

OUR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST WAY OF RELIGION

Just who are we Unitarian Universalists anyway? I thought it'd be a fine question to answer on New Members Sunday, for old-timers as well as newcomers.

Let me get right to it. For starters, we have in our ranks believers and skeptics, pagans and mystics. We continually draw folks from Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, and Islamic as well as non-faith backgrounds. The heart of the matter is this: anyone is welcome in our midst who speaks and practices her or his truths in a respectful manner.

In the Christian scriptures, Jesus boldly claims that every viewpoint has its own merit, "for wisdom is justified by all her children." Yes, wisdom from our liberal religious perspective, has many faces and is discovered in multiple forms, for our living tradition draws from the world over and from every era.

There's the story about the Indiana farmer who goes to the big city circus. Upon seeing a giraffe for the very first time in his life, he exclaims: "But there ain't no such animal!" Well, sometimes when I attempt to describe Unitarian Universalism as a bona fide religion to newcomers, I feel like I'm running into Indiana farmers gawking at giraffes and saying: "But there ain't no such animal!"

People grounded in conventional religion invariably perceive us to be an intellectual, social, and ethical enterprise, but rarely a religious one. They just don't associate how we do religion with the standard brands of religion. And so, in their eyes, "there ain't no such animal" as Unitarian Universalist religion.

Even some of our own members have promoted that image across the years, with comments like: “Hey you’ll really like our San Dieguito Fellowship. We aren’t very religious at all.” Fortunately, our self-perception is changing, for most of us are finally seeing ourselves not as an alternative to religion but as a religious alternative. To be sure, we offer a very different kind of religious path than do the evangelicals or even the mainliners, but a very crucial path nonetheless, and one increasingly attractive to people who want to be reasonable, inclusive, spiritual, and compassionate all at the same time.

So today I want to highlight some key dimensions of our Unitarian Universalist way of religion, knowing full well that each of you might well answer the what, how, where, when, and who of Unitarian Universalism somewhat differently than I do. And next month, if starting from scratch again, I might deliver a different sermon myself.

Let’s start with our core beliefs.

One of the comments often heard about Unitarian Universalists is that we don’t believe in anything. Our general aversion to creeds and dogmas has mistakenly led folks to assume that we’re a negative religion without positive convictions. Couldn’t be farther from the truth!

The fact is, we cherish countless affirmations: ranging from responsible freedom; to the essential goodness of human beings; to the transformative power of love; to the necessity of the democratic process; to being an intentionally welcoming and diverse faith; to the never-ending quest for truths, not just one final Truth; to whole-hearted acceptance of this natural universe as our place of origin and true home; to the conviction that divinity is experienced inside this world not outside it; to our claim that the universe is unified, even if unfathomable; to our trust in the authority of individual conscience,

guided by reason and intuition; to the power of dwelling within the caress and critique of a beloved community; to the embodiment of an ethical, liberating religion in our private and public lives.

Wow, that's a large list of strong affirmations, and I'm just getting started! And here's the clincher: any of us may add to or subtract from that foundational list throughout the course of our religious journey. In short, ours is a faith that invites, nay requires, regular amendments to life's minutes!

So I hope it's unmistakably clear that we Unitarian Universalists hold as many explicit affirmations as any other religious movement. We're not a reactionary faith but a progressive one. Now, it's true, we don't systematically organize our beliefs into a set creed. But scratch only slightly any Unitarian Universalist and a waterfall of affirmations gushes forth. Try it sometime with any person sitting next to you in our Fellowship—better yet, try it with yourself.

Now, of course, there also exist differences among us to boggle the mind. We range from theists to humanists, and multiple combinations thereof. We lean strongly toward and starkly against traditional modes of worship. We respond differently to various symbols. Our lifestyles and political opinions vary. We sing differently, reason differently, and feel things differently. But as Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: “if two people think exactly alike, one of them probably isn't thinking!”

The second question, equally important to our Unitarian Universalist way of religion is the *how*. How do we gain our beliefs and how do we share them?

It's quite fair to say that we come by our religious values democratically. That means the convictions we hold aren't revealed to us so much as experienced by us. As

Unitarian Universalists we freely examine every idea that comes our way, keeping for tenets of faith only those wisdoms that prove truthful to ourselves and respectful of others.

One of our mid-20th century Unitarian religious leaders, Burdette Backus, put it persuasively when he wrote: “We sometimes hear it said by some of our own members that you can believe whatever you please. Actually we’re confronted with a paradox; were not free to believe what we please, we’re free to believe what we *must!*”

To be sure, there’s a lot of tantalizing whipped cream that we Unitarian Universalists, being human, are tempted to believe, but our minds and hearts simply won’t let us. For we’re a people who live inescapably in this one, precious real world and affirm only what our souls permit us to affirm.

Thomas Jefferson stated a universal conviction among us when he said: “I may recover health by medicine I’m compelled to take, but I cannot be saved by worship I do not believe.”

Here at San Dieguito, we claim that you cannot violate your integrity nor discount the findings of your personal conscience and long remain a Unitarian Universalist. As a New Yorker joke of years past put it: “The trouble with Unitarians is that they have trouble telling a lie!”

You bet we do. Trouble telling lies and trouble living lies. We contend that you can’t sell your spirit or compromise your mind. They’re you, and you’re the ultimate determiner of what and how you believe. I often tell newcomers that we aspire to be a religion of no lies and no cruelty, or put positively: a religion of unyielding honesty and universal compassion.

Our Unitarian Universalist way of religion is demanding. *Easy* is not in our working vocabulary. Our faith entails a gradual, never-ending challenge. For when struggle is replaced by sedate doctrines and empty rituals, the soul goes flat, and boredom and conformity rush in.

Some people fear anything new even if it resembles the truth. There was a person who heard for the first time about the theory of evolution. It troubled her greatly as she listened to an exposition of its implications. Then she prayed, “God grant that it may not be true, but if it is true, God grant that not many people are gonna hear about it!”

I think the trick for us, for religious liberals, is to be open of heart and mind without being empty of heart and mind. To be firm without being unbending, flexible without turning wishy-washy, to make our strong claims in the midst of life’s flux.

German philosopher Karl Jaspers put it aptly:

This is the vision of a great and noble life: to endure ambiguity in the movement of truth and to make light shine through it; to stand fast in uncertainty, and to prove capable of unlimited love and hope.

So, *how* do we believe: with utmost care and responsibility, with passionate fervor combined with a light touch. We’re seekers who forge commitments from the core of our own souls, realizing that in religion, as in life, nothing is secure and everything matters. We simply keep editing our religious odysseys all the way to the grave.

For example, when Ralph Waldo Emerson was an older man he preached for nearly two years as an interim minister at the East Lexington, Massachusetts church, using sermons he’d preached as a young Unitarian minister. It’s reported that as Emerson read the sermons, he would pause now and again, look up, and with a wry smile say, “Well, I no longer believe that,” and then return to reading his sermon. Such is the nature

of our Unitarian Universalist religion. It's a changing, growing faith, and we often leave behind or alter the convictions of yesterday. Our living mantra is the 16th century phrase of our Transylvanian Unitarian founder, Francis David: *semper reformanda*, "ever-changed and being changed".

There are more questions to address on this New Members' Sunday concerning the Unitarian Universalist way of religion: when and where do we believe? Well, in a nutshell: all the time and everywhere. Our convictions are shallow, even phony, if they're reserved for special occasions and holy spots. Our beliefs and behaviors must match up, our religion and politics reinforce each other, our attitudes and actions harmonize. Why? Because that's the way we do religion. After all, vital religion, like good music, needs no defense but rather rendition. And sense of humor where we take ourselves seriously but never somberly.

Unitarian Universalists contend that the religious drive cuts across all phases of human existence. It's not a slice of life, like a section of *Newsweek* magazine. It's present in every part of life: present in our sexuality, our imagination, our intelligence, our work-life, our parenting, our social witness, and our devotional practices.

My religion is the sense and glory I make out of my stay on this earth. As Robert Frost boldly declared: "Earth's the right place for love. I don't know of any place where it's likely to go better." Unitarian Universalism also doesn't know of any place where our religion's likely to go better than amid this dazzling, complicated, messy universe.

The final question concerning our Unitarian Universalist way of religion is: in *whom* do we believe? Well, believing unreservedly in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we clearly believe in you, whoever you are. We affirm that you, in the face

of human tragedy, inner demons, or natural disaster, can endure with dignity. We affirm that you, however limited by health of mind, spirit, body or material resources, can think honestly and live nobly. We believe that you, even in the throes of death, can be a resounding affirmation of creative love.

Do not misunderstand, we believe you can. We don't claim that you always will. And that's why we all need the challenge and comfort of a beloved community, like our San Dieguito Fellowship, a community that dares to afflict us when we're too comfortable and comfort us when we're afflicted, to forgive us when we fail, to always grant us second chances, to nudge us onward toward our better selves.

Who else do we turn to as Unitarian Universalists? Surely, inner and higher powers beyond our creation or control, sacred teachings and healing rituals from every available source and era.

Clearly, we're neither self-sufficient nor do we submit to gurus or deities. Ours is the partnered path of religion. Independence is a critical but merely instrumental value for us: living interdependently with human, animal, and divine companions is our ultimate mission.

We give thanks, we praise, we love and are loved, not in a vacuum but in relationship with other realities that transcend yet include us. Indeed the heart of our religion is communion, dialogue, and encounter: engaging ever more deeply our selves and our neighbors, the natural world and divine mystery.

In summary, becoming a member of our Unitarian Universalist religion doesn't commit you to any set of affirmations except your very own: truthfully, responsibly, and everlastingly updated. We encourage our members to recognize that what we affirm is

bound together with how we believe which is demonstrated in every where and when of our lives and finally rooted in our very own *who*.

Gertrude Stein once said about Paris: “It’s not what Paris gives you; it’s what she doesn’t take away.”

That remark rings true for Unitarian Universalism as well. For we can’t give you everything. We can’t possibly meet all your earthly fantasies or promise you a piece of heavenly real estate, nor will we even try. But we can promise you an accepting, open home in which to grow your spirit and multiply your gifts, sink your roots and spread your wings...alone and together. And moreover, we’ll never take away your mind or compromise your soul in the process of doing our brand of religion.

I don’t know about you, but the warranty on my spirit expires every once in a while. I need a religion that through its patient prodding graces me with an extension. So I come to this Fellowship when I’m empty and a song or some solace, moments of silence or clear-cut marching orders, a vision or someone’s touch revives me and sends me back on my path. Until I grow weary and need, yet again, to be prodded and embraced by a healthily imperfect congregation such as the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito: our chosen home of open minds, loving hearts, and welcoming hands.

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