

# *That Which We Hold Dear*

He that will believe only what he can fully comprehend must have a long head or a very short creed.

**-Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**

We live in great mystery.

This isn't an easy thing to say to a group of people as educated as some of you, scholars and scientists whose life pursuit has been investigation and the gathering of information and the drawing of conclusions. Nonetheless, I'll say it again. We live in great mystery.

What we don't know far outweighs what we do know. We don't know why we're here, where we came from or where we're going. We don't know if there's life on other planets and if there is, what that means. We don't know how to cure some of our most aggressive diseases or why violence continues to define and shape human culture. We know very little of what happened in the past and absolutely nothing of the future. In fact, at this moment, we are surrounded by people who are thinking thoughts we'll never hear and a near infinite number of things happening on the planet about which we'll never be privy. We don't even remember a good portion of our own lives, the lives we've been living. My mother recently told me a story of a stray dog we took in briefly when I was child. I don't remember any of it although apparently I was quite attached to the dog and was sad to see her leave. So, mystery defines not only the largest, greatest of questions, but even the details of our own lives.

All through history, people have been asking questions about what it means to be alive. We've been facing mystery since we were first able to wonder. We've been looking for meaning, for patterns, for a reason for our being. And as we wonder, we've organized our thoughts and created ideas and rituals and responses to all that we don't know. Religion becomes the response.

Religion is the way communities face mystery together. Traditionally, religion provides the lens through the use of stories that become doctrine. Jews find meaning in history through the chronicles of Moses and Christians understand the mysteries of death through the tale of Jesus and Buddhists face suffering using the narrative of Siddhartha Gautama. These lenses shape the questions and provide, at least, tentative answers.. The answers may be uncertain, but they are the best we have, and billions of humans have used these stories and others like them to place their own lives in context.

Some people would call themselves spiritual rather than religious. Spirituality is the way individuals embark on the search for meaning. Religion is the institutionalization of that search. Traditionally, religion provides the framework for the search for meaning through scripture, ritual, doctrine, mythology and the like. It's generally accepted that religious institutions provide answers, have found ways to respond to the great mysteries, and people live their lives within these frameworks trying to better align themselves to the truths being offered. In other words, the truth claims religious institutions make are not the end of the search, nor are they expected to be. The idea has traditionally been that the institution provides the container and people spend their lives within it trying to better understand what it means.

Unitarian Universalism has approached this issue quite differently. UUism is a religion in the traditional sense. We are a community of people searching for meaning and we have institutionalized that search. But, the institution itself doesn't provide specific answers as much as it supports individual exploration. Our Commission on The Church and It's Leadership In the Free and Changing World put it beautifully when they wrote:

“With us... theological quandary is not personal, it is institutional. We have set at the heart of our church, not a creed or a statement of faith, but the principle that theological questions shall be kept open. We, therefore, have no creed and can have none.”

We are a creedless church. We commit to no final statement, no truth we think is unchanging. The UU heretic is the one who insists that something is. What that reality is, is irrelevant; the act of insisting is

opposed to who we are. We exist within mystery as the defining certainty and our search for answers and responses as the communal task. It is not true to say that we are open to anything or that nothing defines us. We are open to the pursuit of truth without the claims of indelibility and we are defined by our commitment or even institutionalization of the free spirit.

We also believe in our need for community. We understand that our quest is best done with others. Without the community, we are less ourselves, not fully able to reach the potential of being human. We accept that truth is found in the full and free exchange of ideas. The covenant we make is to live together in pursuit of meaningfulness. To alienate another is to break the covenant.

The test in a creedless church is that of welcome.<sup>1</sup> Can we, regardless of what we believe, allow another to pursue a path distinct from our own? Are we open to a diversity of ideas, opinions, approaches, styles, and pursuits? If we make no absolute faith claims, can we be open even to the possibility that there are faith claims to be made and welcome those who make them?

There are underlying principles to be found in our free search. We can conclude that we value truth and we value the search for it. We also value the freedom to break with orthodoxy. These aren't creeds, but they are part of our identity.

In fact, we aren't averse to claiming some basic principles of our denomination. Our seven Principles and Purposes are a broad statement of what we value. It is not true to claim that without creed, we are without identity or that we offer nothing to religious seekers if we don't offer them answers. We offer basic principles to live by, but we understand the fluidity of these values. We don't claim these principles to be either exclusive to us or eternal in their truth. We remain open to the possibility that as we evolve on this planet that we might find the need to change or alter the statement, which is, of course, the process in which we're currently engaged.

Nor are we without identity. While we might define ourselves across a spectrum from humanist to theist, Christian, Buddhist, Jew, pagan or mystic, during a survey in 1998, every person (more than 8,000 people) replied "shared values and principles" or "acceptance, respect and support for each other as individuals" as the "glue that binds us ...together"<sup>2</sup> Of course, while we might agree to these principals, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Churches had this on their walls: "We believe in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation through Character and the Steady Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever." This is to say that what we understand today as the ground on which we stand may be very different just 50 years from today, thus our unwillingness to claim any eternal, unchanging truth. We live in and have embraced the reality of constant modifications and transformations of human understanding.

I would like to suggest that we cannot let our commitment to creedlessness define ourselves as a denomination without grounding. We are grounded, as I've said, in shared values of a free, honest and responsible search for truth in community with others with respect for the individual and a profound commitment to each other. We've listed seven principles that get even more specific, claiming a devotion to the inherent worth and dignity of each person, to the values of justice equity and compassion, to an acceptance of each other, to the right of conscience and the democratic process, the goals of world peace and justice and to our planet and all that is supported and sustained by it. We share symbols and rituals across congregational lines and yet we resist steps to define ourselves more clearly for fear of losing our individual and congregational freedom.

I would like us to consider that while creedlessness is at our core, we have sacrificed something with all our openness. For instance, while we share some language, principles, rituals and symbols, we hold onto them all loosely, sometimes so loosely we are in danger of letting them slip through our fingers all together. For instance, I went to a discussion group recently to talk about the seven principles and no one in the room could recite them. Most people couldn't get past the first. Have you ever been to a 12-step meeting? Every

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, Joseph. *"Faith and Practice in Unitarian Universalist Churches"*. Beacon Press Reference Series. 1963

<sup>2</sup> Ross, Warren. *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*. UUA, 2001. pgs. 199-200.

member in the room can tell you word for word what the 12 steps are, what they mean and how they are used or incorporated into that individual's life. Sadly, in any given congregation, many members can barely tell you what it means to be UU. Some will debate if it's a religion at all. Very few can explain the meaning of the chalice or what it means to be a congregational church. While I would argue that we have an identity, I'm not sure how secure that character is if our members can't identify it.

I have a more difficult critique of the way we live our creedlessness. I am afraid that we are more committed to the *idea* of the search for truth than we are to the actual search. I preached recently on Jesus as God. It was received well, but not without some ruffled feathers. My point was essentially that in the end there's a sacred reality alive in each of us. On it's own, this point isn't terribly controversial, but using Jesus as the jumping off place was. For all our openness, there are plenty of things we don't want to discuss. I suspect that many ministers and members alike filter language and even topics of conversation or services for fear of being ostracized or ruthlessly criticized. I was in a Lifespan Faith Development Committee Meeting on Thursday and someone asked about teaching religious, and even more specifically, biblical literacy. I suggested that we incorporate bible stories into our lesson plans in RE and was told that several if not many members would object to that. It turns out, there is at least one book some UUs want to ban from our classrooms.

When I talk about the test of creedlessness being one of welcome, I'm not talking about folks who want to make absolute faith claims and convert you to their brand of believing, but UUs who want to follow paths not generally accepted in our circles. I would suggest that we avoid those paths in our community because we are more committed to keeping a peace among us or, possibly even to a general uniformity than we are to the pursuit of truth. We nit pick and prod and even ostracize people following a road less travelled or otherwise outside of what we deem acceptable behavior. (On my first Sunday here I was drinking an iced tea I'd gotten at Starbuck's and someone called me an elitist. We have a specific and narrow definition of what it means to be a good UU.) It's not about being mainstream by American standards, but by UU standards. You're a UU with a Jewish background who practices Zen meditation. Great. You're a UU pagan who dances naked in the woods at night. Fabulous. You're a pro-life UU Christian and you may have trouble finding friends. **Again, the test of creedlessness is one of welcome.**

I am both committed to and concerned about what it means to our denomination to be without creed. Sometimes, we cling to our freedom and lack of definition with the same passion others hold onto their doctrine. It's almost a blind devotion and our steadfastness to this freedom has the potential to be the very thing that stagnates us. How often are we in annual meetings or similar assemblies during which each person's individual acceptance and comfortability with every word has to be taken into account before anything can be decided. Too often we're left with statements that lack bite or depth of meaning and we will never claim that any statement is more than a suggestion or a reflection of what some people might think.

The Universalists didn't write a creed, nor were they surviving. By the time of the merger, the Universalists were in danger of extinction and the Unitarians had similar reason to worry. While they both had some moments of popularity, ultimately neither could sustain membership. There was great expectation around the merger, but it hasn't panned out as well as hoped. We are not a dying denomination, but we aren't growing at the rate of the population increase, which means we are essentially getting smaller instead of larger. I would argue that we exist without clear, discernable definition which means we have trouble taking national stands, have difficulty recruiting new people and don't know clearly who we are. This allows definitions of UUs to be created by outsiders making guesses based on a few examples and offers members nothing to hold on to week to week. It has even prompted the common sentiment that being UU means you can believe anything you want.

Creedlessness doesn't require the wishy-washy attitude we take toward making faith claims, but it has nonetheless created an entire denomination of people who are unwilling or unable to declare anything as true. Creedlessness has defined our *culture* more than our *theology* and I have a growing concern that a culture grounded in an unwillingness to commit with a vague sense of shared values may lack the endurance needed. In reality, a good number of new members leave after two years and while surveying them is very difficult, it's safe to assume they leave because there isn't enough reason to stay.

And so I ask: Does our creedlessness offer us anything in return for what we've lost? Or, maybe more

pointedly, are we willing to accept and embrace creedlessness in its entirety, allowing uncomfortable discussions and even argument, making room for faith claims with caveats and expected consistent reworking, and breaking through a culture of non-commitment so that when we “covenant to agree” that covenant can stand for something substantial and not simply something we recite from time to time.

Our creedlessness is a defining characteristic for Unitarian Universalists. It demonstrates our institutionalized search for truth, our commitment to the free spirit and to the free and open exchange of ideas. Our unwillingness to indoctrinate any of our commonly held values and shared beliefs is an extension of our acceptance of the mystery of existence and the fluidity of all spiritual truths. It does not indicate a lack of identity or an inability to discern our faith system. But it does happily imply our resistance to the indelibility of faith claims.

Today is Association Sunday. It's the second time the UUA has sponsored a national effort to raise funds for a specific purpose. Last year, the money was used for the ads placed in Time magazine which have been memorialized outside the office. This year, the money will go to support a variety of educational opportunities for ministry. It will be used to scholarship new ministers entering seminary and to create and fund lay training for our shared ministry.

So, what does that have to do with being a creedless church? It has to do with the responsibility, ie, the ability to respond, that we each carry as members of this denomination. Like many of you, I am devoted to the free and responsible search for truth and I'm faithful to the option our movement offers the world to live in the mystery, facing the certainty that we don't know. I am willing to stand by and within our creedless theology, to perfect it and lay claim to it as others do their doctrine. I am dedicated to the ideal and am willing to declare it with all the passion I can muster. And, in the spirit of true creedlessness, I'm willing to let it go, like all faith claims, to see what might come next.