities. This practice is important, as it shapes UUWaco members' ability to create new literacies, drawing from the rituals and texts they encounter during these visits. According to Clara, who directs Children's Religious Education at UUWaco, taking the church youth to visit other religious communities is an important part of the children's curriculum. One of the reasons they do this is to prevent the children from looking down on people from other religious groups. Thus members of UUWaco begin multi-religious literacy at a young age, as it is important to first understand and accept the differences in other beliefs, which later can be used in

creating theology. Kris also stressed the importance of adults visiting other churches. While she was studying music in college, she worked in the music programs at a Methodist church and a Baptist church and said it was enlightening to see how much she had in common with religious groups she had thought were radically different from her own. She remembers one experience that was particularly meaningful to her spiritual development:

"I think the thing that kind of brought me out of my adolescent irritation [of Christianity] was music... The Brahms Requiem is just this amazing piece of music he wrote when his mother died. He hand-selected the texts from the Bible, and it's just powerful and it's meaningful, and I just think, it can't be all bad, you know."

Based on her experiences in Christian churches, Kris believes that every Christian should spend some time attending a Unitarian Universalist church, and every Unitarian Universalist should spend some time attending a Christian church or other religious community. This conviction in the importance of interacting with a variety of literacy sponsors and finding value in unfamiliar communities, is what allows Unitarian Universalists to craft innovative literacies.

Unitarian Universalists do not just learn about other religions, but actually identify with multiple religions and philosophies. Sydnee, who identifies as both a Unitarian Universalist and a liberal Christian, describes her experience at UUWaco as "embracing *and*." What Sydnee means by this is that she and other UUWaco members identify with multiple religions or philosophies, one being Unitarian Universalism and one being their other religious or philosophical belief system (Christianity, Buddhism,

Atheism, etc.). This practice of acquiring multiple labels is another way that Unitarian Universalists forge their own religious beliefs, as their belief systems are not limited to one label. Instead Unitarian Universalists have the freedom to adopt as many or as few religious or philosophical titles as they like, contributing to their role as theology creators. Moreover, Unitarian Universalists need not identify equally with all labels they claim. It is common to instead identify primarily with one religion and partly with another. Clara, for example, grew up in a Christian home but abandoned this faith as an adult. Now a member of UUWaco, she says that she is a Unitarian Universalist “first” and a Humanist “second.” This mentality of “embracing *and*” allows plenty of room for creative freedom as Unitarian Universalists craft their own theologies, not restricted to selecting just one religion, philosophy, doctrine, or literacy practice. This approach makes UUWaco a place of varying spiritual beliefs, and thus necessitates the crafting of unique literacy practices to accommodate and allow the flourishing of diverse beliefs. Unitarian Universalists’ collecting of labels is sometimes perceived as inappropriate or insensitive by other religious groups. Though there may be issues surrounding this practice, these issues lie beyond the scope of this paper. Despite potential issues, collecting philosophical and religious labels is still a meaningful aspect of UUWaco’s religious practices and is useful in understanding their literacy.

The multi-religious influences that UUWaco members discussed in interviews appear throughout their church practices. These influences are most obvious in the Sunday service, which structurally resembles a Christian service. It begins with hymns and recitations and includes a sermon. However, the content of these

practices are entirely unique to UUWaco. In order to appeal to the diverse congregation, the sermon was devoid of any specific religious references, other than Buddhism, which Kris said is a philosophy rather than a religion. In this sense, the sermon was strictly “Unitarian Universalist,” mentioning values in the Seven Principles but not validating any other religions, so as not to encroach on the individual members’ journeys toward truth.

Language Appropriation in Multi-Religious Literacy

Though many UUWaco members do not believe in the Christian God, they still frequently use religious language to describe their spiritual practices. According to Kris, using religious language in a Unitarian Universalist congregation can sometimes upset members, because Unitarian Universalism draws a lot of people who have previously been hurt by religion and are thus sensitive to religious language. However, both Kris and Clara mentioned the value of “reclaiming religious language,” as this language is effective in describing their spiritual experiences even if it does not have the same meaning it would in other religious communities.

Part of crafting literacy at UUWaco is adapting religious language to effectively communicate with those inside and outside of UUWaco. Clara, for example, redefines “prayer” to apply to her experiences as a Humanist and an Atheist. To her, prayer is “meditative” and “thanksgiving.” She frequently journals as a form of prayer. In addition, she views prayer as a way to encourage other people. Several times people have asked Clara to pray for them, assuming that she was Christian rather than Atheist. In these experiences, Clara prayed with the Christian language and form she grew up

with, seeing this as an opportunity to encourage others by using their own language. Clara said that she is perfectly comfortable using religious language to describe her experiences, even if her words and phrases mean something different to her than to people outside of UUWaco.

Not only does repurposing religious language provide meaningful ways for Unitarian Universalists to discuss their own experiences, but it also provides a common language, a sort of connecting link to enhance communication and understanding with people of other religious communities. Kris explains this experience with religious language:

“What I often do is anytime people are talking to me in a religious context, you know, because people assume that if you're a minister that you're the same faith that they are, which is fine, I'm fine with that. But if people say, 'God is guiding you,' my heart translates that to say 'love.' To me, you can pretty much substitute those words... I love that language too. I love, you know—like NPR has that show called code-switch, where they talk about what language means to different communities. I love that you can do that code-switching in a religious context.”

Kris' ability to “code-switch” demonstrates her multi-religious literacy, by understanding other religions enough to not only use their language but interpret it in a way that is more meaningful to her. Essentially this “code-switching” allows her to communicate with and better understand people who have different beliefs. While conversations about God may make many Agnostic people uncomfortable or confused, Kris understands what Christians in her community talk about, because she has read extensively about Christianity. Furthermore, she not only listens and respects their views,

but is able to engage in meaningful conversation through using traditionally Christian words and phrases.

The literacy practices of UUWaco require not only the understanding of multiple religious texts, but also the ability to speak about these texts and religious practices with the language of an insider. By using this language, Unitarian Universalists diminish the sense of otherness in regard to different religious communities, making it easier to connect with individuals in the Waco community.

Conclusion

UUWaco members spend time creating individualized theologies, drawing from texts, experiences, and interactions with other people to shape their unique belief systems. Though it may seem that such a range of religious beliefs in one community could be divisive, the respect and celebration of these differences is the very thing that binds the UUWaco congregation together. At the core of Unitarian Universalism is a conviction that all people deserve love, respect, and dignity, regardless of their beliefs, backgrounds, or lifestyles. In order to better understand others, they consume a variety of texts, and participate in literacy practices they believe foster religious inclusion and understanding. As UUWaco members explore the literacy practices of the unfamiliar communities they visit, they act as literacysmiths, synthesizing aspects of religious and non-religious literacies into a new literacy unique to their own community.

In order for literacysmiths to create new literacies, they must first be exposed to an array of literacies, and thus they seek out new sponsors. Reading Circle, as one literacy event in which UUWaco members discuss a variety of books, is a setting in

which authors and book club members all act as sponsors. By allowing members to read whatever they choose in book club, members are exposed to more viewpoints and stories than they would if discussion centered on a single text. UUWaco's unique approach to book club provides insight into how individuals within a community may engage and discuss texts, even without reading a text. Such is one example of how literacysmithing allows creative ways to appropriate literacy and form practices that are meaningful to a community.

When building theology, Unitarian Universalists frequently appropriate the language and practices of other communities. This appropriation is obvious in UUWaco's Sunday service, which is structured after a traditional Christian service, but adapted to best serve UUWaco's congregation. UUWaco's use of multi-religious literacy as well as its members' use of religious language are valuable in understanding how communities form new literacies. The way that Unitarian Universalists appropriate religious language may also be useful to researchers of religious rhetoric, as UUWaco members' reinforce the value of spiritual language, while also shedding light on ambiguous phrases like "God," "worship," and "prayer." These findings provide new ways to think about literacy appropriation, particularly in religious communities.

In order to create distinctive literacy practices like the Sunday service and Reading Circle, literacysmiths frequently experiment with traditional literacies and are curious about other viewpoints. Analyzing this attitude toward literacy is important, because research regarding the relationship between literacy learner and sponsor often focuses on literacy learning in situations where the learner's values are mostly aligned with the sponsor's. Even

when learners do disagree with a sponsor's values, however, they often subscribe to their sponsors' literacies by necessity or convenience (e.g. workplace literacies). My exploration of UUWaco, however, indicates that when literacy learners intentionally seek sponsors with conflicting values, not by convenience or necessity, the literacies in their communities can be more complicated and multifaceted. Identifying and examining other such communities may reveal more regarding the nature of literacy acquisition, appropriation, and sponsorship.

The receptiveness to a variety of sponsors allows UUWaco members to envision ways that multi-religious literacy can fit into their already established literacy practices. This research is valuable to religious literacy studies, because little scholarship exists regarding literacy in non-evangelical religious communities. Evangelical and non-evangelical communities read and write with different goals in mind, approaching literacy through different frameworks. Thus their literacy practices provide unique ways of interacting with religious texts. For example, while both Unitarian Universalist and Evangelical communities read the Bible, their approach to this text and the language they use in discussing it varies. According to religion scholar Mark Noll, evangelical communities used to have more in common with Unitarian Universalist communities. He says that evangelicals used to value both religious and nonreligious influences in spiritual developments, but have since begun to avoid nonreligious sources. This topic could be particularly interesting, as it could address ways that individuals and communities may disassociate from literacy sponsors with opposing values and speculate reasons for doing so.

Learning more about literacysmithing may

also be useful in understanding nonreligious communities that engage and adapt a variety of literacies. Future research could explore how the concept of literacysmith translates to classrooms and workplaces. A potential research topic could be the relationship between an instructor and his or her literacy

sponsors that influence the creation of non-traditional assignments. The literacysmith is significant to literacy and religious studies and provides insight into literacy development as it occurs within individuals and communities.

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