

Unitarian Universalism in a Nutshell

Deliver August 28, 2011

How many of you have every tried to explain Unitarian Universalism to a family member, friend or acquaintance? Ever try to explain who we are and what we do to a stranger, when you know little or nothing about them? Where to begin, right? How do you explain something like Unitarian Universalism to anyone who has never experienced it? Or can't even imagine a "religion" that is not based on certain beliefs and rituals.

This is the problem I experience most often, people assume that Unitarian Universalism is based on certain beliefs, which is the experience most common in our Western culture. I recall an experience, it was during the reception of one of the first weddings I ever officiated. The couple was not Unitarian Universalist, but they were looking for someone to officiate their wedding that could give them something "spiritual but not religious."

Nobody at the wedding was the least bit familiar with UUism, and several people seemed very curious, at least everyone sitting at my table during the reception dinner was curious. After a few preliminary questions about the service and my affiliation and background, they got the heart of the matter. Someone asked, "Exactly what is it Unitarian Universalists believe?"

The question itself makes many assumptions that most people aren't aware. It assumes that religion is based upon certain common beliefs, which is not always the case. Many religions, especially Eastern Religions, stress Ortho-praxy, right practice, over ortho-doxy, right belief. Religion is about what you do, how you live life, not simply what you believe. But in our culture, most people assume that religion is simply a matter of belief because that is their experience.

On this particular occasion, I told the wedding guest that UU's don't necessarily share common beliefs. Many of us are Agnostics or Atheists. Some are Pagans, where others are Christian, or Jewish, or Hindu. We include practicing Buddhists and native American Shamans. Seemingly unfazed by my response, he continued with a follow-up question that, I'll admit it, fazed me a little bit. He said, "If you don't have a common belief, what is that holds you together as a community. What is that binds you as a group?" I had to think for a minute or so, and finally said that it was Love that binds us, and more than likely I quoted the 16th Century Unitarian Theologian Francis David who said that we do not have to think alike to love alike.

Everyone seemed content with my answer. I don't think I converted anybody, but maybe I planted some seeds. But frankly, while it seemed fine at the time, it left a bad taste in my mouth. It seemed to me, and still does, that my answer was a bit trite, a little too easy. Because really, every religious community, could say the same thing. While it's true that most churches have common creeds that serve to bind them, its equally true that no two people interpret that creed in the exact same way, let alone believe it. Thus, it could be argued that creeds serve merely as a facade but the community is actually held together by mutual caring and support, Love.

So, what is it that sets us apart from other churches, why are we unique. To understand that, we need to understand where we came from. Knowing where we came from helps us recognize

where we are going. Before there were Unitarians and before there were Universalists in this country, religious discourse was dominated by sermons such as this by Jonathan Edwards:

“The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God.”

The famous, or infamous, sermon is called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It was such an attitude, that humans were first and foremost sinners and were saved only by the grace of an angry and spiteful god, it was this environment that gave rise to both our Unitarian and our Universalist forebears. The early Unitarians rejected the idea that humans were saved only by the grace of god, they believed that humans had an important role in our own salvation, that we had not only the responsibility to rise above our “sinning” nature, but also the power to do so. It was these beliefs that gave rise to the notion that it matters what we believe, that our beliefs shape us, guide us, and serve as the lens through which we interpret the world. Unitarian Minister, philosopher, and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best:

A person will worship something - have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts-- but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

It matters what we believe, it truly matters what we believe.

The Universalist, on the other hand rejected the whole notion that God was as angry and spiteful as Edwards would have us believe. They believed that God was a loving, caring god and would not condemn the bulk of humanity to eternal damnation. They believed that God so loved that world that he sent his one and only son to save it. Period. They believed, as George de Benneville said, “As no church is pure in all things, so none can be found that does not contain some truth. Glorious truths are found in every church and religion under the sun. And this glorious chain of truths . . . we believe will someday unite all of them into one form of love.” From which one can conclude, that when it comes to the future dispensation of things, It doesn't matter what we believe.

Unfettered by the limiting bonds of creeds and the exclusivity of god's love, these two christian denominations evolved. Eventually, they both moved away to from being exclusively “Christian” in their orientation and as the social circumstances that kept the two movements apart fell away,

the natural currents of time and temperament brought them together to form our modern Unitarian Universalist movement. No longer exclusively Christian, but inclusive of it to be sure. For that is nature of evolution, to transcend and includes that which came before.

We are inspired by Truth, Beauty and Goodness wherever it is found; In Art, Religion, Science, philosophy, in ancient myths, the love of a child, the eyes of a lover, the awe of nature. Unitarian Universalism is the environment, the matrix, in which people, in which we pursue our individual paths of meaning and purpose (spirituality), it is the matrix in which we come together to form what Andrew Harvey calls a “network of grace,” where like minded and like hearted people are brought together by passion, skill, and serendipity to pool our energies, triumphs, grievances, hopes, and resources to transform ourselves and our world according to the dictates of love and compassion.

When we say we are like minded, it does not mean we think alike or believe alike. Rather, it means we share a common vision. We share a common outlook on life. It means, that we recognize, as David Eaton wrote, that “All living substance, all substance of energy, being, and purpose, are united and share the same destiny. All people, those we love and those we know not of, are united and share the same destiny. Birth to death we share this unity with the sun, earth, our brothers and sisters, strangers, flowers of the field, snow flakes, volcanoes and moon beams.”

Pause

All those years ago at that wedding, when I said that what binds us together is love, I wasn't wrong, but the answer was incomplete, it was trite, simplistic. So, what exactly are we today? In a nutshell, what is this thing we call Unitarian Universalism? What is it that binds us together in a cohesive movement?

I'm going to preface this by saying that this is my opinion today, and it may or may not be my opinion tomorrow or a week from today. If new information or different perspective presents itself, I am glad to reconsider it, refine it, or even reject it. I don't ask you to believe it or accept it, I hope you will consider whether it is a useful idea, and you are free to refine it or refute it and offer reasons why I should reconsider my position.

What is Unitarian Universalism? Unitarian Universalism is a home for you to believe, not believe, according to your own experience, conscience, and reason. Unitarian Universalist is a home for you to grow in mind, body and spirit in a safe and loving community. Unitarian Universalist is a home to practice the art of being human, sharing our gifts and talents in service of the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part.

The roots of our tradition are as deep as human history. There is a clear and direct line connecting what we do today back through time to our earliest ancestor communing, communicating, with the non-human world. The evolution of the cosmos from the big bang to the rise of consciousness, to our ever growing awareness of the depth and complexity of that cosmos, is our story: The only limits to what is possible are the limits of our own imagination.

As Unitarian Universalists, We are bound by love. We are bound by a common vision and a common purpose. As Unitarian Universalists, We are bound by a shared history and a shared story. This congregation, this church exists because you are willing to share your “passion, skill, energies, triumphs, grievances, hopes, and resources to transform yourselves and our world.” You are bound by love, by a common vision and common purpose. You are bound by a shared history and shared story. You have built an oasis of liberal religion out of a dry, and unforgiving land.

It is a wonderful gift to have discovered this oasis, it is a gift worth sharing with all share our vision, with all who stand on the side of love. “ People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.”

So be it. Amen. Blessed Be.