

Getting Serious About Unitarian Universalism

- by Scott Alexander <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/183412.shtml>

Delivered on Sunday, 10/25/15 by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

I have chosen to present this sermon by Scott Alexander as a fitting prelude to our exploration of "Re-Imagining Unitarian Universalism" next Sunday, November 1... hear now his words...

At one point in her novel *Fly Away Home*, American writer Marge Piercy has a mother say of her daughters: "The girls had been raised Unitarian (Universalist), which seemed a nice, sensible compromise between having no religion at all and having to lie about what we believed. Enough religion to be respectable but not enough to get in the way."

Ouch. That hurts. It hurts if, like me, you are proud to be a Unitarian Universalist (UU), and strive to be *serious* about your own religious life. But whether we like it or not, this is precisely what many people from other faith groups think of UUs.

Remember the old jokes?

Question: "What is Unitarian Universalism?"

Answer: "A weigh station between Methodism and the golf course."

Question: "What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Unitarian Universalist?"

Answer: "Someone who knocks at your door...for no particular reason."

~~One old "downeast" Maine fisherman asks another, "Unitarian Universalist—what's that?" To which the other draws back, "Well, best I can figure it, that's someone who has no principles...and lives by 'em."~~ *Selective editing...chose not to share this joke. ~DD*

I used to laugh when someone told jokes about how laid back and lax we Unitarian Universalists are about our religion. But I'm not laughing any more. I've stopped laughing because I realize how terribly important it is for me to take my religious life seriously. As I reach mid-life (~~and approach my 50th birthday~~) I find myself increasingly compelled by life's vast spiritual questions and pressing ethical demands. I've stopped laughing because I believe with all my heart and soul this troubled world desperately needs the compassionate and saving vision of Unitarian Universalism. I believe people—millions of people of many different cultures and backgrounds—need this transforming faith. I've stopped laughing because we can no longer allow ourselves to be marginalized, ridiculed, or dismissed. Unitarian Universalism will never realize its great potential and mission unless we are (in both reputation and reality) **serious religious people**.

Will you join me now on a journey to explore what it means to get serious about your Unitarian Universalism? We must begin by acknowledging that **we UUs are largely responsible for our reputation as the "lightweight" and "soft" religion**. My colleague Bill Miller puts it bluntly:

For too long we have not taken ourselves seriously. We have offered a haven for those on their way out of institutionalized religion. We have demanded little and received the same. Too many of us have actually espoused the notion that one can believe anything and still be a Unitarian Universalist. We have resisted the strictures imposed by form and structure and embraced a laissez-faire spirituality that has commanded the respect of nearly no one.

Stephen Carter, in *The Culture of Disbelief*, asserts that our society as a whole encourages individuals not to take their religion seriously:

*In contemporary American culture...religions are more and more treated as just passing beliefs—almost as fads—rather than as the fundamentals upon which the devout build their lives. [What this culture says is] if religions [become] inconvenient, give them up! If you can't remarry because you have the wrong religious belief, well, hey, believe something else! If you must go to work on the Sabbath, it's no big deal! It's just a day off! Pick a different one! If you can't have a blood transfusion because you think God forbids it, no problem, get a new God! And **through all of this trivializing rhetoric** runs the subtle but unmistakable message: pray if you like, worship if you must, but whatever you do, do not on any account take your religion seriously This attitude exerts pressure to treat religion as a hobby.*

I have been a Unitarian Universalist minister for nearly twenty-five years. In every congregation I have served there have been people for whom Unitarian Universalism seemed little more than a casual convenience, an occasional hobby, a peripheral part of their lives. This reality was driven home for me when a parishioner in New Jersey told me that he liked the church because **“it is an interesting and entertaining place to be on the Sunday mornings when I'm not away skiing.”** Other ministers (and denominational statistics) have painted the same, sad picture: far too often we have been a low-participation, low-expectation, low-commitment religion.

But something new is stirring in our movement. The “baby boom” generation is now flocking to UU churches looking for a serious, spiritual, transforming, ethical religion. There is a hunger for Unitarian Universalism that gives and expects much. But as we try to respond to this demand for serious religion, we bump up against the “casualness” that has defined us in the past.

Regrettably, many people used to be attracted to Unitarian Universalism because it seemed the religious path of *least resistance*. I will never forget the long conversation I had with a man following his wife into a congregation I was serving. He was having trouble understanding the Unitarian Universalist way of religion. A lapsed and angry Roman Catholic, he did grasp the “freedom “ part about Unitarian Universalism refusing to impose any dogma or moral absolutes upon individuals: he felt great to be liberated from all that **“encrusted orthodoxy.”** But having been raised in a church where beliefs were imposed from above, not nurtured from within, he just couldn't grasp how UUism (like any serious religion) **continually challenges each person to careful, authentic, compassionate and responsible living.** With more than a little sarcasm, he said to me, “Hey, this religion is great! It's a cake walk, a Sunday walk in the park—no dogma, no catechisms, no confession booths, no eternal damnation or sin—I like this! If I join this church, I just lean back and believe whatever I want to.”

No matter how I tried to explain what a demanding, disquieting, life-long journey it is to be *seriously* on the Unitarian Universalist path, this guy just couldn't get it! Like so many “come-outers” in our movement, he fixated on our *freedom* (“Thank God, at last a church where I don't have to pretend to believe all that stuff I don't believe”); he missed altogether the **haunting challenge and demanding tension written into the fourth UU principle: ours is “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”** To be a UU is to spend a *lifetime* seeking reality and truth, and to live in this world in an ethical and principled way. There is nothing casual or easy about that.

My colleague Charles Magistro speaks to this point:

*I'm amused by the view that it's easy to be a Unitarian Universalist. It's as easy to be a UU as it is to search the murky waters of life without sure charts to guide us or any guarantee that we will find a safe port in which to put down anchor. It's as easy to be a Unitarian Universalist as it is to overcome the natural fear of the unknown and venture forth with nothing to sustain us save our zest for living and our **hunger for new experience and new knowledge**. Our way in religion is not the way of ease. We are called to be sailors. For many worlds exist waiting to be discovered. **And not the least of them are within ourselves**. It takes much persistence, courage and curiosity to look into our own depths, to come to terms with the twin mysteries of being alive and having to die, to see ourselves in new and larger ways without being dishonest about our limitations. We have only begun to discover our potential.*

Unitarian Universalism does not give you freedom from religion; it gives you freedom for religion. Here is the great paradox of our faith.

Being a UU does not give you freedom “to believe anything you want;” it gives you rather the freedom to search for and find those beliefs from which your heart and soul cannot escape!

Being a UU means *searching* for your own defining religious principles and then allowing yourself to be *captured* by them. Actively practicing our free religion has an *inescapable* quality about it. The only *choice* involved is whether or not to take your emerging personal truths and principles seriously enough to actually *live* them on a daily basis. Once you find your moral and spiritual guideposts (and these evolve over the years), you have no choice but to follow the path that your guideposts define. This faith tradition, which trusts the integrity and worth of each individual, sets you free not so that you can casually dabble in religion, but so that you can become, as Stephen Carter puts it, “**intoxicated**” **by an authentic, personal faith you cannot help but live, serve, and cherish.**

For some UUs this means choosing a particular, demanding faith stance—living life as a committed Christian, or Buddhist, or Humanist or Neo-Pagan. For others, finding authentic religious paths is a more eclectic, individual process—gradually evolving a “working” set of “authoritative” beliefs and principles.

Some of the fundamental religious and spiritual *sources of authority* they use in this process are:

- the seven principles articulated in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) by-laws;
- the hundreds of years of our liberal faith tradition (including the writings and deeds of our UU “saints”);
- the traditions, scriptures, and ethics of the world's many great faith traditions (most especially those of the Judeo-Christian tradition from which both Unitarianism and Universalism sprang);
- the consensus of human history and law;
- the common moral sense and persistent conscience of the individual arising out of his or her direct experience with the world.

Many UUs have come out of conservative faith traditions hurt and angry about the spiritual damage they suffered at the hands of the religion of their childhoods. At first, they use precious spiritual time, space, and energy proclaiming everything they *don't believe*, all the spiritual practices they *no longer need*, all the ethical restraints they *refuse to obey*, all the forms and rituals they *can't tolerate*.

This stage of declaring oneself free of old, destructive religious beliefs is both necessary and understandable. **One first liberates oneself from “what I do not believe” before one begins to move toward new, authentic, life-giving beliefs.** Although a few UUs get stuck spiritually by wallowing in *negative rebellion* from their religious pasts, most sooner or later begin *using* the freedom that comes with being a UU to get serious about discovering what they *do* believe, finding the ethical and moral principles that inform their living, and engaging in spiritual practices that feed their souls and energize them for careful, responsible living. “Freedom, like the air we breathe,” said the philosopher Santayana, **“is necessary for existence but is insufficient for nourishment.”**

The UU minister Jim Brewer further reminds us:

*Freedom demands responsibility to others and life. It is not enough to be merely disciples of freedom, [we must also be] disciples of intelligence, sensitivity, understanding and love. It is not enough to be free from intolerable constraints, **but to be free for what is good and true and beautiful.** May we realize that freedom is not an end of our religion, but in reality only its beginning.*

Being a UU is about much more than the opinions and beliefs you hold, it is about the way you *live* everyday. Our tradition has always affirmed that true religion is *about deeds, not creeds*. UUs are fond of saying, **“Don’t tell me what you believe, show me how you live.”** As one minister pointedly put it in his sermon title, “If being a Unitarian Universalist were against the law, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Taking your Unitarian Universalism seriously means that your beliefs, principles and values should be **visibly present** in your life. People around you should be able to see your religion in all the big and little ways—in what you say and do in relationships, in how you make decisions and solve problems, in the institutions and causes to which you give time and money, in how you care for and serve other living things, most especially other people. As my colleague Robert Swain says:

Faith is not enough. Nor belief. Living what you believe is the principle of honesty put into practice. Unitarians and Universalists over the centuries thus have been active, out of all proportion to our numbers, in seeking justice, struggling against oppression, and making this a better world to live in.

The first dimension of getting serious about your religious life (this unashamed liberal evangelist will tell you) is *talking the talk*—taking the trouble (**when appropriate and respectful**) to share with others (your family and friends, neighbors and co-workers) *what* you religiously believe and *why* you believe it. But true religion—transforming, saving, compassionate religion—is then about *walking the walk*. It’s about rolling up your sleeves and genuinely living a *theology of dirty hands*. It’s about standing up for principles, living your values, and serving others.

Such religion, unlike the lackluster UUism Marge Piercy describes, very much *gets in the way*. It is not convenient to live by one’s most dearly held principles; there are many costs and sacrifices that are required. **True religion limits, tests and challenges the individual.** It is often anything but fun. For in this broken world of ours, it is hard to serve justice, difficult to work for peace and equality, demanding to live compassionately.

The history, spirit and principles of our UU faith clearly call upon us to grow bigger, more inclusive hearts. Being a UU means daily lending yourself and your soul to the building of a gentler, more humane world—most often *not* in grand and glorious heroic feats like those accomplished by great human saints, **but in little, everyday ways that have the power to transform our world, one caring, responsible deed at a time.**

Now please don't be intimidated! Being serious about your Unitarian Universalism means that you simply strive to make a positive, principled difference right where you live in your little cluttered corner of life, in all the *everyday* ways that count.

Our religion, well and responsibly lived, looks like the everyday examples expressed throughout this sermon. Being a UU is not about single-handedly rising to the level of noble saint-hood—like UU Clara Barton founding the Red Cross in the Civil War, or Theodore Parker protecting runaway slaves with his loaded pistol, or Rev. James Reeb dying in the streets of Selma. **It's about being a caring, authentic person—living the beliefs and values that grow in your life's center.**

For some months, the CLF staff has been discussing a process for helping members get more intentional and “serious” about their religious life. In the coming months, we will share materials that help you:

1. articulate to yourself what you *now* believe as a UU (remember, beliefs and values can and do change over a lifetime, but at any given point in life, you can clearly express that to which you have loyalty);
2. assess the ways in which you *already* live your Unitarian Universalism;
3. identify new ways in which you want to express your religious and ethical commitments;
4. take the necessary steps to fulfill your commitments. It is our hope that you will choose to utilize this process for becoming more intentional about *walking* your Unitarian Universalist *walk*—to take Unitarian Universalism seriously by visibly living it.

**Highlighted section not presented in service.*

I close with an affirmation from the Unitarian Universalist church of Greensboro, North Carolina:

Being a Unitarian Universalist means taking personal responsibility for your own religious life. No one will try to remake you religiously. We won't offer you “final and absolute truths” or rigid dogma. Instead, we try to provide a stimulating and congenial atmosphere in which you may seek answers...in which you may ask new questions...in which you are free to discover the best that is in you. We reject the idea that a book or institution is superior to the conscience and intellect of a morally responsible person. We affirm that your spiritual well-being is yours to determine.

Amen.