

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

Rev. Scott W. Alexander

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

March 6, 2011

On this Bring-A-Friend Sunday – when we extend a special welcome to folks in our community who may not be familiar with our community of faith – I thought I would get right to the heart of the matter...and share with you what I believe it means (at its core) to be a Unitarian Universalist.

This can be summed up, I believe, in one word. Being a Unitarian Universalist means that you are an architect. Now, not an architect like Frank Lloyd Wright, although that famous 20th century designer of great and beautiful buildings was a Unitarian Universalist, who (as you know) designed exquisite buildings all over America, and incidentally several of our more striking church buildings in the Midwest...but I'm not talking about that kind of architecture... Being a Unitarian Universalist means – rather – that you become an architect of the heart.

Being a Unitarian Universalist simply means that you devote a lifetime to the purposeful and compassionate structuring of both self and society.

Let me say this a slightly different way. Being a Unitarian Universalist means that you spend your life striving to intentionally shape both your personal culture – and the culture of your community in accordance with our seven Unitarian Universalist principles:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Being a Unitarian Universalist means that you spend a lifetime lending your best self to these seven noble dreams for the human enterprise...both in the daily rounds of your personal life, and in your larger life as a citizen of the wider world – in the hope that someday humanity might achieve justice, equity, compassion, freedom, and respect for all persons and communities.

Because we are a liberal, non-creedal religious tradition that doesn't insist that everyone thinks and believes exactly alike (and that is a key thing anyone must understand about us), because we are a non-creedal religion that doesn't insist everyone thinks and believes exactly alike, many in our culture mistakenly believe that Unitarian Universalism is a low-key, wishy-washy, "anything goes" religion.

Although Garrison Keillor of Lake Wobegon fame happens to be very fond of Unitarian Universalists, many of the jokes he repeatedly tells about us on the *Prairie Home Companion* perpetuate our undeserved image as a lightweight, not-serious faith.

Just two of his favorite UU jokes if I might...one Saturday night on his radio show, Garrison lightheartedly told of walking into our modern church in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and being shocked to see not the "10 Commandments" posted in gold leaf on the wall, but rather the "10 Suggestions." And on another occasion, he described (with great relish and ridicule) the earnest 19th century Icelandic Unitarian missionaries (pure fiction, of course, although there were in fact quite a few Icelandic Unitarians a century ago scattered throughout the upper Midwest) who came to Lake Wobegon "to save the Indians through interpretive dance." Thanks to Garrison Keillor and others, there are a whole lot of people out there (and trust me, I know, because as a UU minister I hear it all the time) who mistakenly think that being a Unitarian Universalist means that you "can believe anything you want."

To think this about Unitarian Universalism is to entirely miss both the soul and substance of our faith! Yes, we are genuinely open (as an evolving, free faith tradition not trapped in rigid beliefs or frozen dogma) to new ideas and multiple ways of seeing spiritual and ethical matters...but being a Unitarian Universalist means that you take your religious and ethical life with a terrible seriousness of purpose. As I have already affirmed, "An architect of the heart...devoting a lifetime to the purposeful and compassionate structuring of self and society...in accordance with our seven guiding principles."

Practicing this religion means that you are ever and always an architect of the heart...devoting a lifetime to the purposeful and compassionate structuring of self and society...in accordance with our seven guiding principles.

And this is not something new for us in this denomination. We Unitarian Universalists have understood that this dual responsibility – of intentionally and compassionately structuring both self and society – to be at the center of the religious life for hundreds of years. From our earliest beginnings as Christian sects in the 18th and 19th centuries, both the Unitarians and the Universalists (who, incidentally, merged into our present-day denomination in 1961), the early Unitarians and Universalists were guided by two interconnected slogans – or sayings. On the one hand, they talked about "*salvation by character*" – the idea that it mattered ultimately that each individual shaped his or her character in principled and compassionate ways. And on the other hand, they talked about the importance of humanity, together bringing "the Kingdom of God to Earth" – that is, the movement being devoted to the task of helping to shape society to reflect the highest and noblest ideals we human beings could imagine. Centuries later, these two intertwined religious ideals -- intentionally shaping both the self and our society to reflect the best we can know – still lie at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith journey.

Let me take each of these two equally important spheres of human being in turn, saying a little more about each.

First, devoting your lifetime to intentionally shaping yourself into the best human being you can become. This means that as a Unitarian Universalist, you work at creating within your own particular human being “an interior architecture” – an interior architecture of strength, purpose, compassion, responsibility, and joy...”a design of decency,” if you will, as you grow your own self and soul to achieve your full and finest human potential.

More than 150 years ago, the famous Unitarian clergyman William Ellery Channing once said, “Be careful how you live...it is the only sermon you will ever preach.” And Unitarian Bard Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “The gods we worship write their names on our faces; be sure of that. And 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 our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshiping we are becoming.” And in a similar vein, a few years back, a colleague of mine from St. Paul, Minnesota, put this sermon title up on the front lawn marquee announcing what he would talk about on Sunday; it simply read, “If Being a Unitarian Universalist Were Against the Law,...Would There Be Enough Evidence to Convict You?”

My colleague’s point was simply that being a Unitarian Universalist obliges you to live in certain obvious, ethical ways...it obliges you to visibly move through your days honoring and serving the seven principles of our faith...it obliges you to constantly work – again, in our interior architecture of being – to bring your behaviors in line with your beliefs. It means that there is congruence and consistency

Congruence and consistency between:

- 1) your religious principles, and
- 2) your day-to-day words and deeds.

Earlier this week, I happened to go out to a Chinese restaurant for dinner...where I unexpectedly got a perfect Unitarian Universalist fortune in my after-dinner cookie. Here it is. Want me to read it to you? “A person of words and not deeds is like a garden full of weeds.”

Another way of affirming this about our faith, is to say that there should be no such thing as a stealth Unitarian Universalist, who can somehow secretly be a part of our faith without showing visible and regular signs of what they believe in. Our religion is not some sort of an intellectual exercise where you simply pay lip service to certain principles, beliefs, and affirmations. It is rather an everyday lifestyle religion – a lifestyle religion that you must live out (day in and day out) as you share this earth with others. If you are a serious Unitarian Universalist...if you are truly practicing this faith, your principles and your beliefs should be profoundly apparent to all whose lives intersect and co-mingle with yours. Let me say this one more way, if you are a Unitarian Universalist, there is no such thing as being in the closet...you have to come out...and live your faith vividly for all so see.

So...that takes care of the first half of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist...building an interior architecture of purpose and compassion...a sturdy and reliable infrastructure which enables you to live your personal life with rectitude and consistence. But then there is the second, and equally important sphere in our living where we must all be architects of the heart.

Being a Unitarian Universalist necessarily means regularly looking beyond the narrow confines of self and working diligently with others in the wider world to build a societal architecture of justice, equity, compassion, and dignity for all.

Some of you may not know that in the early days of America, many of the greatest advocates for social justice and reform were Unitarians or Universalists.

Theodore Parker and William Ellery Channing fought to end slavery in America...

Dorthea Dix and Benjamin Rush led the way in American penal and mental health reform...

Horace Mann fought for free universal education, and Elizabeth Peabody founded the first kindergarten for early childhood development...

Joseph Tuckerman and Margaret Fuller helped to create modern social welfare and protections for the poor...

Samuel Gridley Howe and Henry Bergh fought for those who could not defend themselves. Samuel Gridley pioneered work for the care of the blind... and Henry Bergh founded both the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and a similar organization to protect children from labor and domestic abuse.

Clara Barton (who founded the American Red Cross) and Julia Ward Howe (who founded Mother's Day for Peace) addressed the carnage of war.

And finally...Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton fought for equal rights for women,

It is this great legacy of social concern and social justice which still animates and inspires our religious movement and our particular congregation here in Vero Beach today. Here at UUFVB, we constantly look outward from these walls...and do what we can to build a wider human architecture of compassion and justice for all of the human family.

We first do this locally...by giving our plate collection away each and every Sunday to worthy social service organizations here on the Treasure Coast, and through our Social Justice Film Series, which alerts members of our community to many of the pressing human issues of our day. We also engage in many other social justice projects week-in-and-week-out, both local and global, with other people of goodwill in our community, all in the hope of increasingly structuring our society to reflect our seven guiding principles.

And so, dear friends -- whether you are a guest with us this morning (who up until now have known almost nothing about Unitarian Universalism...or whether you are a third-generation UU who has this faith tradition virtually hard-wired into your heart -- this is, in a nutshell, what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist!

Being a Unitarian Universalist means that you devote a lifetime to the purposeful and compassionate structuring of both self and society, in accordance with our seven humanity-affirming principles.

This troubled world of ours desperately needs congregations of concerned men and women devoting themselves to the building of both finer individual selves and a more just and humane society. Here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach...we are humbly (at the same time) about the business of building both. Please know that we welcome any and all who are so moved to join with us on this great journey toward that which is loving...and just...and good.

AMEN.