

Why Are You a Unitarian Universalist?

Covenant Group Session: Peggy Simonsen, Countryside Church UU, Palatine, IL

Preliminaries

Coffee sign up sheet

Chalice Lighting and Reading

A community bound by love.

By Adam Robersmith

Consider what is coming and plan for it as best you can, but live in the present moment. Value everyone, because each person matters right now. When we bring our children, our youth, our young adults, our mid-life adults, and our elders all into one community, one body of faith, we embody the hopes and dreams of many, many people who have gone on before us. We become a religious community bound by love. We become a place that can support people in their quest for meaning and truth. We no longer wait for our young people to become the church of the future. We all become the church of the present.

Check-in

Transition Reading

“I believe we have a home, we have a spiritual tent, we have sanctuaries, we have sacred spaces that are large enough to hold those who hunger for something, hunger for something more in this lifetime. I believe that we have a message that speaks right to the deepest places of the human spirit as it cries out in its hunger and thirst. I believe that Unitarian Universalism and places like your congregations and mine are places where dreams have become realities for people, where they have been fed, where they have been given living waters.” Rev Gary Smith, UU

Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

Issues to Consider:

1. Why did you become a UU?
2. What do you need from the church? Is the church responding to your needs? If not, what is missing?
3. What characteristics do you like in a minister?
4. What do you appreciate in sermons?
5. Which values represented by Countryside are particularly aligned with your own values?

Check out

Closing Reading

The human response to places that open the spirit is deeper and older than any religion.

Paige Grant

Gratitude should be the center of Unitarian Universalist theology. By Galen Guengerich

"My twelve-year-old was on the playground recently with her Jewish and Catholic friends. The topic of religion came up, and they asked her what Unitarians believe. She found it hard to respond. Is there a playground-ready answer to this question?"

This is a very difficult question, and it was recently my assignment to answer it. At the start of the church year, I was asked to contribute to a new publication being produced by the Parents' Association of the religious education program at the church I serve in New York City.

Unitarian Universalism often plays better to a graduate-school crowd than a middle-school crowd. Part of the reason for the enigmatic nature of our theology is that we haven't worked hard enough to make it clear and simple. I am reminded of a minister who, when asked why he preached a 45-minute sermon, replied, "Because I didn't have enough time to write a 20-minute sermon." But there is another reason why this question is difficult. If your child's friends (and their Muslim playmate) answered the same question about their own faiths, they would probably talk about a God who is revealed through a written scripture (the Torah, the New Testament, the Qur'an) and represented on earth by a prophet or messiah figure (Moses, Jesus, Mohammed).

Unitarian Universalism has none of these concrete and uniquely defining elements. Instead, our prevailing—dare I say orthodox—view insists on our freedom to believe whatever we want. Indeed, I asked my very own daughter what Unitarians believe, and her answer was orthodox to a fault. Zoë replied, "We believe whatever we want to believe." This answer is not good enough, and it certainly doesn't work on the playground. It's as if your daughter's friend asked, "Where do you live?" and she responded, "I'm free to live wherever I want."

Although Unitarian Universalists today cut a wide swath theologically, my own tendency when describing our faith is to stay close to our theological roots. Here's the adult version of my answer to the question of what we believe: "As Unitarians, we believe all names for God point toward the same mystery. As Universalists, we believe all creation shares the same destiny." One divine spirit within and around us, and one destiny before us.

My answer runs against the view that everyone is entitled to his or her own set of beliefs. I commit this heresy because I have two problems with our current approach. One is practical: It doesn't work. Our numbers as a movement may not be plummeting, but a growth rate of 1 percent a year means that we are slowly dwindling as a percentage of the faster-growing larger population. If we have any sense of mission, we need to be able to say what we believe in language that is positive, relevant, and even playground-friendly.

By positive, I mean that we must talk about something other than freedom, which is the absence of something such as coercion. People may be attracted to Unitarian Universalism because we don't believe in a doctrine they find abhorrent. But they won't stay because of what's missing. (People don't go to Carnegie Hall because of what they *won't* hear.) By relevant, I mean that our message must speak to a nation where, whether we like it or not, more than 90 percent of people asked say they believe in God. And by playground-friendly, I mean precisely that. Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, was once asked if he could sum up all Christian doctrine in a single sentence. He thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, and

the sentence is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” He wouldn’t have written his fourteen-volume *Dogmatics* if he thought the playground answer was adequate for adults, too, but he knew children (and most adults) don’t read theology even though they need one.

In addition to my practical problem with orthodox Unitarian Universalism, I also have a theological problem. Our usual way of describing ourselves doesn’t even begin to suggest that we are a religion. In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. The feeling of awe emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine. This feeling becomes religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share. In theological terms, religion begins as transcendence, which is the part about God, and then leads to discipleship, which is the part about the discipline of faith.

I realize the idea of faith as a discipline may also sound like heresy to many Unitarian Universalists. Unless our faith is mere intellectual affectation, however, the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind. What kind of practice? For Jews, the defining discipline is obedience: To be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God. For Christians, the defining discipline is love: To be a faithful Christian is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. For Muslims, the defining discipline is submission: To be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah.

And what of us? What should be our defining religious discipline? While obedience, love, and even submission each play a vital role in the life of faith, my current conviction is that our defining discipline should be gratitude. In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude.

Why gratitude? Two dimensions of gratitude make it fitting as our defining religious practice. One has to do with a discipline of gratitude, and the other has to do with an ethic of gratitude. The discipline of gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters. From this flows an ethic of gratitude that obligates us to create a future that justifies an increasing sense of gratitude from the human family as a whole. The ethic of gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return. It is our duty to foster the kind of environment that we want to take in, and therefore become.

The two forms gratitude takes in our lives (a discipline and an ethic) are natural outcomes of the two elements of religious experience (awe and obligation). The experience of awe leads to the discipline of gratitude, and the experience of obligation leads to an ethic of gratitude.

There are many potential defining virtues from which to choose. Why gratitude? It has to do with the role of religion and the nature of the universe. The role of religion, in my view, is to help us find our place as human beings within this universe we call home. You may recall that the word religion does not mean to liberate or set free, but rather to bind together. Religion unites the purpose of our lives as human beings with the purpose that animates the universe. Religion unites the meaning of our lives as human beings with the meaning that pervades the universe. Religion unites the spirit of humanity with the spirit that keeps the stars shining, the planets spinning, and the flowers blooming in springtime. I believe that gratitude is the appropriate religious response to the nature of the universe.