

Birmingham Lecture

Nurturing Our Faith

Unitarian Universalism: The Religion

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Did any of you notice that the Convocation registration form says there is no UU theology? Well, it didn't say that *exactly*.

I was wondering which direction I should go on today's topic when I was filling out the Convocation Registration Form online. It had theological categories and nowhere was "UU" included as a possibility. I found the author of that part of the form and asked why. My colleague and I had a little back and forth, and if I've got it right, first he said "UU-ism is [not] a theological perspective in and of itself..." Then, like pulling teeth, I get it out of him that UU-ism "has a variety of theological perspectives." Aha.

That colleague is not alone in his first answer that Unitarian Universalism is not "a theological perspective in and of itself..." Another way of saying this is that there are no UU "beliefs" per se.

I'll give you two more examples.

In my second example, I found a colleague's sermon on the internet entitled, *What do I Say After I Say "I'm a UU?"*. Probably an important sermon for any UU preacher's portfolio. In this one, my colleague starts by saying *belief is not the collective identity of what our religion is about*. That statement may be a typical UU ministerial take on the nonexistence of UU doctrine. In the course of the sermon, she has a non-UU friend ask a UU about Unitarian Universalism and she presses this question about belief. The UU gives long answers that only seem to beg the question again. Finally, the newcomer asks the UU: "do you have a basic belief that undergirds your religious life?" Answer: "we believe and live as if life matters." And our colleague continues with a thoughtful answer.

So, there is a belief UUs share, but the UU won't give the short answer first.

My third example comes from a public talk a colleague and I had at GA workshop last year about whether or not UUs have a set of beliefs in common. He gave a good, lengthy introduction and then said: we UUs share not beliefs, but a "constellation of values." Okay.

Sometimes I think answers like these three are akin to saying you can't have a vegetable, even though it looks like I'm holding a *tomato* in my hand, because technically, a tomato is a fruit and not a vegetable. I can't help it, that's just the way it is.

Tell people "we have multiple theological perspectives." Or say "we believe & live as if life matters." Or even that we UUs share a "constellation of values. But I urge you to give the short answer first. Think about not denying UU-ism its doctrine.

The denial of Unitarian Universalism as a "real religion" is part of what could be called "the Liberal Curse." Over Labor Day weekend last year, I went to a retreat for ex-LRY'ers. Some of them I have

knowing since I was 15 years old, which for me know means over 25 years. Half are extremely productive UU citizens. They know who they are, they are growing, flexible, and making a contribution to their family, church, town, the world. They are relatively healthy, witty, and smart. They are capable of being overly generous. The other half are still doing drugs, smoking, drinking, not quite sure who they are or where they are going, and not too worried about how they'll get there.

Our district president told me about her son's very liberal alumni magazine and about how half the folks mentioned in it were doing marvelous deeds, creating noteworthy experiences, making a real contribution. The other half were at bus stations waiting for someone to come and pick them up.

The *liberal curse* is being urged on to do great deeds, to boldly march into the wide-open field of possibility, but without much definition, without much concrete, short answer guidance. Among the UUs I grew up with, this message tended to create either over-achievers or drug addicts.

To those unchurched UU Peter Pans of my generation, I want to say "You are over 40 now. It is time to get a move on. Define yourself!"

To our Faith, I want to say "You are over 40 now. It is time to get a move on. Define yourself!" Our nourishment must change. It is time to get through our mid-life crisis and proclaim our identity. For the Peter Pans, it is always about *possibility*. Always about "what might be," and not "what we are doing now."

Nourishing our faith, means defining where we are now. It means taking it out of the box. It means taking the bubble wrap off, and letting the sharp edges out – into the air and light – letting the sharp edges grow. When it isn't fuzzy anymore, and when it is clearly defined, we have to watch our step. We have to see how useful this thing really is, where it works, and where it doesn't.

Ah, but we love a faith without sharp definition. We love a faith that's smothered in bubble wrap, that *seems* to welcome everybody, a faith that makes no hard demands, a faith that doesn't have rough edges, a faith with no doctrine. A fuzzy, smooth faith that anyone can swallow whole. Not too big, not too many edges. A faith found easily enough by millionaires out on the golf course. Found by politicians at ribbon cutting ceremonies, and by those looking for shortcuts.

Sometimes this is the faith description I want to give when a newcomer is on the other end of the phone line and I don't know who they are and what they want. They are searching for– hmm– something, and I want to help them. Maybe I want to make it easy for them, give them something easy to swallow– something without edges, without clear boundaries.

I wonder if we like our theology this way because it requires so little of us. Somehow we think that if we do what we do on Sunday morning, that this accomplishes the goals of our religion. It's as if – our religion only has an evangelistic component for those who thought to come see us on Sunday morning.

It is as if our religion makes no mention of the necessity of risking embarrassment for the propagation of the faith. As if we are somehow exempt from a call to get on a soap box on a college campus and tell people the good news, just like those young guys from Campus Crusade for Christ. Those other preachers are showing up on campus telling kids all gays and lesbians are going to hell. Do we just hope MTV's theology is close enough to our own so that we don't have to get our aging bodies out there and witness to the gospel of Unitarian Universalism? Is it enough to just talk to our own people what we believe?

First, we have to define Unitarian Universalism as a religion and give the short answer. Then we have to do it in public.

What is our first priority? Our first priority is not learning about other world religions. Our first priority is

not learning how to be a good interfaith partner. Our first priority is not about being the perfect guest at other people's religious ceremonies. Our first priority is defining who we are, how we are, when we are, that is our first priority. And when we publicly define ourselves theologically, we will stand out, we won't be invisible.

A preacher invited an Amish couple he had befriended, to come see a play. Now you may recall that the Amish wear black clothing, special hats, and so forth. Even in a crowd, they can really stand out. The Amish couple had never seen a play before. The play was *Camelot*. The preacher and his wife and the Amish couple, all went to see the play. Most of the people in the theater had seen the play before. So most of the people in the theater were watching the Amish couple in their strange clothes watch *Camelot*.

If we are to take advantage of the available opportunities, we may need to take more opportunities to be the Amish couple. Be willing to be seen. Be willing to say we are different and to be public about that. Maybe we should start getting our black clothes and hats on now, because we'll need to be distinctive in the larger culture in order to command attention, and then we better be ready to answer the first wave of incoming questions. And we'll be a lot more ready to answer if we've know what distinguishes Unitarian Universalism as a religion.

Let's get to a scary challenge. If we were actually willing to *demonstrate*— if we were willing to go out there on soap boxes and preach alongside the Campus Crusade, if we convinced our congregations we would stand with them and allowed ourselves to be *searched & rescued* from upper-middle-class conformity— well then by god, it might *feel*-- as if we were donning the clothes of the Amish.

We could become that noticeable. Not for self-aggrandizement or pure novelty. But to overcome fear. To have more spiritual experience and to develop more spiritual resources to bring to bear in crisis and at moments of *kairos*. We would go out there and define ourselves theologically in order to be more truly comfortable in our faith, to know it better, its edges and contours, having taken it out of the box, stripped away the bubble wrap, and worn it out and about, here and there. And we would share it with more people. So they too, could find what we found, they too could join the club, they too could sit at the welcome table.

Here is something else you may disagree with me on. We are responsible for helping develop a UU identity in our parishioners. This is the primary way we nourish the Faith with a capital F. *Otherwise*, we are just helping along the odd religious liberal, rather than helping that odd religious liberal make the jump from being self-centered to helping continue the religion that has helped them on the path.

When we don't promote a UU identity, we end up limiting ourselves to only being a haven for religious liberals, rather than being a beacon for liberal religion.

You know the aphorism: give a man to fish, and he eats for a day, teach him to fish and he eats for a lifetime? It may be that when we preach & teach on any old thing we give our people a fish. When we help develop a UU identity in our parishioners, we teach them how to teach *others* how to fish. We nourish not only their own personal spiritual development, but we teach them how to nourish other people's spiritual development. We teach them how to contribute to something even bigger than the meaning of their own life, we teach them how to make a small contribution to the big picture. We teach them how to keep contributing to the big cauldron of stone soup, even after they are full, even after they are long gone. We help them move from being just a haven for religious liberals, to being a beacon for liberal religion.

What would it take for you to *communicate* what a UU identity is to newcomers? Are we willing – to tell them what they want to know – how they convert - move from being a non-UU to being a UU? Are we willing to do the hard work of telling them our beliefs, of explaining our doctrine? Are we willing – to go public? To encourage them to go public?

People visit our congregations as newcomers because they've heard or read something about UU beliefs. They've heard UUs *don't* believe in a punishing God or some other part of our theology we may take for granted. They come to be fed our doctrine, and then to decide on their own whether or not it is palatable, whether or not it will nurture them. They want to try a taste of it first. They want the short answer up front, then maybe they'll try the entree. They want to know – if we are for real.

It doesn't help when they ask us to define and nurture our faith, and we: name long dead UUs instead; or use euphemisms; or change the subject; or make people ask us 3 times before we give them the answer; or claim we UUs only believe in freedom. It doesn't help when we claim to do social action in the name of our faith, but we won't define our faith. Or we substitute social action for theology.

When a *fundamentalist* says UU-ism isn't a real religion, I take it as the acknowledgment that for them, UU-ism isn't a real religion. When a *colleague* says UU-ism isn't a real religion--I take it as the acknowledgment that for them, UU-ism isn't a real religion. But I wonder if they are serving UU-ism the way they should. Are you – my colleagues – willing to preach the *possibility* that for some of your listeners, Unitarian Universalism is a real religion?

For every one UU minister in this room, I bet there are more than 100 pledge-card carrying UUs who will testify to the transforming power this religion called Unitarian Universalism has had and continues to have on their life. For some it has made the difference between life and death. For others it has made all the difference in how they approach their deaths.

I have had the privilege of asking UUs with terminal illness if and how Unitarian Universalism has made a difference in how they approach their impending deaths. A man in my congregation – we'll call him Bernie the Humanist — told me he grew up a secular Jew, but was always a bit afraid of death. Years ago, becoming a UU and discovering Humanism, has eased his mind and focused his priorities in his last days. Around Labor Day last year, my mother was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. She has at least a few years of life left. She tells me she grew up with a certainty of hell and damnation. She began attending a UU church shortly after my birth and became choir director there, more recently at our congregation in Stockton, CA. She is on disability now, mostly in bed, so she is easy to reach by telephone. She tells me Unitarian Universalism has convinced her God is Love, and she no longer fears death.

So please, don't tell Bernie the Humanist, and don't tell my mother that UU-ism isn't a real religion with a real theology. Say it in your car or tell your colleagues at a minister's gathering or tell your therapist, or tell me, but as a representative of the UU faith don't tell the newcomer that UU-ism isn't a real religion with a real theology. For if and when you do, you foist upon them a limitation you decided for your self. You may steer them away from the ever-widening possibilities of a real and transforming faith. They ask for bread, and you would hand them a stone? Don't rob their hope. Don't pilfer their courage.

The UU faith *requires* conversion and transformation. Trust that your congregation will respond to that message. Trust that preaching or educating or organizing in a way that nourishes our faith means taking chances. Take a leap of faith by showing some reckless confidence in the power of the UU good news!

Don some metaphorical black clothes, figure out what UUs believe in common. Define our doctrine on your own, in a group, and not for proscribing or prescribing but for de-scribing. Not to keep out or push in, but to say what we believe. Take a risk to look foolish in front of your colleagues for a better chance at definition.

When our *Coming of Age* class this year wanted to know what UUs believe – and not just the Principles & Purposes or the "stuff in the hymnal," I took a risk and came up with a handout which I gave to them and to which I give you. I don't submit this as the be-all and end-all of UU theology, just an imperfect stab at it, just a draft, an attempt. This offering of doctrine is not a stone tablet I gave to our youth, but an offering of service. So they would know that I *and we* are serious about this. So they would know that when their

minister says: We're here to try the impossible; We're here to try things that can't be done – that they would know someone was willing to risk it anyway (see handout at bottom).

I wanted them to see someone take a risk at definition. Orthodox religions provide only the Question and Answer. Not how to get from the Q to the A.. Ignore the blank space, says orthodoxy, concentrate on the Q and A. That's *their* version of doctrine, not ours.

UU-ism says you cannot just give the Q and then an A, you have to *show* your work. In high school math classes, you can't just repeat the problem assigned to you and spit out the answer. You have to *show* your work. UU-ism is the same way. It's *how* you get to the A from the Q that matters. The Qs and the As will change over time, but the uncovering of what's in between is what makes you uniquely UU. Similarly, we can't just use the big words, we have to define them. It's better to give the short answer first. Then the long answer.

If we are asked to nourish our faith by defining it, we have to deliver. When newcomers or our own kids ask us for this kind of nourishment, they are looking to us to be the cooks. Not tyrant cooks, but not cooks who refuse to make the dish, either.

We can't just point to a list of famous cooks from the past. The people are hungry. We can't just say– you know you look like you've had enough theology, maybe you should go on a diet. We can't just keep on serving leftovers or keep serving mystery meat. We can't just draw pictures of food on cardboard and hand that out. We can't just hand out cookbooks or just set the table and leave them there or pretend we're the waiter and not the chef. Of course, some people will need booster seats, extra help, and high chairs, and even a kids meal with a token, so they remember what they had, and where they were.

When you don't feed the people what they need, they will eventually become disillusioned because you are not delivering on your implicit promise. The promise that says: as a UU preacher, as a UU teacher, I will tell you what UUs believe.

Let us define the faith. Let us define the faith in public. Let us help develop UU identity so that more people are equipped to share the new good news. Let us nourish this faith.

It happens every year on November 11. At 11 minutes past 11 o'clock in the morning. A small town in France. The town used to be in Germany at one point, but it's in France now. And the bell tolls. And the mayor comes out to the crowd. He wears a funny hat and a big sash across his robe. There are mothers and fathers and children. Hundreds of them. Wearing little buttons and ribbons. And the mayor reads the names of the dead from that town who gave up their lives to World War I. The dead had some idea of what they were fighting for. But World War I is so long ago, no one in that French town remembers anyone who died. And yet, they come out anyway. And they shed a tear for a stranger. A stranger who gave their life to an ideal that somehow lasted past their life to be handed down as a gift to those gathered in the town square. And the bell tolls, and the mayor reads their names, and people shed a tear.

And there will come a Sunday. In a town far away. And a man or woman wearing a robe will read aloud the name of the dead. My name and your name. There will be mothers and fathers and children. Thousands of them. Mostly strangers who don't know us. Wearing little buttons and ribbons. They will guess that we gave our lives to an ideal that somehow lasted past our life. To them we will be strangers who didn't know who their gift was going to exactly, but strangers who made the sacrifice nevertheless. Let them say of us – that we defined the faith when it was our turn.

Appendix

Unitarian Universalism: The Religion

=many scriptures, not one

=here and now, not the hereafter

=freedom, reason, tolerance, love as overarching values

=deeds not creeds, show your work, live your faith

=evolutionary theology, language changes

=we are saved by Love,

we are made holy by character

We share with other religious liberals:

=no original sin, God is Love

=unity of experience: faith & knowledge, sacred & secular

=non-creedal, authority of conscience

=need for religious community

=congregational polity, democratic methods

=a spark of "divinity" or the "highest good" in every person

=a destination: an earth made fair,

all her people one, we co-create the world

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