

Joining a Church and a Faith

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I was looking around on the web as I was preparing this sermon and happened across a message board for college students from all over the country who had taken a test online to see what religions fit their beliefs the best. A form of Belief-O-Matic. A good percentage of the students reported that they had Unitarian Universalism in their top 2-5 matches. So I found the link to the test and took it myself. There were questions about how you view God, human suffering, an afterlife, salvation and various social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. After you answer the questions you get a list of religions with percentages next to them with the best match at the top. The best match for me was...Unitarian Universalism which they gave a 100% match to my answers. Well that's a relief. I guess I'm ok to continue then.

And maybe that is one of the means by which we find our way to a particular religion or group. We know enough about the framework to know that we have a lot in common. So I think perhaps it is fitting that one of the requirements for membership in a congregation is that a person knows the basic principles of Unitarian Universalism. We could have someone learn the 7 principles the Unitarian Universalist Association developed for our denomination. They say a lot about us but they don't capture the depth and breadth of our history, the ideas of the many great thinkers that have fostered and nurtured liberal religion through the centuries or the fullness of the living faith that exists today.

Being a member of a congregation is one thing, being a member of a faith is another. Ours is no easy faith to capture. Except for a few acronyms, we have almost no 'group speak'— no words you have to be an insider to understand or more accurately words for which everyone assumes they hold the same definition. Phrases like "living in Christ" "Serving God", or "being saved" don't pass our lips very often and even then they are carefully defined. There are as many beliefs about God, an afterlife, salvation, and hope for the future as there are people in any gathering of Unitarian Universalists. We are a faith named after two theologies but not necessarily adherents to either one. At least we are not required to be. Nor are we shamed for what we do believe even if others see things differently. On the other hand, we are not a group as so often is said, that "believes anything we want to believe" or worse that "we don't believe in anything."

We have many different strands of faith woven into our denomination.

We hold the heritage of men and women in the early days of Christianity who were free to wonder who Jesus really was and what his teachings meant. After the Council of Nicea this was considered heresy and many were killed for simply having an open mind about these questions. We uphold and practice the conviction, which many others died for, that a person has a right to their own religious beliefs and cannot be coerced by anyone else to profess or believe differently. We can trace our roots back to the Protestant movement in Europe when Luther and Calvin insisted that salvation is not conferred by another person but is a matter between the individual and God.

The Puritans brought this radical notion with them to New England when they arrived. Over time, they became Congregationalists fostering democracy and modeling the free country we would become.

Some of the Congregationalists became Unitarian Christians who followed the teachings of Christ but couldn't accept his divinity. Once the door was opened for a reasoned approach to religion, Unitarianism became more and more expansive in its thinking. This is the core of liberal thinking that more and more can be included in our list of what is real, what is true and what is worthy of our attention. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the notion that science offers just as much revelation to us as any sacred text entwined into our faith. As well as the corollary to this: the idea that sacred texts should be considered in the context of science, historical context and literary form as well.

At its heart, liberal religion says that people at their core are basically good, that who we are is worthy and that the best of what we think and feel and intuit is revelation. William Ellery Channing, a prominent Unitarian minister in Boston in 1830 preached a sermon in which he said, "I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, while consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself."

As the Unitarians moved further and further from an inerrant view of the Bible, the Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Lydia Maria Child, and many others offered a deeply individual and spiritual view of religion. One that didn't require the organization of churches but the courage of individuals to trust themselves and their connection to the universe. They and others brought strands of Eastern religion, Hinduism and Buddhism into our faith.

In the 20th Century religious and secular humanist thought began to rise in our denomination with the publication of the Humanist Manifesto and we learned that a belief in God was not necessary in order to be ethical, fulfilled or to care deeply about humankind.

At the beginnings of our country, Universalists starting with John Murray shared the radical notion that God is love and that salvation is available to everyone – sinner and saint alike. Over time they found that their thinking took them further and further away from orthodox Christian dogma as they increasingly saw salvation as greater well-being and compassion in this life. You have probably heard the famous saying attributed to Thomas Starr King, that "Universalists think that God is too good to damn them forever and the Unitarians think that they are too good to be damned." In the 20th century these two movements joined forces to form the denomination of which we are a part today.

To say we are no longer Christian, no longer spiritual, no longer Salvationists is simply not true. We have explicitly Christian churches among our number, we have Christians in nearly every church, we have deeply spiritual people; we also have atheists and agnostics. We have all flavors of theists and every possible idea of who God might be represented in our congregations, maybe more than any other denomination. We have Buddhists in increasing numbers, some who

also attend a Hindu temple. We have some pagans and many who hold an eclectic mix these as I do.

In our worship it is as minister David Bryce said, “that is not a matter of being all things to all people, it is a matter of finding the deep place within, deeper than any religion, dogma or creed, and speaking from that place within ourselves and to that place within others.”

We have a lot in common that defines our faith. We see salvation as something that happens here and now on this earth through our own efforts and deepening wisdom in our care for each other and this planet.

We belong to a faith that values behavior and character more than whether you think you will survive death in some form. We value how we treat each other and our neighbors more than how we characterize God. We belong to a faith that calls us to action in response to the suffering of others or the degradation of our planet. We belong to a faith that has included many, many people who have catalyzed social reform in this country. Who fought against slavery, sexual discrimination, and economic injustice. We are not waiting for the messiah. We are people who create our lives and our heaven for ourselves and others wherever we are.

When I was in seminary I attended a summer course in religious education. The students all came from various mainstream protestant denominations. There was one Catholic in the class as well. We did an exercise one day which the Professor introduced in this way. He said, “I have a bowl that has all of your names on slips of paper and another bowl that has questions on slips of paper. I am going to draw a name and then have that person come up and draw a question. Then they will have a few minutes to respond as though this question has just been asked in a religious education class they were teaching.”

As soon as he explained this, I knew my name was going to be drawn. I had no desire to do this. I knew the question would force me to talk about the vast difference between my theology and that of the other students. I was fairly new in this liberal Christian seminary and didn't know how others would respond to me if I was really open about my beliefs. On the other hand, this is why I was there and not in a Unitarian Universalist seminary.

So, after a couple of rounds he did draw my name. I had been determined to decline going up. When my name was called however, I found myself standing up and going to the front of the room. My knees were shaking and my mouth was dry. I reached into the bowl of questions. As I did, the Professor said, “Oh, there is a question in there I am so hoping you pick.” Feeling that this was some destined moment in my life, I said, “I'm sure I will.” And I did. The question was, “Do you have to believe in the Trinity to be a Christian?”

Now the significance of this question for all of you who find theology a bit tedious or baffling is the issue of whether Jesus is God. The reason for the Trinity is to explain the phrase “The Father, Son and the Holy Ghost” which appears in a couple of places in the New Testament. Trinitarians believe that all of these are aspects or persons of God. God is three rather than one.

Unitarian Christians believe in one God and that Jesus was a human being like the rest of us. Ok, so I first opened up the question to the class. I asked them to respond.

Let me say I was really impressed with the answers they gave. Many of them had given this a lot of thought. A number of them felt it really wasn't important to believe in the Trinity or that there wasn't a lot of biblical support for it. Then the Professor said, "Well, Frieda since it happened the way it did this morning that you are up there, perhaps you could spend a few minutes and tell us about Unitarian Universalism." So I did. I explained what Unitarian meant. And I explained Universalism. I spoke about the belief in the goodness of human beings and our potential on earth, our history of expanded thinking and respect for the worth and dignity of every person. One of my fellow students that I really liked who was Pastor to a very conservative African American church asked point blank, "You mean you don't think Jesus was the son of God?" I took a breath and said, "No, we don't." He paused a second or too and then said, "Ok."

The professor, a young Christian man who was going through a lot of loss and grief in his life at that time asked me, "But where is the hope in your religion?" I understood him to mean that without hope of an afterlife, we are lost in grief and despair. I said, "Our hope lies in what has been given to us: the incredible beauty and complexity of nature and of human nature. We take hope in our relationships with other people and our relationship to the whole of nature."

At the break both a Mennonite and a Disciples of Christ student came up to me and each said, "I think I'm a closet UU."

It seems to me vital that members of this or any Unitarian Universalist congregation learn its history which is the foundation of its being. There are many books and courses that make that history and those who lived it come alive. It is vital to learn about the history of this congregation and how that has shaped its interests and direction. There are many ways to do this some of the most enjoyable being to ask some of the longer-time members to tell their stories. They have quite a few to tell.

It is important to read or hear the past and current flow of Unitarian Universalist theology as expressed in sermons, not only in your church but in the wider denomination, especially those held up by the collective clergy as visionary found on the UUA website. It is important to read the various reports generated by UU's and others who gather to think deeply about issues that matter: Like "Soul Work" a collection of essays about racism, and the various Commission on Appraisal reports that examine aspects of our faith and attempt to move our theological envelope further each time. All of these provide food for thought that can challenge, inspire and lead us to a broader understanding of what we are about.

It is important to take advantage of Adult Religious Education classes so that you can use the experiences and thoughts of each other to expand your own understanding and practice your own expression of faith.

And most of all it is important to then live your understanding of your faith in all aspects of your life. So that you will no longer need a little card with the 7 Principles and 6 Sources to tell

someone about your religion. Nor will you need an elevator speech. You then will be a living testament to that faith and all that you say and do will be your testimony.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not believe anything we want. We believe what our reason, intuition and experience tell us we *must* believe. We are bound by this each of us and this is the heart of what makes us different from the other churches on Crabapple Road. We gather together to help each other discern what is true and to act to create a world where reason and love prevail on this Earth.

That we may take a critical look at our own and others' beliefs and practices is not only acceptable to our faith, but it is what sets us apart. It is our obligation and a trust we hold sacred to be honest with each other and true to our own intelligence. If we hide behind a vague idea that "we accept all beliefs" and do not challenge ourselves and one another we have missed the point. If we claim to build a community based on diversity but haven't any clue what our fellow members think and believe or where they live then we are hypocrites. If we don't know each other, we cannot claim to be in community with one another. Likewise if we limit our association and openness to a group of agreeable like-minded people within the congregation we are simply building cliques within a church and there is no community. When we do this, we are creating nothing more interesting than a Middle School playground. We may join this or another church by signing a book and making a pledge, but it takes real courage to join this faith.

When I was a chaplain in a Catholic hospital as part of my seminary training, I visited patients occasionally who were nuns. They would ask me what my religion was and when I said 'UU' they would say, "Oh isn't that nice!"

Joining this faith means understanding that an open mind is one that reveals itself and values the revelation that comes from the other. It does not mean saying "Oh isn't that's nice!" to one another. It does mean connecting with the force for growth that exists within us that led us *here* instead of to a church where all would be laid out for us...all questions answered. It does mean that you have a responsibility to each other to encourage each other's progress, to listen to one another and to let yourself be known.

If we were all to join this radically vibrant faith, we would be united by bonds that could not be broken by petty arguments or by differences of opinion. There is no greater bond of friendship between lovers of freedom than the opportunity to freely explore and create together. We would be a force to reckon with in the greater community, a force for justice, peace and freedom of thought. Joining this faith means putting the responsible search for truth and meaning above our egos, our need to be in control and any other hidden agenda.

The good news is that you can do this because it is in the practice of our faith, at whatever level we can begin, that we become the community we seek. Therefore joining this faith is a growth process that starts when you really 'get' what it is that you've signed up for.

Being a child of the 60's I thought a great deal about the suffering and problems in the world and I still do. I wanted to become a minister in part because I saw that business was never going to do the right thing. It would always be profit motivated and although it benefits all of us by

providing jobs, goods and services, there will always be the temptation to ignore the harm it may do in order to increase the bottom line. Even non-profit agencies have their hands tied by the groups or government that funds them. That's why I've hitched my wagon to the church as a vehicle to facilitate both inner and outer change. It is one of the last bastions of grass-roots organization that can influence people significantly.

You may be afraid that others will criticize or even do violence to you for your beliefs here in the Bible belt. All of our number who preached the evolution of social values – the abolitionists, the suffragettes, the civil rights workers, those who preached freedom of thought, were ridiculed, run out of town or worse. Yet their legacy lives on in the important changes they helped bring about in our society. Our denomination, because it has always been small compared to all others has demonstrated over and over again, that numbers are not what effects change but a willingness to stand up for the truth in a persistent way.

New members, you are all welcome here, you have already made a contribution to this congregation by your presence and everyone here looks forward to a long association with you. May we all embrace the challenge of joining this faith. May this house be a “cradle for your dreams and a workshop of your every common endeavor.”

Amen.

Closing Words

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Be ours a religion which, like
 sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.
 --Theodore Parker