

UU 101

The world needs a religion that builds faith out of the knowledge
that we are united with everyone and everything,
and that nothing is saved unless all is saved.
- Charlie Ortman

When I sat down to write this sermon, all my ideas were coming in three's, which is pretty funny considering that the first name of our religion is Unitarianism. "Unitarianism" literally means a doctrine about Oneness.

In the early nineteenth century in the United States, the word *Unitarian* was a slur used by more orthodox Christians, who were Trinitarians, to insult and shame our forefathers and mothers, who eventually said, "Fine. We'll take this name you have given us and wear it proudly."

Trinitarians believe in the orthodox Christian doctrine that God is manifest in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This doctrine includes a belief in the divinity of Jesus and in the necessity of salvation only through him.

We Unitarian Universalists, historically, have denied these orthodox doctrines, especially the exclusionary one that says there's only one way to be saved. Our other name "Universalism" means a belief in universal salvation.

Alice Blair Wesley, a Unitarian Universalist minister and historian who has written extensively about our faith, defines salvation this way: “The English word *salvation* derives from the Latin *salus*, meaning health. Unitarian Universalists are... concerned with salvation, in the sense of spiritual health or wholeness,...[and yearn for] personal growth, increased wisdom, strength of character, and gifts of insight, understanding, inner and outer peace, courage, patience, and compassion” (“Our Unitarian Universalist Faith: Frequently Asked Questions” UUA Pamphlet Commission Publication, 1997).

Some UU’s today identify as liberal Christians, for whom the teaching and person of Jesus is central to their faith, and I think all of them accept other ways to salvation.

But I’m getting off the track, which is easy to do when you try to talk about what Daniel O’Connell calls “the long answer” to the question: What do Unitarian Universalists believe?

So I was thinking in three's. I remembered a bumpersticker that I saw in Madison CT: "Unitarian Universalism: A Different Trinity: Respect, Freedom, Justice."

I was thinking I wanted to talk this morning about three things: UU identity, which answers the question: Who are we? UU values, which answers the question: What do we think is of ultimate importance? And UU mission, which answers the question: Why do we exist?

The Baltimore Catechism, which my husband Paul, who was born into an Irish Roman Catholic family, studied as a child, asks, "Why did God make you?" Paul can still recite from memory the answer he was taught: "God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next."

In another part of his speech to the UUMA Convocation, Daniel O'Connell says, "Orthodox religions provide only the Question and the Answer. Not how to get from the Q to the A...Ignore the blank space, says orthodoxy, concentrate on the Q and A. That's *their* version of doctrine, not ours."

UU-ism says you cannot just give the Q and then the A, you have to *show* your work. In high school math classes you can't just repeat the problem assigned to you and spit out the answer. You have to *show* your work. It's *how* you get to the A from the Q that matters. The Qs and As will change over time, but the uncovering of what's in between is what make you uniquely UU" ("Unitarian Universalism: The Religion" essay delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Convention, March 8, 2002, p.6).

Another thing we often do when we're describing our religion is say what it is not, what we don't believe, and there are good reasons for this. Many of us, almost all of us UU's, come into this religion from some other faith tradition. Maybe we're among the unchurched, those who were never brought up in any religion. Maybe our parents or grandparents were affiliated with some other faith tradition. But very few of us were born into Unitarian Universalist families.

This is a huge strength and a huge weakness of our religion. The strength comes from the choice. Most members of this congregation, and most of the members of most of the

congregations in our denomination, have deliberately chosen this faith. People who call themselves UU's have made a decision to identify with this faith. They have converted to this religion from something else or from nothing else.

(*Convert* means to turn around, to come over from one belief or faith to another—and another thing we UU's like to do is define words and play with words and squabble about words so that it is very hard to get us to agree about them. We love to wordsmith endlessly. It's hard for many of us to acknowledge that what the words say might not be the most important part of our faith.)

People who convert to a new religion tend to be passionate about their faith. They tend to be committed to the doctrines they have chosen. This passion and commitment are true strengths of our religious communities.

And, also, converts tend to be opinionated and oppositional and to think bad thoughts for a long time about their old religion and maybe about religion in general. They can be intolerant and negative and difficult to work with. Interfaith ministries are challenging for them because they can

become fundamentalists in their new faith and think that they have the answers and are better/smarter/more enlightened/more evolved than people of other faiths.

These oppositional and fundamentalist tendencies are the potential weakness of Unitarian Universalism. Such attitudes leave us isolated from the wider religious community and belie our Universalist identity as a tolerant and compassionate people. Our First Principle says we covenant to affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Not just the people we like and agree with who think like we do.

One more thing about discussing our beliefs—and this is the final idea I had that came in threes—is something we discovered a couple of weeks ago when we were brainstorming about what might happen at the Grange Fair table. When someone asks what Unitarian Universalists believe, you have to answer the question on three levels: you can say what UU’s as a whole believe; you can say what kinds of beliefs are found in your particular congregation; and you can say what you as an individual UU believe. It’s useful to keep those three strands distinct.

Let's review for a minute: Historically Unitarian Universalism comes out of the liberal Protestant Christian We believe in the One, not the Trinity, and in the potential for all people to become spiritually whole. Most UU's are converts and tend to see themselves as mavericks and as heretics (a *heretic* is a person who thinks for herself, a nonconformist, a dissenter from established religious dogma). Our values are articulated in the Seven Principles. Okay. So far so good. But what about our Unitarian Universalist mission. Why do we exist?

Charlie Ortman, a Unitarian Universalist minister who serves the UU congregation in Montclair, NJ, says we exist because "the world needs a religion that builds faith out of the knowledge that we are united with everyone and everything, and that nothing is saved unless all is saved ("From My Window," *The Gazette, Newsletter of the Unitarian Church of Montclair, NJ*, May 2007, p. 1.)

"We are united with everyone and everything." That's the Oneness of Unitarianism. It's reflected in our Seventh Principle:

“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are apart.”

Last Friday night I saw the new film about the Apollo space missions called *In the Shadow of the Moon*. It's a documentary that combines interviews with the surviving astronauts and vintage footage of the actual flights, the first landings on the moon, and the worldwide excitement they generated. Wonderful movie, very inspiring and touching. From the perspective of 2007, the late 60's look so innocent.

One of the astronauts told a story about looking out the Apollo spaceship window on his way back to Earth and taking in the celestial panorama: the moon, the sun, the Earth. He had what he described as an epiphany. He realized that he was looking at the source of his own body, that he and every other human was made of stardust, and that everything in the universe was united because it was one thing. And he said his response to this insight was “ecstasy.” Part of the reason Unitarian Universalism exists is to develop and proclaim this sense of the Oneness of the universe, the Oneness of human

kind. The violence in which we dwell so much of our days is “so antithetical to that vision” (Ortman, op cit).

If we are all One, then “nothing is saved unless all is saved.”

The doctrine of Universalism says that every person has the potential to be saved, to be made whole, to be healthy. But this salvation is not automatic. It is hard work. You have to, as Daniel O’Connell says, *show* your work. The Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Principles offer direction toward spiritual health and wholeness—in our personal lives, in our congregations, and in the wider world. As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that each of us can be saved, and our Principles point to some of the ways we can behave, some of the work we can do, to move in the direction of our salvation.

Our faith is both optimistic and realistic. In the words of Unitarian Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, we believe that “the arc of the universe bends toward justice.” This saying, often quoted by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, carries the sense of the infinite possibilities of the human spirit and of the long and patient

work required to realize these possibilities. Parker was a radical minister who was shunned by his Unitarian colleagues for his liberal theological analysis in a famous sermon, “A Discourse on the Permanent and the Transient in Christianity” (1841) in which he claimed that the miracles of the bible and the divinity of Jesus were “transient rather than permanent and necessary parts of religion” (David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, p. 302).

I hear Daniel O’Connell whispering in my ear, “No more history. Get a move on. Define yourself!”

All right. I’m still working in three’s, so let me mention in closing three aspects of Unitarian Universalism that are central to my own religious faith. First, I believe, in the words of an old liberal formulation, that “revelation is not sealed.” We can all continue to be open to new knowledge, new inspiration, new teachings our whole lives. We can take a beautiful old folk hymn from hundreds of years ago and adapt it to express new meanings.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am committed to a lifelong practice of spiritual disciplines that I hope will open me to new

thoughts and beliefs and convictions. What I tell you I believe today is not cast in concrete. It could change. Revelation is not sealed.

Second, as a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that what I say about what I believe is not as important as what I do. We are a religion of covenant, not a religion of creed. We believe that deeds, not creeds, are the measure of a person's faith.

And I can't get out of here today without calling on the heritage of my fathers and mothers and quoting from the scripture of my upbringing: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13: 1—3, KJV, adapted).

As a Unitarian Universalist and a follower of Jesus, I believe that every person is my neighbor. And what matters is

not the words we use to define our faith but the relationships which we cultivate. Our faith is covenantal, not creedal.

And finally, I believe that Unitarian Universalism is one of the best hopes the world has for learning how to live as we must in our diversity. In Transylvania in the sixteenth century, Unitarian Frances David said “You need not think alike to love alike.” When people ask me how we can have a religious community without sharing the same beliefs, I tell them we have many beliefs, but one faith. This is the great experiment being carried out in each of our congregations where people who do not agree about their religious beliefs nevertheless come together and support each other in their spiritual journeys.

I believe that the world must solve the problem of human diversity or we are doomed. And I believe that this congregation and all of our Unitarian Universalist congregations can point the way. If we can learn how to do it, to truly accept and respect each other, and if we can teach others, then we will have made a difference.

Alice Blair Wesley writes, “The creative freedom of our whole society will endure for just the length of time we together understand and teach and keep our covenant and speak with our own mouths the words of love and truth and freedom the whole world always needs to hear” (Minns Lecture, “The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church,” p. 9)

May it be so. Amen

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Preached for the Fourth Unitarian Society
In Mohegan Lake, New York
September 16, 2007