

What to Tell a New UU

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UFWC

A lifelong unchurched man suddenly develops a vague religious urge and decides to join a church--any church. So he sets out to find one.

His first stop is a Roman Catholic church where he asks what he has to do to join. The priest mentions diligent study and the affirmation of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, then--just to see how much the man knows--asks him where Jesus was born. "Pittsburgh," he answers. "Get out!" cries the shocked priest.

Next stop is Southern Baptist where the seeker is told he would have to learn Bible verses, swear belief in the Nicene and Apostles' creeds, swear off booze, and be baptized ("By immersion, not just some sissy sprinklin"). The Baptist preacher then, to see how much this man knows, asks him where Jesus was born. "Philadelphia?" he asks tentatively (once bitten, twice shy). "Get out, you heathen!" yells the preacher.

Our perplexed protagonist finally walks into a Unitarian church where he is told all he has to do is sign a membership card. "You mean I don't have to renounce anything, swear to anything, or be dunked in anything?" "That's right. We have no special tests for membership, no dogma. We support total individual freedom of belief." "Then I'll join! But can I ask you a question? Please tell me--where was Jesus born?" "Why, Bethlehem, of course." The man's face lights up. "I knew it was some place in Pennsylvania!"¹

How many religious traditions do you think have web pages dedicated just to jokes about themselves? It is a good and healthy thing that we can and do make fun of ourselves. Though we take our faith seriously, we don't take it so seriously that we can't see the humor and the humanity in our struggle to be faithful—a word that we discussed a couple of weeks ago. But I must take issue with the statement that all you have to do is sign a membership card. Becoming a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation should not be as easy as getting a library card or signing up for an account at Blockbusters. We want you to know who we are and what we are about. We want you to want to be a contributing member of a community. By that we mean that this is a shared venture requiring the time, talent and treasure of everyone involved. The adage you get out of it what you put into it is very fitting.

This morning's topic is not about crafting the right elevator speech, the thirty second statement to catch someone's attention so that they want to learn more about us. It is really another chapter in the "getting to know you" process which we have undertaken together.

I have attended all but one of the scheduled house meetings at this point. So far of the 88 people I have "quizzed," fully one third hail from Catholic roots and only 5 had a Unitarian Universalist upbringing, more or less. That's an astounding figure when you come to think of it. If representative, it means that clearly over 90% of you who attend this Fellowship were brought up either in a religion other than Unitarian Universalism, or with no religious background at all. Ergo, most of you have at one time or another walked into one of our churches, meeting houses, rented halls or houses as a newcomer wanting to know who we are. I was one of you at one time as well. I was looking for something, not knowing quite what, and when I walked in the door and stayed for an hour or so, it felt like I'd found a home. Rather than go into that whole story—you will hear pieces of it as time goes on—suffice it to say that the First Parish UU Church in Arlington shared a parking lot with the town library and after attending a service, I found myself in the library soon after trying to find out more about this new spiritual home that I wasn't quite ready to move into.

The Setting - Starship Uniprise crossing over the Bible belt into the Fundamentalist Zone to respond to a distress call from a lost (UU) Association outpost.

Kirk: "Spock, what can you tell me about these people?"

Spock: "The library computer has little information, Captain. Logically, however, we may deduce from their name, 'Unitarian-Universalist', that since Unitarian means one, and Universalist means everything; that these people believe in one of everything."²

Fortunately I did not get my information from Star Trek. In 1981 there was no internet, let alone home pages with links and more information than could be comprehended. Maybe it was better that way, I don't know. Anyway, the book that I found in the library—I know that there were others, but the one that I remember—was Jack Mendelsohn's Why I Am A Unitarian written in 1960, one year before the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists. In it, he told his own story of his spiritual journey in a way that was framed to ask and answer the questions we all have, What do we believe? How did we get this way? Are we Christian or more than Christian? Where is God? All good questions. All the things that we are eager to learn when we walk in the door. But then we get to know the people, get involved in activities, and often leave the quest behind because it feels good enough. We feel comforted that we can ask questions and we don't have to believe any one thing in particular. We certainly don't believe in one of everything. But is that enough? I don't think so. For me, walking in and finding home began a life long challenge to construct a moral framework by which to live a fulfilling life while contributing to the betterment of society. I don't need 10 commandments hanging on the wall—or even 10 suggestions. I do need to understand, to the best of my ability, the multiple frameworks by which my friends and neighbors and others in this community and in the world community live so that I can learn from them and live with them in peace. Those statements sound reasonable and even simple, but the living of them is not.

Several years ago I found a charming book, How to Be a Perfect Stranger, A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies, which has been a fascinating reference. It's great for use in the class "Neighboring Faiths" or "the Church Across the Street." The book is designed to give a brief introduction to people of traditions that may be unknown to them— a short history, basic beliefs, what to expect in a worship service, rites of passage, holidays that might be celebrated, etc. It is truly the Cliffs Notes of Religious traditions. We are to be found in the second volume which covers the smaller of the mostly western religious traditions. Under Dogma and Ideology (interesting that it assumes that there is a dogma and ideology in all religions) it says the following:

Unitarian Universalists believe:

- Personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion. Religious authority lies not in a book or a person or an institution, but in ourselves.
- One cannot be bound by a statement of belief. Unitarian Universalism does not ask anyone to subscribe to a creed.
- Religious wisdom is ever-changing, and human understanding of life and death, the world and its mysteries is never final, and revelation is continuous.
- All men and women have worth. Differences in opinion and lifestyle should be honored.

- One should act as a moral force in the world, and ethical living is the supreme witness of religion. The here and now and the affects that our actions will have on future generations are of great concern. Relations with each other, with other peoples, nations and races should be governed by justice, equity and compassion.³

Each one of those statements is a sermon topic itself. But notice what none of them have, none of them talk about what we don't believe. For the longest time when I first became a Unitarian Universalist, it seemed as if we were always defining ourselves in terms of what we don't believe, as in, we don't believe that Jesus was the one and only son of God and was divine, we don't believe that there's a heaven and hell, we don't believe that babies need to be baptized to be cleansed of original sin, etc. We have turned in our language as well as in our thinking to an attitude of affirmation. Perhaps the early days of defining ourselves in terms of our disbeliefs had more to do with our tendency to be "come-outers," that we were still raw from the experience of leaving our past faith behind. I don't know. But what is important to me now, to us as a movement is that we are a faith that affirms—we affirm one another on our spiritual journeys, we affirm the worth and dignity of our fellow human beings, we affirm our efforts to build a society that is founded on justice, equity and compassion.

A Unitarian Universalist was worried, and confided to another UU, "I want to invite a friend to the Sunday service, but our minister uses that J-word so much I'm afraid it will make my friend feel uncomfortable."

"When has our minister ever mentioned Jesus?" asked the other.

"I meant 'Justice'."⁴

Justice, a word that has been abused quite a bit of late is something that is of utmost importance to not only me, but to Unitarian Universalism. It is so because our history, one that is comprised of embracing one heresy after another, has always found us taking a minority position, always looking at a larger picture, and rarely looking to elevate one's individual righteousness or piety at the expense of society as a whole. Throughout the history of Unitarianism and Universalism, we have been on the cutting edge of societal change. The Universalists were the first denomination to recognize and validate the ordination of a woman into the ministry. Unitarian ministers were preaching abolition well before the Civil War. The transcendentalist movement was given birth by a community of Unitarians. The Universalists defied the hellfire and damnation circuit riding preachers with their message of love and universal salvation before that message was adopted by the Methodists and later other main line denominations. Unitarians were the early adapters of an understanding of humanism to be the guiding principles of leading a moral life. Unitarian and Universalist ministers were walking hand in hand with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. in Selma in 1965. UU's were out in front of the movement of being religiously pro-choice well before Roe v. Wade found its way to the courts. We were the first denominational association to ordain openly gay clergy and then we performed the first legal marriage between two persons of the same sex in Massachusetts. What drives us to be on the cutting edge of these issues is the belief in and dedication to the power of justice.

As Jack Mendelsohn writes in his book:

Because Unitarians find the essence of religion in character and conduct rather than in doctrines, creeds, dogmas and catechisms, those who normally think of religion as a series of theological definitions find it frustrating to understand the Unitarian position. We are

believers, but our beliefs are centered in a method, a process of the religious life, rather than in closed articles of faith.

We have no creed. That's all there is to it. We have no creed! On matters normally frozen into creedal statements, a Unitarian is expected to follow the dictates of reason, conscience and experience. Our churches make no official pronouncements on God, the Bible, Jesus, immortality, or any of the other theological mysteries generally answered with unabashed finality by the more traditional religious groups.

By its very nature, a creed is final, complete and binding on all professedly religious people. It is held to be above reasonable examination. Its divine origin is assumed. . . . The traditional creeds are human products, and they were probably the best possible expressions of Christian belief in the third and fourth centuries. What Unitarians cannot accept is that these creeds should be binding on this and future generations. To us, creating a religious way of life is far too important to be left to the distant past's propounders of doctrine. We are Unitarians, not by substituting one confession of faith for another, but by opening our minds to receive truth and inspiration from every possible source even from the ancient creeds, if by critical examination they throw genuine light on current concerns."⁵

Notice that last phrase, "opening our minds to receive truth and inspiration from every possible source even from the ancient creeds, if by critical examination they throw genuine light on current concerns." A recurring part of the conversation I had with so many of you in your living rooms this past month was that even though you may have left a faith tradition behind as you became a part of this community, there still remains somewhere in your spiritual genetic make-up a part of you that will always be Catholic or Jewish, or Lutheran or or whatever ties remain to what might still be a warm spot in your heart for the "old time religion." We try mightily not to be absolutists in our thinking and in our own personal beliefs. We want to encourage you to make sense of your beliefs, what you left behind, what you held onto and what you have newly discovered.

By virtue of this alone, being a Unitarian Universalist is a challenge. You will never hear from my lips that being a UU is fun or easy, come on and join us. I'm here and we're here to challenge you. My great hope and wish is that you will spend some of your time with us delving deeply into who you are, what drives you to be the person you are, what great stories inform your being, and what do you want to do with your life that will reach out and touch others.

As Jack Mendelsohn phrased it:

For us, the vital task in religion is to get from Sunday to Monday: to carry serious concern with religious living from the protected atmosphere of a worship service into the flesh and blood realities of daily living. Religions generally emphasize salvation, and most religions talk of salvation in terms of ceremonies, sacraments, catechisms and creeds. Unitarians speak warmly of salvation also, but in terms of character. We prefer to think of it as an achievement dependent on deeds rather than creeds."⁶

A Catholic was explaining to a Unitarian Universalist friend how dogma was formulated in the Catholic Church. "First it is debated by the Church authorities. Then, when the debate is ended, whatever was decided upon is declared dogma by the Pope." "It's pretty much the same with us," said the Unitarian Universalist.

"I thought you didn't have dogma?"

"That's because no debate among Unitarian Universalists ever ends!"⁷

I'm not about to give you a great elevator speech or quick sound bite to share with friends and neighbors. We are here to deepen our connection to one another and to our faith tradition. As we do that we will all find ways of expressing what to tell someone who is new to Unitarian Universalism. Suffice it to say, revelation is ongoing.

¹ Unitarian Universalist Jokes (www.stoney.sb.org/uujokes.html)

² ¹ Unitarian Universalist Jokes (www.stoney.sb.org/uujokes.html)

³ Matlins, Stuart M. % Arthur J. Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger Vol.2* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997) p. 355

⁴ ¹ Unitarian Universalist Jokes (www.stoney.sb.org/uujokes.html)

⁵ Mendelsohn, Jack, *Why I Am A Unitarian*, (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1960) pp. 32-33

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28

⁷ ¹ Unitarian Universalist Jokes (www.stoney.sb.org/uujokes.html)