

Everything I know About Unitarian Universalism

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Reverend Scott W. Alexander

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

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Almost 40 years ago (when I was an aspiring minister in seminary out in California) one of the great Unitarian Universalist preachers of the day, The Rev. Dr. Joseph Barth of King's Chapel fame, had the formidable challenge of teaching me (and some other over-eager students) the art of preaching. One day in class (after I had offered a far too complicated and sweeping sermon—with way too many quotes and theological observations) he paused. He looked me square in the eye and said, as only a wise old man can, (in that deep and gravely voice of his), "***Kid...when you get your own congregation, don't try to tell 'em everything you know on the first Sunday...Because you might succeed!***"

Over the many subsequent years of my preaching career, I have always tried to remember this sage advice. But this morning, as I preach my second sermon to you as the newly settled minister of this wonderful congregation, I want to attempt to do just that! In the next thirty minutes (or less, I promise) I want to try to **summarize** (hopefully in a coherent and useful way) everything that I know about Unitarian Universalism—Well, it may not be ***Every Last Thing*** that I know (for ours is a very thoughtful, complicated and intricate religion). But, it will be everything that I believe is essential and important about our religion. Don't think I can do this? Well, hold on to your hats, dear friends, because here we go...and for those of you who want to hold to that the 30 minute promise, **START YOUR WATCHES!**

I believe there are **four essential components** of our Unitarian Universalist faith that both define us as a religious movement...and set us apart from most organized religions in America.

These components are:

1) Our **ESCHATOLOGY** (and don't worry, friends, I will define these fancy theological and philosophical words in a minute!)

2) Our **ENGAGEMENT** with the World (that is, our **ETHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL ENGAGEMENT** with the world

3) Our **EPISTEMOLOGY** (another big word which I'll explain in a moment),

4) and finally OUR **INCLUSION** (which is to say our devotion to DIVERSITY). Let me quickly take each of these four components in turn.

1) First, Our **Eschatology**.

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Eschatology is simply a fancy theological word that asks the biggest (and most enduring) of all religious questions: **What is the straight dope...(The real story) about life and death?** Different religions, of course, answer this biggest of spiritual question differently. Hindus and pagans talk about reincarnation, Christians talk about heaven and eternal life, Jews talk about the lasting immortality of influence, Buddhists talk about Nirvana, transmigration and the great wheel of life. But for most Unitarian Universalists, the real story about the meaning of life and death is firmly rooted in this temporal, earthly existence we find ourselves in now. My colleague Dennis Daniels states it this way, **"I have spent decades trying to succinctly summarize Unitarian Universalism, and finally I have gotten it down to Just three little words...THIS IS IT!"**

There is actually an ancient Gaelic word for the phrase **"this is it"**...the word is **Sine**... ["shin-ay"] **"This Is It!"**

"This is it"...for most Unitarian Universalists (and I'll talk about the exceptions in a minute, for there are some, which we must acknowledge and honor), for most UU's this pretty much sums up our eschatology. Ours what theologians call a **"realized" eschatology**...which means that as a religious people, we Unitarian Universalists are fiercely and joyfully rooted in this world and this time we have on earth. Imperfect and difficult as they often are, UU's are not waiting for (or spiritually betting on) any other world or other time to live out of humanness, make our contributions to the world, or play out the purpose and destiny of our lives.

Now some Unitarian Universalists do believe that they will continue on past this life in some spiritual or mystical form or another. ...And many of us believe (and take real comfort from) the Jewish idea that after we die we spiritually live on in the memories others have of our good deeds and love....but in general, we UUs do *not* characteristically devote much-if-any spiritual energy toward earning a ticket to heaven (or some other eternal place or spiritual dimension of bliss)...**Rather, we have spiritually decided that this life and this world are it...wonderfully "it" ...and precious all that we have.**

So...because this is the way we see life and the world...it matters profoundly how we Unitarian Universalists live. If our lives on this planet are to have purpose and meaning...dignity and joy...richness and satisfaction...and if we are ever to find those mysterious realities called salvation and satisfaction, it will (in blessed spiritual fact) be **Here and Now in this complicated world**. It will be amidst the whirlingly imperfect stuff and relationships of this creation, as it comes to us in all its holy and vulnerable imperfection.

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Now most other religions (including most of our Christian neighbors here in Vero Beach) find such a realized, this-worldly eschatology (firmly rooted in the imperfect world and fleeting days that we know we have) to be emotionally and spiritually insufficient. Most other religions seem to want the promise of eternal life as a reward for striving in this life to be good and purposeful upon the earth. But not us. Because as Unitarian Universalists we really believe that "this life is it," we strive to live our earthly lives with as much intentionality, goodness, decency and purpose as we can.

Let me speak personally for a moment of my own passionately realized eschatology. It is precisely because I believe that my life (as I know it now) and my world (as I experience it now) are all that I shall ever have, (it is because I am convinced that the great gift of life and being is not given forever) that I strive to live my life with all the emotional and spiritual passion and depth that I can. I do not ask "*The Great Flowing Mystery of It All*" to give me something I believe it cannot deliver. This Unitarian Universalist is spiritually satisfied by (and genuinely grateful for!) the gift of temporal life as it has come to me...I do not demand or dream that I shall have this gift—or some other, MORE PERFECT gift—forever. I spiritually seek to rise to the challenge of living my life as best and purposefully (as joyfully and responsibly) as I can...even though I know I someday must, reluctantly—perhaps even sadly—relinquish it.

So...I say without spiritual fear or regret, that when it comes to life (My Life!), **This Is It!** This Is It! Dear Unitarian Universalist friends...this is the only existence life we will ever have. And because this delicious/demanding dance of life is all that we will ever have, *there is no time to waste*. Now is the time for us to sing and dance and know joy. Now is the time to serve others and fight for justice. Now is the time to savor and celebrate each day. Now is the time to *love* and *live* and *risk* with purpose, passion and care.

So **the first thing** I know about Unitarian Universalism is that it calls us (with a holy urgency) to get about the business of living fully and religiously now. This is the essence of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist...to live this temporal life passionately and well...with both joy and responsibility.

- 2) And that leads me to the second essential component of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, **ENGAGEMENT – ETHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL ENGAGEMENT -- in and with the world.**

We are a religious people who (again, because we believe that it is in this earthly life that the purpose and meaning and dignity of our lives will be played out) believe we have an obligation to be fiercely and purposefully *engaged* with

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our world and its peoples. Another way of saying this is that we UU's know that **we have a *ministry to live out in the world, and amongst ourselves***. Look for a moment please at the seven guiding principles of Unitarian Universalism that we read responsively together earlier in the service.

Each of these life-affirming, outward-looking principles primarily comes from the bedrock wisdom of our Judeo-Christian roots, enhanced over the generations by the insights of the other great spiritual traditions of the world. Each of these principles calls upon us and challenges us to be fully engaged in the world...and to live responsibly. These principles call upon us to live loving, reciprocal and nurturing relationships of caring, connection, and compassion with other life. Whenever I am asked to summarize our religion, I say that **being a Unitarian Universalist means that you devote a lifetime to developing a ministry to the world—a ministry of right relation, depth relation, and caring relation in every sphere of your life.**

First, we devote time to developing a ministry to self (developing an interior architect of both joy and compassion) which provides you with a spiritual center that energizes and motivates you to develop. Then, we develop a ministry to others (to affirm and defend as best and broadly as we can the inherent worth and dignity of every man, woman and child who shares this tender planet with us). Then, we strive to develop a ministry to community and culture (striving to be active and engaged citizens who work to ensure that justice, equity, decency and compassion are defended in all the communities and institutions we participate in). Finally, we try to develop a ministry to all of creation itself. This means we work with others of good will around the world to end starvation, enslavement and poverty in all their forms, and to ensure human rights and freedom for all. We work for containment of war and violence and to end the environmental destruction that so threatens our continued existence on Mother Earth. We Unitarian Universalists (both individually in our separate lives...and together, here, as members of this gathered and organized community) are called (by both our seven principles and by our hundreds of years of liberal religious tradition and spiritual practice) to **a ministry of responsibility, tenderness, justice and caring**. We are *not* (as many orthodox traditions are) a religion of beliefs or dogma—where salvation and meaning are obtained by the sheer adherence to certain beliefs and convictions. We are rather **a religion of ethical action and everyday engagement...a religion of deeds and duty...commitment and character...and everyday spiritual practice of ministering to the world right where we live.**

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Contrary to all the old, tired jokes they tell about us Unitarian Universalists (which make us out to look like a casual or wishy-washy religion) ours is a serious, demanding religion we must Live Out. We must live out our religion (with diligence and discipline) in our daily living...here, now...in this fragile and fleeting gift and duty called earthly life. You cannot be a "stealth" or "closeted" Unitarian Universalist (one of my colleagues once came up with a sermon title that became famous, he asked, **"If being a Unitarian Universalist were against the law, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"** I love that...to be a part of this faith, you must promise to intentionally mold every aspect of your life (everyday, more intricately and intentionally) into a ministry of purpose and care...pure and simple.

But how?

- 3) By what methods and methodologies do we structure and shape our response to (and engagement with) the world...this is where **EPISTEMOLOGY**, our third essential and distinctive component of Unitarian Universalism, comes in.

Epistemology is another of those fancy theological words that has a fairly simple meaning. Epistemology is simply **the science or theory of knowledge**, and the question which epistemology always asks is this: **By what authority do you (as a religious person) assert that something (you believe and follow) is real or true...good or right?** Let me repeat that. Epistemology asks: by what authority do you (as a religious person) assert that something (you believe and follow) is real or true...good or right?

For some religions (most especially the conservative ones which abound around us here in America) authority for what is real and true, good and right lies (clearly and unequivocally) with what is understood as god's immutable word...or scripture's absolute inerrancy...or some prophet or leaders proclamations or sayings...or the pronouncements of the church's hierarchy...or some combination of all of the above. Now in our faith tradition we **do** value and honor these classic sources of religious truth and have an honored place in our religion for scriptural wisdom, church tradition and prophetic utterances of great men and women. But in our liberal faith tradition, the most enduring locale for religious authority lies elsewhere... and closer to home. In our faith tradition, authority for what is real or true, good or right lies primarily **within each individual person**, as they discern it by the light of their **reason**, their clarity of their **conscience**, and their own direct everyday **experience** with the world. Ours has (since its earliest, humanist beginnings in the Protestant Reformation) been a religious

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tradition that affirms (as our first principle does) "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," including their right to find what is true for them.

As a faith tradition, we have placed great and persistent confidence (some who are more skeptical about human nature might call it "extreme") but we have placed great and persistent confidence in human nature to see and do what is good and what is true and what is right. Again...though we do see authoritative sources of truth and morality beyond the reason and conscience of the human individual (in things like scripture, history, and church tradition) we have always hesitated to dictate (to any individual's reason or conscience) some dogma or external truth which none can then question, doubt or reject. This is why there is always (and preciousely) *a diversity of belief, conviction and perspective* here at our fellowship. One of my colleagues once put it this way, ***"If you want to come to a church where everyone agrees with you and thinks just like you do, you have come to the wrong place...for in this Unitarian Universalist congregation there is (of necessity) a wide diversity of perspective and belief."***

Because we trust in human reason and conscience and character, we refuse to tell one another precisely what to believe. Yes...we are commonly guided by our shared principles (and by the clear and reliable direction of hundreds of years of Unitarian Universalist thought and practice). But when all is said and done, our open-ended epistemology (which sees many, valid sources for spiritual truth and ethical action) means that we will have diversity (and, on occasion) disagreement about what is real and true, good and right. In many dogmatic religious communities, things look (and perhaps actually are, in some instances) less messy.

But in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, our open-ended epistemology means that we understand ourselves on a **fluid and evolving journey** (both together and individually) toward truth...toward understanding...and toward all that might be called good and holy. Again, this is a very **demanding religion** we have chosen for ourselves...for it asks and expects all who say they are on this religious path to do the hard (intellectual, spiritual and emotional work) of finding (by themselves yes...yet also in community with others) those ethical and spiritual truths from which they cannot escape, and to which they must express fealty and devotion in their daily living. If you aren't at least a little scared, chastened or intimidated by all this, dear Unitarian Universalist friends, you have not yet started to take this demanding religion of ours seriously enough. This is not a church where, as some like to imagine, ***"you can believe anything you want."*** Such a wishy-washy, spineless spiritual place is not where our open

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epistemology (combined with our historic principles) leads us. **This is rather a serious, diligent, hard-working liberal religious community where you are free-yet-obliged (individually and with others...primarily using your own reason, conscience, and spiritual discernment) to spend a lifetime moving toward truths that serve both you and the wider world with love and hope.** Can I repeat that sentence please...for I believe it's almost everything that you need to know about this religion. **This is rather a serious, diligent, hard-working liberal religious community where you are free-yet-obliged (individually and with others...primarily using your own reason, conscience, and spiritual discernment) to spend a lifetime moving toward truths that serve both you and the wider world with love and hope.**

It's a paradox when you think about it...the **freedom** inherent in our open epistemological approach **binds us** Unitarian Universalists to a diligent life-long process of discernment, reflection, integrity and faithfulness. Ours is the freedom **for** the hard work of religion...not freedom **from** religious discipline and diligence.

- 4) And there is more (even if I probably have already overloaded you with rapid-fire things to think about) there is one more essential component of Unitarian Universalism...one more key element of our faith...and that is our insistence on **INCLUSION**.

As I have said, as a faith tradition, we encourage every individual Unitarian Universalist to (first and foremost) trust and use their own internal discernment, reason and judgment. This means – of course – that here at UUFVB (as well as every other UU congregation scattered around the world) people in this religious community naturally end up coming to differing conclusions about the structure, realities, needs and purpose of the world. When people are encouraged to think and decide for themselves, they inevitably (and we say blessedly!) come up with a wide variety of answers, conclusions and perspectives. And thus we arrive at our UU devotion to the principle of INCLUSION – inclusion in terms of theological outlook, spiritual perspective, and ethical emphasis.

Here in this sanctuary this morning we have ardent humanists who have concluded that humanity is on its own in this creation, and others who believe there is a spirit of holiness (or sacredness) faithfully guiding creation toward justice and love, and still others whose spiritual orientation is more eclectic. We have people who find the ethical teachings of Jesus to be the central guide of their lives, sitting next to folks who find Buddhist, Jewish or neo-pagan teachings

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to be the most spiritually rewarding. We have people for whom music is a primary pathway to the deep places of the spirit, and others for whom poetry, meditation or prayer serves the same purpose. On and on the diversities and distinctions could go...suffice it to say that as Unitarian Universalists we agree to be together (on the wide path toward meaning, responsibility and truth) even though we see the shape, structure and purpose of the universe in far different terms.

This diversity of belief, worldview and perspective (while disconcerting and threatening to those who are not secure about their own ideas) is actually to us liberating and exciting to us. Not only do we as Unitarian Universalists get to consider the possible worth and rightness of someone else's views (which differ from our own), we also get to clarify our own through the process of dialogue and engagement!

Now I won't lie to you...of course sometimes it is hard (even for Unitarian Universalists) to truly listen to and respect views that are far different from our own. This resistance to ideas different than one's own seems to be a natural part of human nature, this hesitancy to truly enter into the divergent reality of someone else. But in this faith, we constantly encourage such openness, for we know both the excitement and growth which result from truly engaging our ontological and cosmological differences. Rather than be threatened by one another's divergent beliefs, we are challenged and stimulated by our differences.

So...time is flying...let's see if I can summarize **everything that I know about Unitarian Universalism.**

1. Unitarian Universalism is a religion which has a realized eschatology. We believe that this is it...and we've only got this one, precious lifetime to grow a soul and do life right ...
2. We are an engaged and ethical religious people, serious and busy about developing our ministry to ourselves and the wider world (guided by our seven principles and the history of our Unitarian Universalist heritage)...
3. As we move toward developing our ministry, we do it from an open epistemological place which honors every individual's reason and conscience and therefore both welcomes and expects a wide and challenging diversity of spiritual and ethical perspectives...

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4. We are blessed in the movement with rich diversity that provides us with a tasty and diverse diet of different ways of seeing the universe.

Unitarian Universalism is a serious, demanding—and yet blessedly liberating—religion that puts you in charge of your own spiritual destiny, and expects you to live up to your highest human potential and values. This faith calls us constantly to more love, more purpose, more justice, more service and more joy—all in a context of intellectual freedom, rigor, and respect. This free and challenging religion is not right for everybody. Many in our culture seem to want (when it comes to Sunday) to be told precisely what to believe and how to live. But I hope this free and rigorous religion is just right for you...just right for you as you shape your life into something of purpose, love and gladness...purpose, love, and gladness.

Well...There...by God, I've done it...twenty-eight minutes-and-thirty-three seconds...my work here is done...Amen!