

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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Many of you have heard my story of becoming UU. I was a college chaplain and adjunct professor teaching theology and serving as liturgist for Roman Catholic mass for a decade. I knew the Roman Catholic world wasn't feeding me and that I had to go and because I'm well versed in American religious history, I knew that my own theology would fit better in a UU or UCC context. I left my job, my community, my neighborhood and set out on a new journey. The first Sunday morning I had nowhere to worship I went online, found a UU fellowship not too far from my home and woke my husband. I said "Will you go to church with me this morning?" He rolled over and said, "No." "They support marriage equality" I whispered. "OK", he said "I'll go."

Graham was willing to go if he didn't find anything offensive. He didn't want to have to pretend to believe something he didn't or to apologize for what he did believe. Lots of people show up with the same defenses in place. Religion has gotten a bad reputation, not entirely unwarranted, and even those of us who stand in opposition to the offending theologies suffer some guilt by association. Then folks come here and find themselves thinking "nothing here is offensive."

That's great. I'm glad no one is offended. OK, I'm not completely thrilled; I certainly seek to offend from time to time just to shake things up a bit, but I understand what you mean. You don't have to think around anything, don't have to apologize for anything.

Sometimes that experience is misinterpreted. Sometimes folks think Unitarian Universalists don't believe anything. I hope that I've put this concept to rest, but in case I haven't let me be clear- that's not true. We believe lots of things. We also have a great and proud history, centuries of working through what we believe.

Our story, the Unitarian Universalist story, begins with the Christian story. Jesus was born, he lived and he died. His friends were transformed by his life, moved to great service, breaking themselves open and pouring themselves out in his memory. They were known for their love, but they were also known by the government as those who would not conform. The Roman Emperor was accepted as 1/2 god but the Christians, like the Jews, wouldn't pay proper homage to him- they had a different understanding of "god". As a result, they were targeted as heretics and traitors. Those first 300 years were violent, but their numbers grew, despite the risk. The messages of love and hope were compelling.

I've told this story at length before in the sermon To Be Human is Divine, so I'm not going to tell it again. In short, the Christians made an important concession so that they could mainstream in the 4th century. They agreed that Jesus was god. The god-man was common in pagan mythology and smoothed the way for the conversion of the entire Roman Empire to Christianity, so they went for it.

But, not everyone agreed. One group of theologians stood firm, claiming that Jesus was a man, that there is only one god. The fight continued for 126 years, but ultimately the official doctrine was that Jesus was god. This is the beginning of Unitarian theology.

Flash forward to 1553. More than a thousand years have gone by. Miguel Servetus was burned at the stake by John Calvin after asserting that neither infant baptism nor the doctrine of the trinity made sense. Infant baptism suggested that each person is born with sin that can be washed away and Trinitarian theology created a complex relationship between three gods who were also one god. And one of the three was Jesus, a man who lived 1500 years earlier. Servetus knew his history and he'd read his bible. He knew neither of these doctrines was in Scripture and both were created in response to political pressures. More importantly, Servetus was using reason as a primary source for his theology. As a result, he suffered and died, but both his ideas and his methodology found their way into Poland. The doctrines were suspicious, but it's really Servetus' use of reason that shifts things. In Poland the ideas and the methodology took root and blossomed for almost a century until the movement was banned and the followers were forced underground. They went to Holland and Transylvania where they could practice their religion freely.

It was in Transylvania that Unitarianism, now so named, found its greatest audience. Francis David had the ear of the king who deeply appreciated the use of reason in theological inquiry and who recognized that

truth has not been fully revealed. It was in Transylvania that we have the very first Edict of Toleration, allowing all citizens to worship as they choose rather than as they are told. So, Unitarians with their willingness to challenge the status quo and to use reason as a primary source for faith, discovered that religious tolerance was a natural outgrowth of their faith. I know it's true in my own experience-I imagine it's true for many of us. The more I know, the more I know I don't know. When we prioritize education and reason, it becomes impossible to think that there's only one truth and that it has been discovered. An openness to other paths to truth, to all the other faith traditions, is a natural outgrowth. The Unitarian king recognized that quickly and created a nation uniquely open.

But, when the king died, David was accused of a crime I hope one day to also be accused- the Crime of Innovation. David was imprisoned and soon died a criminal.

There was also a growing interest in liberal religion in England. One day we'll talk about the effects of the Reformation in England because it's so much fun, but it will have to wait for another day. For now, I just want to mention the chemist Joseph Priestly who was a Unitarian leader. He was driven from England under threat to his life and settled in Philadelphia where he started a Unitarian church in 1794. It was the first to use the name, although not quite the first Unitarian church.

Liberal religion came to America in several different ways. The Puritans were reformers who created Congregational Polity which is the system of church governance we use since it best reflects our theology. And the Puritans, also known as the Congregationalists, are our direct descendants. There were many great Congregational ministers who were preaching the use of reason as a primary source, even more primary as the bible which should be read through the lens of reason. That's different. In some theologies, the bible is the primary source, pushing reason to a back seat or even out of the car. So, even before Joseph Priestly showed up with the name Unitarian, many people were already shifting in that direction and King's Chapel in Boston had made a formal shift several years earlier. Frankly, we see Unitarian theologies and tendencies as soon as we have Protestant preachers on American soil. As soon as there's this freedom to really think big.

So, the Unitarians were always the reformers, always modernizing, always moving the conversation forward. They were asking the difficult questions and discovering both great resistance and great freedom as part of the process.

The more recent history of the Unitarian movement in America is one of change and development, a change much more striking than what has taken place in any other national Unitarian movement. The Unitarians in Rumania worship and believe today just about as they did four centuries ago, and those in England look much like they did in the 18th century, but in this country, there has been a lot of change. In the 19th century our own great Trinity — William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker — moved us from a totally Christian body to one open to the other religions and philosophies of the world, and ultimately into what I would call a post-Christian context.

Even though all the ground work had been done, Channing really kicked off American Unitarianism with his 1819 sermon called Unitarian Christianity. In it he deconstructed popular Christian theology using reason as his primary source. And he did it during the ordination of a friend, making clear that he was not just putting forth a new way to consider accepted truths, but a new way of being Christian that already had followers and ministers. He was articulating a movement that had begun but which no one had fully claimed.

Twenty years later, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister, added even more depth to the newly forming American Unitarianism. To the sources of scripture and reason, Emerson added direct experience. In something of an intentional opposition to Channing and his theological intellectualism, Emerson brought heart. He added a mystical element to what might have spun into a strictly philosophical approach, grounding Unitarianism in the wild, magical experience of the natural world.

And had Theodore Parker not interjected, Unitarianism might have been limited to an individual pursuit of truth or personal experience of the world. Parker opened those minds and hearts and challenged the people of our faith to live bigger, to take responsibility for each other, to extend our theology to include an eye toward justice. For instance, it is said Parker, who preached to a church of thousand people, kept a gun on his pulpit in case a federal marshal entered the sanctuary looking for fugitive slaves. He knew there were several in his congregation and he was willing to put up a real fight to protect them. He extended his theology wide enough to include not just what we think and what we feel, but what we do and how we live together.

I've spent a lot of time focusing on the Unitarians even though I said this was UU 101. The truth is, I've often thought we put the wrong U first. OK, I've often thought we have a ridiculous name- one obviously created by committee and one that is not only too long but which points to two Christian theologies that no longer really define us. I'm getting off topic. If we're going to UU, we really should be Universalist Unitarians. But, the Universalists were nearly defunct at the time of the merger, so they lost that battle.

They were nearly defunct for good reason, though. Their theology of universal salvation had gone mainstream. When they came up with it, it was radical, but by the 20th century, it was old hat.

The Universalist story starts in 18th century England with one and then a handful of ministers preaching a doctrine of universalism, which held that since god was a loving god, it was inconceivable that god could condemn anyone to everlasting torment, and there was no such place as Heaven or Hell; all people would eventually be saved. John Murray then came to North America and began preaching that doctrine of universal love and salvation, which merged with views already finding popularity. Murray and others went on to found Universalist churches all over the eastern seaboard. Like the Unitarians, the Universalists were prominent in social action. They took the lead on all kinds of cases regarding religious freedom and were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement.

And in 1961, these two churches merged to become something new. They had a lot in common and in fact many churches including this one were both Unitarian and Universalist as were many ministers and members. Before we became the First Unitarian Church of Yonkers, our services alternated between Unitarian and Universalist. Without going into all the details leading up to and finalizing the merger, it all really makes sense.

The merger changed things in a way that was unpredictable. For all the negotiations around language and status, the powers that be just couldn't control culture. Unexpectedly I suspect, the merger threw the doors open to the possibility of becoming a whole new thing.

Two Christian churches. By creating one, they clarified a few things that took root in a new way.

We are creedless. Without doctrine. We're not alone. The Quakers are creedless too as are a handful of others. But they are defined by their history in a way UUs may not be any more. By merging, our history shifted in significance, making room for something new.

Creedlessness is the thing that drew me in. We don't declare one thing to be true now and for all time. We believe that revelation continues to unfold. So, it's not that we don't believe anything or that you can be UU and believe whatever you want. Neither of those statements is accurate. But we do believe that truth changes as does our ability to discern it. We also believe in several different ways to know truth. We call it our Sources. There are six of them. They are: Hebrew and Christian Scripture, history and tradition, the other major religions of the world, the Earth traditions, the great prophets who have lead the way for us, reason and personal experience. Using these Sources, we each know truth, or some corners of truth. And we come here to share it, to celebrate it, to consider the implications of it.

So, we have a strong history of rebellion and path blazing. We have created a movement fundamentally characterized by our devotion to truth and freedom and justice.

But if I'm really going to offer a sermon called UU 101, I need to say one more thing. Unitarian Universalism is more than the sum of all these parts. Last night, Graham, Zachary and I went to our home congregation in Mt. Kisco for their service auction. We've been members there for a long time. We've been together through congregational complications of all sorts, we've done more volunteer work than we've ever had time for, we've been accompanied by them through great personal crisis, it was with them that I discerned my call to ministry and they are the ones who ordained me. We were only there for two hours, but in that time, I was kissed by dozens of people and hugged by even more. I was out of the room when I won a big auction with someone else bidding by proxy. I could hear the whole thing from the kitchen, so when it was done, I ran into the room and did a little victory dance and the president, who was my proxy jumped up in her excitement and joined me in my dance and everyone cheered and laughed. The room was filled with joy and warmth and we were home. Honestly, we're there once or twice a year. But membership isn't about time or common beliefs or a shared understanding of our history.

Unitarian Universalism is about pushing the limits and building new ways, about using our heads and our hearts and our hands. And we know that we are not yet. We are still becoming, still figuring out what it means

to live in a post-Christian context, what new truths will be discovered, what those sources will open for us, what mystical, magical world will be revealed, what reason will expose.

And Unitarian Universalism is about creating congregations of transformation, communities in which the marginalized are brought to the center and the center is made whole.

It is now and it has always been about being so open everyone can find room and loving so well the world is healed.