

Being a UU

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera, delivered at First Unitarian Church, March 12, 2017

This sermon is called “Being a UU.” If you’re new to this church, you might be wondering what that means. Maybe you figured it out but maybe not, and I don’t blame you. UU is our shorthand for Unitarian Universalist.

The name of this place, First Unitarian Church, is a little bit of a misnomer. We are not just Unitarian, but Unitarian Universalist. UU.

Sometimes out in the wider world somebody will ask me what religious tradition I belong to and I’ll say, “I’m a UU.” And they’ll give me the strangest look.

Does this ever happen to any of you guys?

What’s a Yoo-yoo? The person will ask. And I realize that it sounds like it’s spelled Y-O-O-Y-O-O.

It sounds like a church from a Dr. Seuss book. Like a bunch of wild-haired characters in striped hats marching up a hill with chalices in their hands.

The Yooyoos have church, a church with no steeple.

Instead it has coffee, and caffeinated people.

They sing when they gather, and sing when they go,

What do they believe in? Sometimes they don’t know.

I’m just kidding. Although we embrace theological diversity, and we value questioning and skepticism as important parts of spirituality, we actually believe in quite a lot.

We believe that all humans have inherent worth and dignity. We honor our interconnectedness with animals, plants, the environment, and everything that is part of existence. We believe in practicing democracy, and not authoritarianism, in church and beyond.

We believe in the right of conscience. We believe in encouraging one another in the free search for truth and meaning. We believe in equity, compassion, and justice.

In other words, we uphold values, rather than creeds.

And we believe that this life, your life, matters.

Your life matters. No matter what has happened. No matter how you are feeling about it today.

UUs don't believe you need church in order to be holy. We ask you to believe that you are already holy, and to come into community just as you are, and prepare yourself to grow, heal, give, be.

You don't need church to be holy, but we create one together, because in community we are challenged, encouraged, held accountable, and loved.

And we do this together not just here in this sanctuary but with over 1000 Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country, and even more beyond this country. There are Unitarian Universalist congregations in Canada, Kenya, the Phillipines, India, and Mexico, and in other countries, too.ⁱ

Some with steeples, some without. There are also campus ministries, military ministries, prison ministries, and even a virtual congregation, the Church of the Larger Fellowship, which anyone can join anywhere, and be part of an online UU community, or receive correspondence by mail.

This is a sermon about that bigger version of us, about the larger denomination. I'm especially going to focus on our denomination here in the US, because it is a big, boisterous group.

Every week we engage in rituals that connect us to them.

Some of the things we do are very old, like singing hymns to tunes that people have sung for hundreds of years. Some are kind of new, like the guest at your table program. And some are old and new. There's one ritual we do very often, and it has become the symbol of our denomination. What is it?

The chalice. The chalice is both old and new.

There is a podcast called "The Pamphlet," which if you are remotely interested in Unitarian Universalist history, you will really enjoy.ⁱⁱ It's funny and smart, and occasionally a little shocking. Seriously. Their first episode was about Unitarianism and pirates in the 17th century.

A few months ago, the Pamphlet's co-hosts, Sean and Susan, decided to investigate the history of the chalice. If you've been a UU for a while, you've probably heard a commonly told version of that history, which starts with the Unitarian Service Committee. That's what the UU Service Committee was called before Unitarians and Universalists merged to create one denomination in the 1960's.

Before the 1960's, it was called the Unitarian Service Committee, and it was created during World War II, to help rescue people from the Nazi's.

The filmmaker Ken Burns made a documentary about it last year, called "Defying the Nazis."

During that time, service committee members determined that having some kind of logo on their official paperwork would help lend it a sense of legitimacy and formality, which would encourage officials to take them more seriously. An important looking document could sometimes keep a person out of jail, or get them through a checkpoint. It mattered a lot.

So with a pencil and ink, an artist named Hans Deutsch drew a chalice, the kind of chalice Romans and Greeks put on their altars, with a flame burning in it. The flame, Deutsch said, signified the burning of holy oil, a symbol of holiness and sacrifice.¹

From this point, the way we usually tell the story is that the symbol became so meaningful to people, and so popular, that it caught on throughout the denomination, and it took on many rich meanings related to our faith.

But, this is where Sean and Susan, the historians who host the Pamphlet podcast went, wait a minute... how did *that* happen? How did it go from being a symbol on letterhead, to a 3-dimensional object used in worship services? Because that's actually a pretty big leap, from the page, to the sanctuaries of hundreds and hundreds of UU churches.

Some people credited a minister named Kenneth Patton, who was very creative about worship in the 1950's. He led an experimental congregation called the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston. One time a colleague dropped in and found Patton on his hands and knees painting the Andromeda Galaxy on the walls around the pulpit.ⁱⁱⁱ

Well, he had started lighting lamps in worship too, but he always denied being the one who brought the chalice to our Sunday services in UU-dom.

In another instance, Sean and Susan came across a 1950's photograph of church leaders in Oxford, Ohio using a flaming chalice to... set fire to a copy their mortgage. Never mind that-- what were they doing with an actual chalice? Could it be that they were the first ones to light one in worship? One of the co-hosts actually traveled to Oxford to find out. But what she discovered was that not only did they *not* use a flaming chalice in worship, it's unclear that fellowship ever held any Sunday services at all!

The 1950's were a *very* secular atheist era in Unitarian Universalism. There wasn't much ritual around at all, in a lot of churches and fellowships.

It turns out that, actually, that fact—the lack of worship rituals—turns out to be a piece of the puzzle.

¹As described by the Rev. Charles Joy, who knew Deutsch. Qtd. in <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/chalice/flaming-chalice>

You see, while other leaders were celebrating mortgage pay offs or fashioning secular-type services for adults, the leaders of *children's* religious education were trying to come up with ways to pass this old, evolving tradition down to kids.

While adults in that era had often joined UU churches precisely to get away from the usual kind of religion and were often happy with lecture-type services, the kids learned better from stories and rituals.

They needed interesting, tangible, meaningful things to do that would bind them together with one another and with our faith.

It was the leaders of children's programming who perceived that Hans Deutsch's flaming chalice could be taken off the letterhead and turned into a real life thing. They started lighting chalices for children's services. The children loved it.

Then the children shared that ritual with the adults during intergenerational services. And the adults appreciated it, too. One minister of religious education, upon her retirement, gave a chalice to the congregation as a parting gift.

It was such a good symbol. Its meanings easily extend beyond Deutsch's feeling for it. A chalice represents a vessel waiting to be filled, like the seeker who is open to spiritual revelation. You know that concept: coming to the divine like an empty cup, ready to be filled? Or, through meditation, we empty ourselves to become more present what is, making ourselves available for wisdom, compassion, enlightenment.

The chalice also represents something ready to be poured out, like the love and service we give of ourselves to the world.

In the back of our hymnals, there is a reading for chalice lightings, reading #455, that goes, "Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back."

In the ancient tradition from which Unitarian Universalism emerged, the chalice represents also our shared cup, communion.

The flame represents sacrifice, but also the light of hope. Fire is our inner light, the divine light, and the spark of life.

Fire also represents the purifying effect that certain kinds of suffering can have in our lives, how it can help us get down to what is truly important, burning away layers of ego or of petty or materialistic concern.

(Anybody know something about that?)

No wonder it caught on. In the mid-1980's a chalice was lit at our denomination's annual general assembly. And today, it is considered THE symbol of Unitarian Universalism. Lit in churches all across our country and beyond.

I love this story for the way our children led the adults in our denomination.

It's a good metaphor for so much about us. Unitarian Universalism is a living tradition. It is constantly learning, developing, and discovering.

It emerged from a long history of religion that you can trace right back to the beginning of human consciousness, back through the ancient traditions that birthed Judaism, through Christianity, and then Protestantism, through the religious sifting of the Enlightenment.

Our spirit of openness to learning, that devotion to the free search for truth, led our tradition to embrace the discoveries of science, allowed us to be excited about revelation, about discoveries of new things relating to humanity or the world.

We UUs see that revelation did not end with a resurrection 2000 years ago. It did not end when the stories we have in today's bible were put in writing and placed together, while countless others were left out to be discovered later buried in caves or waiting in the dark of forgotten libraries. Revelation is ongoing. We are always learning.

In this way, we are still very much a part of a long tradition, and we always will be, but we are not slaves to it. The tradition is not our master. Instead, it is alive in us, because of us, and we are continually shaping it.

I don't mean that in an abstract way. People like you and me really do set the course of this denomination. We shape it.

We practice what is called congregational polity, which simply means that members of congregations, not popes or bishops or other authorities, are ultimately in charge.

We are experiencing that on the local level, right here, right now, as this congregation does the important work of discernment about its next senior minister.

No one else is going to tell you what you need to do. Not the president of the UUA, Peter Morales. Not a denominational executive in our district. Not Christine, and not me. You are the ones who know where you want to see this congregation go next, what kind of minister you need to get there.

That's the work the search committee is doing with you, and it's so wonderful to see that over 300 of you have already participated. It's a wonderful sign of the health and vitality of this congregation.

And this congregation sets its direction through congregational meetings, in which you elect lay leaders from among you and vote on important issues.

On the larger scale, UUs practice this polity in lots of ways too, of which the main one is our annual General Assembly, which we call GA for short.

In his thoughtful sermon last week, Ian Carillo told you about last year's GA in Columbus, Ohio when UUs faced a vote on a most challenging subject pertaining to Israel and Palestine.

This year GA will take place in New Orleans, from June 21-25. Our congregation is entitled to 16 voting delegates. If you are interested in going, stop by the Denominational Affairs table in the social hall and let Mara and Judy know.

We've only used all of our delegate credentials once since I've been here—we'd love to see them get used up more often. Even if you can't make it in person, you may still be able to be a remote delegate. A lot of GA programming is available though live stream. Some years we've even had GA watching parties for the best parts.

This year, something particularly exciting is happening. We are electing a new president for our denomination. And all of the candidates are women. We are about to have our first female president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Break out those pantsuits one more time. ALL of the candidates are women.

But GA's aren't just about voting. They also include Racial Justice workshops; trainings for church members in a variety of issues related to congregational life, such as fundraising and planning intergenerational events and doing outreach. There is a huge variety of worship services, with everything from rap music to gospel choirs to classical music.

There is the famous annual Ware lecture, which has been delivered by some truly remarkable speakers, including Martin Luther King Jr, Cornell West, Marian Wright Edelman, Jesse Jackson, Karen Armstrong, Howard Thurman, May Sarton, and Sister Simone Campbell, just to name a few. This is the Ware lecture's 95th year.

This year the lecture will be delivered by Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who has argued several successful cases in front of the Supreme Court and has been named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people and one of *Fortune* Magazine's World's Greatest Leaders. Stevenson is also the author of *Just Mercy*, which was our denomination's Common Read last year.

Every year UUs across the country are invited to read and discuss the same book, a "common read." This year the book was the *Third Reconstruction*, which I know many of you have read because we had three book groups take it up simultaneously last fall!

You can live stream the Ware lecture without being registered for GA. You just tune in online.

Besides GA, we also have regional assemblies, and there are conferences and events within our district. If you are a youth or young adult, there may even be some funding available through the social justice council to help you get involved.

The Unitarian Universalist Association is called an association because it's made up of congregations coming together voluntarily. We don't have to be part of it. We get to be part of it.

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Many of you have been asking what we can do at this moment in our country's history and our world's history. There are many social action groups right here at First Unitarian. Beth Elliot, our Membership Director, has information about many of them at the table in the hall on the way to coffee hour after this service. You can often also find information in the social justice corner in the social hall, and it's on the church website, too.

Our social justice groups partner with other local groups and organizations to amplify their voices here in New Mexico.

But you might be interested to know that UUs are active on a national level, too. We participate in programs and actions that, because we do them together as a denomination, allow us to amplify our voices and grow our impact in the world to be something much bigger than any of us could do alone.

Right now on the UUA website, you can join your name with many others on the Declaration of Conscience, pledging to translate your liberal religious values into action.

Our denomination supports Reproductive Justice- The UUA is a partner in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. We advocate- through public events, legislative lobby days, etc—for safe, affordable access to the full range of reproductive healthcare, including abortion. The UUA also knows reproductive justice is intertwined with other issues, such as poverty and racism, and works to include diverse voices in all of our justice efforts, and to lift up the whole.

Our denomination supports the Black Lives Matter movement. In fact, last year, the our social justice council here joined other large UU congregations in creating a \$20,000 fund to convene a Black Lives of UU group. Black Lives of UU provides resources and support for Black Unitarian Universalists and works to expand the role & visibility of Black UUs within our faith.

We stand up for Native American rights and immigrant rights. And we serve through the UU Service Committee, a partner organization to our denomination, which, as Mia described earlier, is a human rights organization. The UUSC uses grassroots collaboration to work with populations who are not served by mainstream human rights organizations: people and communities who are denied their rights because of who they are — women, people of color, refugees, religious minorities, LGBTI individuals in Africa, and others.

The UUSC also runs week long “Colleges of Social Justice,” and service trips abroad.

Friends, all of this is just a little snapshot of what our denomination—what we—are doing.

There is so much more.

In a moment, we're going to sing our closing hymn. But first, I want to say that if you've ever made a donation, and especially if you've made a pledge to First Unitarian, then you have supported all of these things. Thank you.

You've supported them inside our church, and we amplify your impact to a national level through our congregation's annual contribution of nearly \$30,000 to the denomination. Thank you.

Finally, it has been several years since this congregation had a Denominational Affairs Committee. That's a group that would help us all stay aware and connected with what's happening at the denominational level.

In these uncertain times, when the power of numbers and our sense of solidarity is especially valuable, maybe it's time to get a committee going again.

At the table in the social hall, Mara and Judy are ready to do just that, and are waiting to hear from you or to share information.

ⁱ Tons of information at www.uua.org

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pamphletpodcast.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ You can find more about Patton here:
<http://uudb.org/articles/kennethpatton.html>