

Sunday, August 30, 2015

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

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Good morning. I'm going to talk about two things this morning: What we don't believe, and what the majority of UUs do believe. And at the end I'm going to ask you to create an "elevator speech" to answer questions about those beliefs.

Some of you may know what an elevator speech is: that is, it is something that can be communicated in two or three sentences, or the length of time it takes your elevator to get to its floor. I will ask you later to consider what you might say in that space of time to answer questions like: "what is Unitarian Universalism", or "what do UUs believe?"

What prompted this talk is something that happened while I was on a trip that included several other UU members. Walking out to dinner, we were discussing the plans for the upcoming Easter service here at our Fellowship. A woman walking in front of us turned around and snarled, (truly, she snarled) "UUs don't believe in God, so there won't be an Easter service!" And she marched off.

Well, obviously there was no opportunity to go into a discussion there, short or not, but I was so taken aback that this comment was given with such authority, I began to think about how many negative ideas are out there about our denomination and our particular view of religion, including how we UUs tend to express ourselves in negatives;

So, let's look at how we do that with these responses:

We don't believe in:

(the most obvious one) **The Trinity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity claims one God in three persons or beings.** Obviously, with the word Unitarian in our name, we do not support the Trinity Doctrine. Unitarians trace their history back to the life of Jesus and the decades immediately after

his death, and they claim this doctrine was widespread during the [pre-Nicene period](#). We do not follow the decision by the First Council of Constantinople in creating three separate beings, the father, the son and the holy ghost. It is agreed by scholars that this version is an addition unsupported by any Biblical or historical references. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century saw in many European countries an outbreak of anti-Trinitarian opinion. Along with the fundamental doctrine, certain characteristics have always marked those who profess Unitarianism: a large degree of [tolerance](#), a historical study of [scripture](#), a minimizing of [essentials](#), and a repugnance to formulated creed.

A Fixed Creed. We don't believe that everyone has to believe exactly the same thing or not be accepted in the community, or end up in eternal damnation. Or worse, at the chopping block or stoning event.

In Proselytizing. A big word that means we don't push our beliefs on others. In fact, it can be rather challenging to search out and find a Unitarian Universalist group.

A Synod, Temple, or Mother Church directing our affairs as a Fellowship. We practice something called congregational polity ... that is, by whatever name, each church, fellowship, assembly, or UU group manages its own affairs, hires its own leaders, and elects its own representatives.

Ignoring Social Ills. We don't believe in ignoring the problems of the world. We do believe that each of us is responsible to do what we can to help and support others and to support the interdependent web of life.

And, although this list could probably go on, one rather surprising negative is that many outsiders and even some members don't believe Unitarian Universalism is a **religion**. Our church is a fully recognized denomination based on Judeo-Christian beliefs.

So what exactly DO we believe?

A question often asked of Unitarian Universalists is: "If you don't all believe in the same God, what are you worshiping?" The word "worship," though, comes from "worth-ship." In our congregations, worship is not about bowing down to a deity, but instead, considering what is of worth. Worship, then, is our opportunity to contemplate what is most worthy in our lives, to discover anew what we value most deeply, to recognize how to align our true values with our actions—indeed, to find what is sacred to us in our lives and to consider how we wish to relate to what we find sacred.

Our shared covenant (our seven principles) supports “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Though Unitarianism and Universalism were both liberal Christian traditions, this responsible search has led us to embrace teachings from a variety of religions and philosophies.

We are people of all ages, backgrounds, and beliefs. We create spirituality and community beyond boundaries, working for more justice and more love in our own lives and in the world. Together, we create a force more powerful than one person or one belief system. As Unitarian Universalists, we do not have to check our personal background and beliefs at the door: we join together on a journey that honors everywhere we've been before.

So, here we go with some commonly held beliefs.

WE BELIEVE:

- that human beings can solve problems through reason and cooperation; that there is no need to turn to superstition or religion for help; that human understanding and intelligence will help us to develop and progress; and that the universe is a natural wonder waiting to be explored and understood.
- that through cooperation and mutual encouragement we smooth tensions by treating each other with care and concern.

- in peaceful problem solving – we try to talk first and work out peaceful solutions. At the same time, we are firm about the right to defend oneself against aggression.
- in equal dignity and respect for every life form – nothing is automatically considered worthless or inferior.
- in no dogma or doctrine – personal beliefs are respected but dogma is not imposed on anyone as if it were the one and only truth.
- in reliance on science to find facts, as well as the enjoyment of human emotions, spirituality and intuition.

HERE ARE SOME MORE SPECIFIC VIEWS AMONG UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS THAT WE MIGHT CALL “TOUCHY SUBJECTS”

And I know there will be someone in the audience who will disagree - but these are fairly common among the majority of us....

Unitarian Universalists believe more than one thing. We think for ourselves, and reflect together, about important questions such as:

- **The existence of a Higher Power: What Do We Believe about God?**

Unitarian Universalists have many ways of naming what is sacred. Some believe in a God; some don't believe in a God. Some believe in a sacred force at work in the world, and call it “love,” “mystery,” “source of all” or “spirit of life.” Unitarian Universalists are agnostic, theist, atheist and everything in between. We are each influenced by our cultures and life experiences to understand in our own way. Our first Source references “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder” which could be called God or could be Nature, Ultimate Reality, Natural Law or other concepts that are meaningful to UUs. We do believe that all knowledge, from whatever source, requires testing, and that testing is

best assisted in community. Evolution, as a scientific proposition, is widely accepted. Unitarian Universalists rely on scientific process as one of the ways to truth.

Few Unitarian Universalists believe in an anthropomorphic God, (that imaginary friend in the sky) tending instead toward concepts such as Nature, Love, or Spirit of Life. Some UUs do not find the term God useful. Rarely do Unitarian Universalists ascribe gender to God, but when they do, they may deliberately use a variety of gender formulations: for example, Mother-Father God.

We come together not because we have a shared concept of the divine. Rather we gather, knowing that life is richer in community than when we go it alone. We gather to know and be known, to comfort and be comforted, to celebrate the mystery that binds us, each to all.

We welcome everyone in the fullness of their beliefs. We join together in exploring life's deepest questions in a spiritually diverse, supportive, and challenging community. We are excited to meet you where you are, and see how we can all learn and grow together.

Life and Death: Two of the big questions religions have sought to answer over the years are: "Why does life exist as we know it?" and "What happens after we die?"

- While there are a variety of views of the afterlife, most Unitarian Universalists consider this life the important one. Some believe in an ultimate unification with God, or the universe. Many UUs believe that the only afterlife is the legacy people leave on earth. Consistent with the idea of universal salvation, hell is rarely discussed except as a metaphor, as in "hell on earth." Unitarian Universalists shy away from talk of sin, but some agree with the Jewish tradition that defines it as "missing the mark"—falling short of our values. That is, we acknowledge that people have shortcomings and make mistakes but have an optimistic view of

human nature. Good and evil are usually considered human constructs that result from human actions.

- Unitarian Universalism won't promise you ironclad answers to these questions or guaranteed "salvation". But we will promise you a community of learning and support to explore what matters most to you.
- At the beginning of life, many UU churches welcome children with ceremonies of Child Dedication, in which we affirm the goodness and the blessing in every human life. You could say we believe in "original blessing" rather than "original sin." We embrace and celebrate the miracle that is each person's unique life, and uphold our interdependence with every life.

At the end of life, we offer communities of care and support. We companion dying people and their loved ones through the sad journey of saying goodbye, and the long journey of grief.

Unitarian Universalist views about life after death are informed by both science and spiritual traditions. Many of us live with the assumption that life does not continue after death, and many of us hold it as an open question, wondering if our minds will have any awareness when we are no longer living. Few of us believe in divine judgment after death. It's in our religious DNA: the Universalist side of our tradition broke with mainstream Christianity by rejecting the idea of eternal damnation.

Does Unitarian Universalism have a sacred text or scripture?

One might say that life is our scripture. While Unitarianism and Universalism both have roots in the Protestant Christian tradition, where the Bible is the sacred text, we now look to additional sources for religious and moral inspiration. Over two centuries, our religious tradition, a "living tradition," has branched out from its roots. Early Unitarians and Universalists took the Bible seriously, though rarely literally. While we continue to see it as a rich resource of stories and

wisdom, most Unitarian Universalists do not see the Bible as authoritative on its own.

When we read scripture in worship, whether it is the Bible, the Dhammapada, or the Tao Te-Ching, we interpret it as a product of its time and its place. There is wisdom there, and there are inspiring stories, but scripture is not to be interpreted narrowly or oppressively. It can be beautiful, inspirational and wise. But in our tradition, scripture is never the only word, or the final word. Influenced by experience, culture, and community, each of us ultimately chooses what is sacred text to us.

Inspiration and Guidance: We are inspired by beauty, truth, love, and compassion that knows no bounds. We are inspired by elders, by children, by courageous people, by community. By nature, science, the universe, and the creativity at work in the world. By Holy texts, by ancient wisdom. We are inspired by literature and poetry, artists and authors. As Unitarian Universalists, life is a constant source of inspiration, calling us to live with greater depth, connection, and compassion.

The role of clergy and the extent of their authority was an active question of the Reformation. From our radically Protestant heritage, we believe each person must formulate his or her own beliefs rather than subscribe to what is passed down. Clergy offer their views, which may hold some authority based on their education and experience. However, they hold no more authority for most Unitarian Universalists than other respected members of the community.

When Unitarian Universalists (UUs) got together to articulate our main sources of inspiration and guidance, we came up with the following six Sources, as articulated in the Principles our congregations affirm:

- Direct experience of that 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.
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- Jesus is generally considered a prophet and teacher rather than God, or the only son of God. Christian Unitarian Universalists endorse the religion taught by Jesus, rather than the religion about Jesus
- **Prayer and Spiritual Practices:** Unitarian Universalism offers diverse and meaningful ways of connecting with the sacred. Whether we're sitting in Zen Buddhist meditation, listening for truth with Christian *lectio divina*, praying to the spirit of life, or chanting in a circle at winter solstice, our spirituality is unbounded. Our stories and practices draws from our six sources of inspiration. We may find joy in multiple ways. As people of many beliefs, we are each encouraged to embrace and practice forms of spirituality that resonate with our hearts and minds.

We are united in our broad and inclusive outlook, and in our values, as expressed in our Seven Principles. We are united in shared experiences: our

open and stirring worship services, religious education, and rites of passage; our work for social justice; our quest to include the marginalized; our expressions of love.

We support and challenge one another in those beliefs through our sharing together about what we believe. This is not an easy task, as UUs, we expect people to bring their own experiences and understandings of religious questions rather than to subscribe to a particular set of beliefs or a particular theological viewpoint. However, we also expect that in the course of sharing with one another, our theologies will be shaped and deepened, or even changed.

So, my question to you is this:

When you hear that very important inquiry: “What DO Unitarian Universalists believe?” what are you going to say? This is not proselytizing, it’s answering a question, educating someone who is curious.

So, what is your elevator speech going to touch on? Obviously not everything we’ve talked about today – that’s way more than a few sentences, but what to you encapsulates the most essential ideas that you would like to convey. Expressing our ideals in the negative is clear, concise and cuts to the chase – there’s no real doubt in what is being said there. However, it may not encourage discussion as much as expressing our ideals in the positive. I leave it to you to find your best approach.

Thank you for hearing me out this morning. I truly believe that in addition to the care we take of our members, and the good works we do in our communities, we need to spread the idea of a liberal religious tradition in which people need not shoot or behead someone who holds a different idea about God, religion or beliefs. We can introduce the idea that there can be many ways to respectfully look at a variety of beliefs.

I look forward to hearing some awesome elevator speeches on this subject.

Thank you.