

“What do we believe” is a tricky, or maybe even kind of a trick-, question in a congregation of Unitarian Universalists. Do you know that, complementary to these Sunday services, our congregation also includes a UU Christian group; the Covenant of UU Pagans; a Buddhist-inspired meditation group; a meditative singing group; and a group studying modern stoicism? We have communion services, Seder dinners, pagan rituals, and philosophical conversations, and there is still room for more.

Together we are atheists, agnostics, theists, pantheists, naturalists, and anti-theological-labelists. We are what we are. We are students of being. We arrive by many paths, and now we are together, but we do not have to be the same.

We do not have a creed. We do have a few thoughts about things. There are seven principles that our congregation pledges to uphold as a member of the Unitarian Universalist denomination. A few months ago I preached about the first principle: respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I had received a number of questions about that one back in November when we did a Q & A sermon. Specifically, I received a few variations on the question “do we really have to respect the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person?” Yes, I said. That is the world we want to live in. The world where humans do not judge other humans as having no inherent value.

Later I learned that at least one person who heard the sermon completely disagreed. They felt that some people behave so horribly, it’s justifiable to treat them as though they do not have inherent worth or dignity. And you know what? That’s okay. It’s okay if someone feels that way. Honestly I’d be surprised if it was just one person. The first principle is demanding, as Meg Barnhouse also noted in our reading this morning.<sup>1</sup> But it is not a creed. When I say, “Yes, you have to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” I don’t mean you have to do so in order to be a Unitarian Universalist. Rather, I believe that it’s what is required of us in order to build a world in which non-violence, and a strength grounded in love and not in judgment, is the order of the day. A world where every baby who is born is seen as sacred and precious. And where there does not come a time ten or twenty or thirty years later where that baby somehow crosses a line into having no inherent worth.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/who-says-uu-principles-easy>

I also know that some grown up humans do terrible things. And when great harm and violence are done, and we respond with anger, that is a righteous anger. It's a ferociousness whose first cause is compassion.

So, of course you are each free to disagree with me. I will still love you and will still be your minister. Because that is also the kind of world we want to live in- a world where our differences are transcended by what unites us. And that's what another of our principles is about: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Unitarian Universalism has been steadily evolving toward more and more radical inclusion throughout its history. Well, in hindsight it looks steady. To those who were part of that evolution, it must have felt lurching and downright dangerous sometimes.

American Universalism began in the 1700s as a breakaway from traditional Christianity, when our religious ancestors rejected the idea of eternal damnation. They came to believe that a loving god would never allow someone to suffer for all eternity. Some came to that conclusion by logical persuasion. Some by mystical experience.

Some Universalists believed there was still a hell, and that certain souls might have to spend some time there before being reunited with God. (Maybe that sounds good to those of us experiencing a certain righteous anger right now). Others believed that while we are obviously good at creating hell on earth for ourselves and each other, there is not a separate place called hell. All would be reconciled with God immediately upon death, and whatever reckoning had to happen in someone's soul would happen then. Those historic Universalists believed that since every person is born a child of god, every person is ultimately redeemable. Even if it might take a lot of work.

That belief is closely connected with our principle about inherent worth and dignity, which can be challenging when we are talking about violent dictators and that kind of thing. But that first principle also affirms the worth and dignity of people who are very easy to love but who have often been stigmatized, rejected or shamed by non-universalists: like atheists and loose women! Lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, and queer folk. People with disabilities.

This is no small matter. One of my classmates at Harvard Divinity School, a guy maybe ten years older than me, was born with dwarfism. As a young man, when he told his priest that he felt called to become a minister, the priest told him that would not be possible because God had obviously cursed him. With dwarfism.

Sometimes it's easier to say what we do not believe than what we do believe, right? You know it when you see it. UUs do not believe in that kind of... theological cruelty. This is part of what it means to say every person born has inherent worth and dignity.

I'm sharing a bit of our tradition's history with you today because you can see how it comes forward to shape who we are now. That's the Universalists. The Unitarians did not start out as a breakaway sect like the Universalists did. Rather, what we now call Unitarianism was at first just an American trend in the late seventeen hundreds and early eighteen hundreds. A trend toward viewing Jesus as fully human, not divine, and toward seeing the scriptures as historical texts and not the literal word of God. They did not call themselves Unitarian. They were given this name by others because of their belief that Jesus was human and God was one—no father, son, and holy spirit. Just God.

Some early Unitarians were also transcendentalists, which means they found the spirit of God in nature and in all things. Back then, as now, many Christians believed life on earth was inferior to the afterlife. That this is just a temporary place on our way to the Good Place. In contrast, the transcendentalists believed that the natural world is inherently good, and that human beings are, too.

We have inherited the beliefs of those early Unitarians, with their understanding of Jesus as human and ancient texts as pieces of history, with their love of the natural world and their embrace of science. Most UUs still hold those beliefs today.

Now at the time, in the 1800s and early 1900s, each of those beliefs was a huge game changer. Churches were divided over them. Ministers lost their jobs. In the course of it all, Unitarians have sometimes tried to come up with blanket statements of belief. As our hold on creeds loosened, some people thought there should be at least *some* beliefs that defined us. And if there wasn't, they wondered what on earth would hold us together.

By the time they convened the Unitarian Western Conference in 1887, they adopted this statement, called "The Things Most Commonly Believed Today Among Us." I love that title, which seems to have a built in disclaimer. "Here's what we *tend* to think..." The statement's language is gendered and old-timey. We wouldn't say it the same way today, but I think what they came up with contains some beautiful and enduring ideas. They wrote:

- We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;
- We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

- We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new; (think about how radical that was in 1887!)
- We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion;
- We believe in the growing nobility of Man; We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, **beneficent**, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life;
- We believe that good and evil invariably carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil thing success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that no evil can befall the good man in either life or death; that all things work together for the victory of the Good;
- We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all;
- We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life awakes in man the sense of union here and now with things eternal—the sense of deathlessness; and this sense is to us an earnest of the life to come;
- We worship One-in-All — that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man its Ought, — that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God, — that Love with which our souls commune.

Isn't that lovely? Some of those same sentiments in today's language might sound like: No kindness is ever wasted. All shall be well in the end. Your own conscience and reason are indispensable sources of spiritual insight. Trust them. We are interdependent—and must do what is good not just for the self, but for the all. What harms others harms the self as well. That to live in such a way is to know divine truth. And that love is the spirit of life.

As the Unitarians and the Universalists wended their way toward merger in the 1960's, they had both faced a lot of turmoil, and had been called heretics and sinners. But the wisdom of theological openness prevailed. In the 1950s, Unitarians and Universalists often quoted the poem *Outwitted*, by the poet Edwin Markham. It's just four lines long. It goes:

He drew a circle that shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had a wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!

This is the history that helped shape our context today. We embrace many different beliefs. This is the context in which Christine Robinson asked this congregation a very interesting question back in 2010. (Christine—whom we will call Minister Emerita in next Sunday's ceremony!)

In 2010, Christine asked what you think happens after death. Is there some kind of immortality? She did this with a little survey that about 200 people filled out.

The survey asked whether UUs believed in immortality. It had a set of answers to choose from. The possible answers were:

- Something lives on
- There is heaven/hell
- There is universal salvation
- There is reincarnation
- This life is it
- I don't know and I'm scared; Or...
- I don't know and it's okay

Fascinating, right? In her sermon afterward, Christine reported that there was—no surprise here—quite a bit of diversity. She said:

Of those who believe in some kind of life after this one, about 40% believe in some kind of reincarnation, that is to say, that our soul returns to this life in a different body. This is traditionally a Hindu idea.

20% believe with the Universalists that all are “saved”

and 2% believe in Christian concepts of heaven and hell.

About 60% of us checked one of the “I don’t know” choices

Of those who checked “I don’t know,” about 50% are trustful that whatever happens will be good and about 10% feel scared.

(If you’re noticing that all of this adds up to more than 100%, that’s because many people checked more than one answer.)

A second set of questions asked whether respondents felt they had evidence for their beliefs. The possible answers were:

- I believe that all such evidence has a non-supernatural explanation
- I have no such evidence
- Most of humanity believes in an afterlife and that influences me
- I have had a near death experience
- People I trust have told me of an experience they have had, and that sways me; Or...
- I have experienced communication with the dead.

Christine reported that

Once again, the congregation was split about in half, with 50% of us feeling we have no evidence of any life after death. 20% of us believe that all the evidence that people think they have, such as near death experiences, has a non-supernatural explanation.

Of those who do feel that they have evidence of life after death (about 50% of us), 16% of those report that they have experienced communication with the dead, 10% have had their own near death experience that convinced them of the possibility of immortality. 21% say that the stories of people they trust sway them to believe in immortality...

Some people who checked that they had “no evidence” of life after death believe it anyway, and some who have had a near death experience are not convinced that this means anything about what happens after a “real” death.

So, that’s what UUs believe. A little of everything. I see this when I make pastoral visits at the end of life. One of my favorite visits was one I made to an elderly couple when I was still in seminary. Both were Unitarian Universalists. The husband was a renowned scientist, an atheist who had helped develop one of science’s most consequential breakthroughs in cardiac

medicine. The wife, bucking UU history, still believed in the trinity. She also believed in reincarnation. The wife understood her husband's atheism to be a necessary part of this incarnation of his soul. The husband adored his wife and observed that her theology gave her peace. They shared a love that spanned many more decades than I have lived, co-existing in a uniquely Unitarian Universalist way.

That's the part I want to end with. Co-existing. And not just co-existing, but inter-existing. Connected.

What I am interested in—more than whether your beliefs are like mine— is the way church can help us develop in our beliefs, whether that entails a deepening of them, or whether they evolve and change. Because one belief that does bring us together, is belief in the value of spiritual community.

Spiritual community is where we reflect deeply, refining our spiritual beliefs and practices so that, I hope, we come to a sense of harmony and peace with them, even if it is a peace with not-knowing. We do this not only in Sunday services, but in smaller groups and friendships, through the sharing of our thoughts and experiences. We grow spiritually through observation, made possible in deep community, that this life matters and that there is beauty in it even when it is tenuous or terrible.

I think of the poem "Fault Line" by Robert Walsh.<sup>2</sup> He writes:

Did you ever think there might be a fault line  
passing underneath your living room:  
A place in which your life is lived in meeting  
and in separating, wondering  
and telling, unaware that just beneath  
you is the unseen seam of great plates  
that strain through time? And that your life,  
already spilling over the brim, could be invaded,  
sent off in a new direction, turned  
aside by forces you were warned about  
but not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,  
the level floor set at an angle in  
some seconds' shaking. You would have to take

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.traumaministry.org/resources/fault-line>

your losses, do whatever must be done  
next.

When the great plates slip  
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen  
to lie in what you trusted most, look not  
to more solidity, to weighty slabs  
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered  
beam to save the fractured order. Trust  
more the tensile strands of love that bend  
and stretch to hold you in the web of life  
that's often torn but always healing. There's  
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,  
your room, your precious life, they all proceed  
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

Love. The ground on which we walk together.

Or to put it another way: at last, our common ground as UUs.