

Why Unitarian Universalism Now?

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Part 1: Who Are We?

Last Tuesday I got a haircut at a salon for the first time in over a year. She was a new-to-me hairdresser, and in the course of getting to know each other, she asked me “Where do you work?” And when I told her I was the minister at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato, I got an all-too-familiar and uncomfortable look, that blank stare. She had no idea what I was talking about. Never heard of us.

It’s always a shock to me when people don’t know about the Fellowship, when people don’t know about our religion. And maybe that has something to do with us. With how we inhabit Unitarian Universalism. So, let’s get one thing on the table right away: Unitarian Universalism is a religion. I know that is a no-brainer for some of us. I know that calling UUism a religion is fine and comfortable, for some of us. And I know that, for some of us, the use of that word and all that it brings up just rubs us the wrong way. Smacks of superstition and emotionalism and the irrational. Reminds too much of traditions that were toxic for some of us. I know.

However, it should strike all of us that we are gathered on a Sunday morning, and in different times we would be inside a church building, whether we like the word “church” or not. And I am giving a sermon, not a talk, not a presentation. We are in a worship service, not an academic lecture. So, what is religion? including for a Unitarian Universalist? This morning, I offer you one answer. I hope you will seek your own.

First, a bit of who we are by way of who we are not. As Unitarian Universalists, we do not get bogged down at the start with a single belief or ritual or language or doctrine—all that we might typically associate with other religions we know. We do not profess one way, the truth and the light. But, make no mistake—as a religion, we are asking questions and seeking answers about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. We are looking for the “more” beyond, for what underlies our everyday realms of experience—material, sensory, emotional, intellectual. That’s all “religion” really is, at its base. And . . . we look for these answers, this direction or orientation, together in community, at the outset knowing that meaning and purpose emerges in the context of relationship, of mutual sharing and exploration.

Now, of course, our religion has origins, deep and complex roots in two strands of early Christianity, in the battles for Christian supremacy in Europe, in the syncretic layering and synchronous affinity between Christianity and other religious traditions. There are volumes written about that, and I am not going to dive much into it today. But here are a few touchstones for defining our Unitarian Universalism, in this time of commemorating that two strands of Christianity merged to become one, and in that merging also became more than the sum of these parts.

These strands of Christianity have to do with, first, the presumed nature of “God”—a trinity or a unity—and, second, with the possibility of salvation—Are we all saved or are some of us damned by this “God” to eternal hellfire? In defining the relationship between Unitarians and Universalists in the 19th Century,

Thomas Appleton, contemporary of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, quipped: “The Universalists think that God is too good to damn them forever, and the Unitarians think they are too good to be damned forever.” In the 20th century, one of our theologians, Forrest Church, defined the two “U”s less cynically: “Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny.” Another way to say it is that We are One, and God is Love. Or, as I prefer, Love is primary and ultimate and lures us into relationship that we cannot deny, though we might try.

American Unitarians and Universalists each in their own ways questioned the Christianity in which they participated. Unitarians introduced an element of skepticism—they questioned the authority of doctrine, always interrogating received truth, always seeking more, higher, and underlying truth. They were mocked and ostracized, and yet the search continued. For example, seeking a religion of spirit rather than divine entity, Cyrus Bartol, Transcendentalist and companion of Unitarian ministers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, he asserted, “I spell my God with two o’s and my devil without a d.” Eventually, a strand of Unitarianism led to the emergence of humanism, with the understanding that a person can be good, with or without God.

There is a risk in Unitarian skepticism. It can create arrogance, especially when one stops along the path and decides “Enough is enough, I have traveled far enough, let me put down my stake and call this the end, the truth. Let me insist that my way is the way.” On the other hand, Unitarian skepticism can lead to a deep humility, that there is always more out ahead, as well as more behind, to discover and to know and to use to make one’s picture of reality fuller, larger, more encompassing. But never complete. How could that even be, in an unfinished reality where the truth is not sealed?

Universalists also confronted tendencies in Christianity, specifically doctrines declaring the inherent evilness and depravity of human beings, debased and hardly worthy of salvation. The following quotation, widely attributed to 19th Century Universalist John Murray, makes this point: “‘Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. . . . Give them not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.’” And another 19th Century story, challenging the impossibility of being good without the threat of damnation. A theologically conservative skeptic interrogated the Universalist minister Hosea Ballou about the ways that Universalism could lead to the moral corruption of society: “‘Brother Ballou,’ he said, ‘if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.’ Ballou looked over at him and said, ‘If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.’”

Universalism can devolve into mere sentimentality, especially if we do not hold each other responsible for the wrong we do in the world, for the hurt and the harm we can cause others. And yet the universe is always creatively unfolding life itself, with so much goodness in which we humans participate. The goodness of green leaves photosynthesizing. The goodness of birdsong. The goodness of microbes nourishing the earth. We participate in this goodness, in fuller awareness, when we, too, do goodness, when we love, when we care, when we help a neighbor we do not know, when we work for liberation

and justice for those whose lives are different from our own. This is not to say that the universe is all sweetness and light. Cosmic cataclysm created the sun and the earth. Diseases emerge and cause us pain, suffering, and death. We participate in this cataclysm, this sin and death, when we hate, when we neglect, when we judge, when we push aside some as unworthy.

We are all of us enfolded with the possibility for evil and within the possibility for goodness. We each do both. We know we do. And we choose how we will live. We can choose to see ourselves full of loving kindness, peaceful and at ease, whole, so that we may feel that for others. There is potential in all of us to create goodness, because there is a sacred within us, between us, and beyond us.

Part 2: Why Are We?

Rev. Johnson reminds us: “Humans make constellations by connecting stars. Humans make meaning by connecting stories: story to story to narrative to story.” I made a small constellation earlier, connecting the dots within dots of two strands of Christianity and our Unitarian and Universalist forebearers. But that is not the whole story for sure, and it is not the end of the one I tell this morning.

Unitarian Universalists refer to this religion, our faith tradition, as a living tradition. As such, it is defined by plurality and transformation, by the unexpected, surprising, and illuminating experiences and ideas that emerge from a confluence of possibilities unconstrained by belief or doctrine. It is an ever-changing faith, which can be exciting, exasperating, deeply troubling and richly fulfilling. Plurality and ongoing transformation of ourselves toward making the world a better world, and the inevitable transformation that effects in our religion—that is what sets Unitarian Universalism apart. We are not exceptional because we know more than others do. We are exceptional because we are willing to change, individually and collectively, as a condition of our search for meaning and purpose.

In our religion, multiple stories converge within us and between us, tapping into that “larger beyond” us and also co-creating that “beyond,” that “more,” that mystery we cannot always name. Within each of us, our experiences collide within the frameworks by which we know and feel. We witness reality through these frameworks, and when our frameworks contradict or smash together, we can grow beyond what we know. Some of us can hold the tensions of prior faith traditions more easily than others, retaining some of what we already believe and making room for that we don’t yet know. A Jewish UU or a Pagan UU or a Muslim UU, these are not impossibilities, even if they are nothing like my own experience or yours. We can struggle our way to realizing that how we see the world is not the whole world, not all of the reality available and lived by others.

Our faith tradition exists within the contrasts between our histories as they have been and our desires to make a space for the sacred in our lives, a sacred that is always beyond our grasp. You might have to re-define “sacred” if that feels too church-y for you. You might have to say—more fully human or more ethical. But Unitarian Universalist obliges you to re-define, to make a translation, so that you can be in relationship with those in this congregation who name that “more” differently than you do. After all, we each know only what we know. Making room for the beliefs and perceptions of your kindred here in this congregation, well, that prepares each of us for the humility of allowing in that mystery of what we

cannot yet ken. If you are Unitarian Universalist, you are called to make that translation, to sit with your companions even if their beliefs make you uncomfortable or strike you as silly or even wrong. To sit with and to not judge on some pre-conceived spectrum of correctness of belief. We are all seekers of more than we already know. We are called to humbly acknowledge that reality. And that is hard, for we humans tend to be brittle and judgmental. If anyone tells that you can believe anything you want as a Unitarian Universalist, they do not understand our tradition. Believing is a separate thing from how we live with each other with compassion and respect while acknowledging the views about the greater orientation of life that one disagrees with.

Change and transformation inform the values underlying all the principles we hold, including the possibility of adding new ones. As UUs, we affirm a set of principles, currently seven. These are not beliefs. Rather, they are agreements for how we will act toward each other and what we will work for in the world. Because they are not beliefs, we cannot simply assume them. We have to bring them into being, every minute of every day, within ourselves, within our relationships, and within the larger cultural realities we inhabit. We must become more loving toward and accepting of each other, if we are to create the conditions of justice, equity, and compassion we claim to care about. We must encourage each other toward spiritual growth if the search for truth and meaning is to move beyond confirmation bias. We must grow more inclusive in the processes of decision-making, if we claim to work for peace, liberty, and justice for all. We must enhance our sense of connectedness with each other and the vast universe, everyone in relationship, no one and nothing left out or isolated and alone.

All of this is not to say that other religious traditions change do not encourage or require personal transformation. But in so many, the change is prescribed—you will become more “this,” as defined by sacred texts and rituals, by interpretive doctrine and tradition. Look how long it has taken some churches to say that queer people are people, worthy of God’s love, and yet still question their inherent worth and dignity. Not affording them full participation in the rites and rituals of heteronormative people or cis-gendered people. And this affirmation tears them apart! For Unitarian Universalists, there is no one text, there is no single notion of the sacred, there is no presumption of absolute knowledge of anything. The very definition of science, held so dearly for us, means the unfolding of learning, the new that is not yet evident, the necessity of transforming the truth when we discover that we have been wrong in our conclusions. This orientation is special to us, but it doesn’t make us exceptional. There is a great risk in the idea of being exceptional, and UUs are certainly subject to it. The emphasis on transformation, however, does make us the exception in faith traditions. Our tradition is open and unfolding, living. It is vital and changeable, and that reality, like each of our own living, means that we live as UUs with discomfort, with uncertainty, with fragility. That is our reality, and that means that we also live with faith in our efforts to transform with resilience in the face of disappointment that ideas we hold fast can unravel, of failure of imagination that shows our limitations, limitations that need to be held with compassion and resolve.

Transformation freely accepted yet unknowable, subject to forces greater than ourselves and our human knowledge, forces we don’t even know exist yet. And transformation as a source of hope rather than fear, of possibility rather than insecurity. We speak of changing ourselves, we speak of changing

institutions, our church as well as the social institutions of our country. We acknowledge that it is normal that our congregations are different from each other, even as we strive for relationship across our differences. It is transformation that calls us as Unitarian Universalists.

We can choose to open our minds humbly and learn, like good Unitarians. We can choose to foster the liveliness of life and the good that sustains us in companionship, like good Universalists. We are Unitarian Universalists. “For this life—for the freedom we have to shape and pursue our lives—we are grateful and rejoice.” We are small but mighty. We are small and humble in our task of multiplying the goodness in ourselves and our world, in this life of the here and now. We think thoughts of justice and right, and we do the work to help make it so. We are Unitarian Universalists. Why would we not want others to know about us? Why do we not, each and every one of us, shout this faith from the rafters and the rooftops? Our religion opens us to the possibility that we are all ever-changing light—luminous in our very substance, bright and full of color, multiple and diverse within us and among us, unleashed by the prisms of relationship, the trials of life, the pressures that break us open. Let us break open, shine our light brightly and openly, and proclaim our saving faith to the world.

Let us open to the sacred within us, between us, and beyond us, reminding us that we are beloved, beloved, beloved, as you remember, today and every day, that in this Fellowship, in this religious community, in this faith that holds you tightly with possibility, you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may the people say together, “Amen.”

Works referenced:

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