

**This I Believe**  
**03AUG08**

Good morning. Have you heard this one?

"There are two groups of people in the world: those who believe that the world can be divided into two groups of people, and those who don't."

I'm fascinated by the idea that there are two kinds of people in the world, and apparently other people are too, because there are a lot of jokes like this.

I think a lot about the two kinds of people who are Church Goers and Non-Church Goers. I've been both kinds, so you would think I'd be able to speak for both groups.

But I can't, because now I'm a very happy Church Goer, happier as a Unitarian Universalist than as the non-church goer I was before. And at this point I don't understand why everyone isn't a church goer.

I hope you aren't put off by my calling this fellowship a church. It's short hand. You know what I mean.

So how did I go from having no interest in church and only a vague interest in spirituality to being a regular here at UUFSD? Why would anyone switch their Sunday attendance from the YMCA to the UU? Do all non-church goers have deep, unrecognized spiritual needs, or was it just me?

A bit of background. I was born and raised in New Jersey and was baptized by my uncle, who was a Lutheran minister. My aunt and uncle were my godparents, but they were unable to indoctrinate me, because my parents divorced and married my step-parents when I was small, and I only saw my father and his side of the family a few times a year.

When I was a child, my mother was an atheist, but my grandmother, who lived with us, was a Christian. And she took me to an Episcopal church. I loved walking to church with my grandmother and singing in the choir. However, as I got older, I was influenced by my mom and questioned Christianity. And although I was confirmed in the church when I was 11, I was already on my way to being an atheist.

It's strange to me now that my mom was an atheist all those years ago, because now she's gone back to being an Episcopalian. As you can see from the short bio in the order of service, my mom, Ellen Wolcott, is a

composer. Most of the music she wrote when she was an atheist was about her profound reverence for the natural world. A love of the classical piano music she played and her compositions is deep in my bones. I am so thrilled that Monique is playing some of her music today.

After my confirmation, I threw myself into the business of growing up, which I have to admit is taking a very long time. I still seem to be learning the art of being a mature adult, especially with regard to parenting.

I didn't think seriously about religion for about 30 more years. I was in school; I worked full time as a scientist; I lived in Manhattan, Rochester NY, and in the San Francisco bay area. And in those places, even in Rochester, I found that my heathen, God-less ways were validated.

Of course I lived in interesting times. There were plenty of opportunities to get involved in political action and cleaning up the Earth. Though I wasn't always on the front lines, my values were certainly shaped by the anti-war movement, civil rights and gay rights activism, and feminism. Over time, appreciating the natural beauty of the Earth and preserving it became a passion for me, resonating with my childhood love of my mom's beautiful garden, the East Coast seasons, and the splendor of California.

As a young adult atheist, I didn't have a spiritual practice, but I did have a special place up on one of San Francisco's hills where I would go in the hope of spiritual guidance.

And I read *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass, a book that still resonates with me. At the time, I interpreted his message to be that searching for a religious community was pointless because they were all the same. Now I recognize the value of honoring the spirit of life by coming together as a community no matter what your religion is.

In northern California, I found it easy to avoid thinking about religion most of the time. But there are certain milestones in your life when the topic of religion can't be avoided. Getting married is one of them.

When I got married the first time, my Jewish husband, who was also an atheist, and I were married by a justice of the peace. When Dave and I got married, the ceremony was performed by a Universal Life minister. We rented a priest costume for him, but my Catholic mother-in-law was not fooled. Or amused.

And then 15 years ago we moved to southern California. Here we found a lot of Christians and very few kindred souls. At first this was very difficult

for me, and then I found, for the first time in my life, that I could actually be friends with devout Christians. Still, I thought there were two kinds of people: religious people and non-religious people, like me.

The truth is that I just didn't identify with people who went to Church. Science tells us that it's human nature to mentally divide people into Like Me and Not Like Me categories. I think we're always scanning for these categories and defining ourselves as being one way or another way, justifying our behavior by telling ourselves a story like, "Oh I'm just not the kind of person who goes to church."

Science also tells us that we tell ourselves stories to rationalize the sometimes conflicting views of the two halves of our brains. Apparently, we are all two kinds of people inside our own brains.

It takes a lot of energy to tell ourselves these stories over and over again to maintain our egos, our personas, our masks in the world. I'm trying to change the stories I tell myself about myself, and not just because they've become so boring after all these years, but because I know these stories keep me from moving forward.

Imagine what we could do if we let go of these stories...

Anyway, as our kids got to be school age, Dave and I started thinking about what to tell them about religion, because we were pretty sure we were never going to be church goers. It was Dave's idea to get a children's bible and read from it now and then. And we took the kids to a few services at Christian churches. This was our version of a Coming of Age program, but it was disjointed and random.

And then almost 5 years ago we found this Fellowship. I wanted to try it, because I'd heard about the amphitheater and wanted to see if I could catch the spirit in a Sunday service held outside. Everything was right about it. A good balance of beautiful and funky. Friendly, but not over-friendly. Nothing objectionable about the principles, in fact they matched our beliefs really well. And even though our younger son, Adam, was not so thrilled about it, our older son, Jacob, wanted to come back, so we gave it a try and never left.

OK, so far, lapsed Christian, child of the 60s, atheist with children joins UU fellowship. Ho hum, it's a common story, shared with many of you. The interesting part to me is what comes after joining the UU - the choices we make about how to live as Unitarian-Universalists.

There's a wide spectrum of reasons for being a UU, and it's not safe to assume what another person's reasons are—even in your own home. The UU principles are open to interpretation, at least in terms of the actions we take as a result of what we believe in.

We like to think that we're all in this together, but in a way, we're all in this alone. As an individual, it is up to me to decide what actions to take to express my UU principles. This is both attractive to me and hard to live with. We have the mandate to take on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning as individuals, but living the other principles requires both individual action and action as a community. It's not easy.

No wonder people keep saying that taking on a leadership role at a UU is like herding cats....

One thing that really impresses me about UUism is that its roots are very old, and that it's still evolving. I like that the sources of today's UUism are Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, humanist, earth-centered, and especially the part about the “transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

We hear about ideological divisions in other religions that are leading to schisms, rather than to an evolution of doctrine. Schisms in Protestant churches are happening today around rainbow issues. To me, this is a good thing and long overdue.

I think it's important to ask people to declare whether they stand on the side of love or not. And it shouldn't be a matter of life and death to say what you think is right and to be who you really are....

The meditation groups may be surprised to learn that I'm a big fan of Buddhism, because I hardly ever meditate with them. I'm enjoying my own path to learning about Buddhism and want to keep my beginner's mind as long as possible.

I don't meditate much, but when I do, I think of coming to this amphitheater. I sit down and take in the space. The benches, the cushions, the bricks, the umbrellas, the plants on the slope, my friends arriving to join our UU sangha. And even though the freeway sounds are audible, they fade away.

When I meditate, I treat my thoughts like the freeway noise. The thoughts are there, and they keep going. I don't try to stop the cars on the freeway, and I don't try to stop my thoughts. I just don't pay attention to them.

Instead, I focus on the feeling of peace I get when I'm not focused on the freeway of my thoughts. It's nice while it lasts, but at some point my focus wanders, and I lose my patience for meditating or I go to sleep.

I also do a walking meditation with my dog. My dog is kind of hyper, and I often start our walks with a silent chant called The Three Jewels. It goes like this: I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha. I picture a peaceful Buddha. I think about the Dharma, which is the word for the teachings of the Buddha. And I think about my Sangha, here and in the world.

I love the idea of refuge. Does UUism feel like a refuge to you? What about this fellowship? Do you feel lifted up when you attend? Does it fill you with the spirit of life? I hope so.

Sometimes I wonder who we might be leaving out. Who needs refuge in our congregation? Why aren't they getting it? What can I do?

Our own Karl Weston says "we do not have to do anything. We do not have to take care of ourselves by ourselves. Refuge is always there. The spirit of life is always there. The infinite spirit of love lifts us up."

May we be filled with lovingkindness and give it to others....

So what do I believe? I believe that our lives are transitory and almost infinitely small when put in the perspective of the Earth's population, let alone the life span of the universe.

Do I believe in a God with a personality and preferences for one person versus another? No. Do I believe that my dog and I will go to heaven or hell when we die? No. Do I believe I lived a past life and will be reincarnated? No.

What I do believe is that even though we are very small in the grand scheme of the universe, how we live our lives is very important.

I believe we need to take our beliefs seriously and act on them. A few weeks ago, Jean Rabenold spoke about how her UU and Buddhist beliefs fire her commitment to opposing the death penalty. She spoke about having compassion for the other kind of people, the ones we can't identify with, the ones who have committed horrible crimes. She said what I believe. That we are all doing the best we know how to do. Even if we know we can do better next time, this is all we can do right now.

Actually, the whole truth is that in the core of my spirituality, I believe there are not two kinds of people. Despite the fact that fear drives us to separate into Like Me and Not Like Me categories, I believe in my heart that we all have the spirit of life in common.

I can feel the connection of my heart to others when I see myself become energized, excited, filled with emotion, and attached to ideas and desires. I believe we all share that spirit, that it truly connects us to everyone, and that it would be a better world if we softened our hearts and looked for common ground instead of differences.

When UUs work for social justice with people of other faiths, it doesn't matter if the work is being done to glorify a deity or because it's the right thing to do. It feels great to me to share the spirit of life with people of other faiths. It makes me happy when I find people who are not UUs agreeing with me that what we do during the week matters more than what we say on Sunday. I'm happy for everyone who finds a community, religious or not, that they can resonate with and that supports their efforts to live according to their principles.

And I'm very impressed with people who can transcend the dogma of their own religion and tap into the spirit of love....

I believe it's important to struggle against our instinct to exclude those who appear to be different from ourselves. I believe it's not useful or even funny to talk about being a recovering Christian. It puts an unnecessary distance between religions and diminishes all of us.

If you haven't tried it yet, I recommend taking the quiz on [beliefnet.com](http://beliefnet.com) that will show you how much you have in common with people of other religions.

In the end, I don't believe there is much difference between church goers and non-church goers or between enlightened people and the rest of us.

Perhaps, if we didn't have such complicated relationships with ourselves, it would be easier to identify with others.

Perhaps, if we didn't come from the confusing heritage of both Emerson's self-reliance and the principle of the interdependent web, it would be easier to ask for help, to offer our talents to the community, and to lean on each other in times of difficulty.

Perhaps, if we could really breathe in peace and breathe out love, we could spread peace and love to the whole world....

But let's get back to the two kinds of people. I believe there are two kinds of people in the world. Those who are ready to stand up and say what they believe and those who aren't. I agree with Steve Rosen and others who suggest that giving a This I Believe statement should be a rite of passage for UUs. I highly recommend at least writing your This I Believe: to clarify your values, to ask yourself if the stories you tell yourself are true or not, and to renew your vows to the UU principles.

If you decide to write your This I Believe, I hope you'll share it with us someday. Walk through the imaginary door marked This I Believe sermon givers, and speak from your heart. There's no way to do it wrong....

I also believe it's important not to take ourselves too seriously. Life can be pretty funny sometimes. And even though I believe we're all one kind of people, I still laugh at those jokes about two kinds of people.

Thank you for listening. Namaste.