

“You Might (NOT) Be a UU If...”¹ * 26 January 2014
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When I'm feeling especially besotted with this home of mine, I like to call myself a "Mainer." Then someone reminds me that I'll never be a Mainer no matter how long I live here. Unlike being a Mainer, being a UU isn't cut and dried; nobody can tell you you're not; there are various degrees of assuming and wearing the identity "Unitarian Universalist."

If you scan the Internet, you'll find no shortage of ways that Unitarian Universalists demarcate our tribe, mostly in a tongue-in-cheek way. To wit: you might be a UU if...

- you've ever argued whether breast milk is vegan
- you own six pairs of Birkenstocks and your favorite pair needs to be thrown away
- the money you sent to the Sierra Club last was more than you spent on your mother at Christmas
- you think the Holy Trinity is "reduce, reuse and recycle"
- the only time Jesus is mentioned at church is when someone trips or stubs a toe

In media both serious and satirical, Unitarian Universalists are purported to be so open, so zealous and yet so mushy on matters of faith that we don't know what we believe in. I get the feeling, sometimes, that the authors of popular culture aren't so much laughing with us, as at us... and, in the process, conveying a stereotype that might keep religious seekers away from our doors on Sunday morning.

Well, we do stand for something. Unitarian Universalism does have a center: a core set of values that have evolved over the past five centuries. In 1822, Thomas Jefferson famously predicted that "there is not a young man now living in the U.S. who will not die an Unitarian"² -- a prediction that (spoiler alert!) wasn't realized, and indeed, won't ever be true:

Unitarian Universalism will never be a major religion. We ask too much from each other; engage complicated gray areas of meaning; ask that people live out their beliefs, not just talk about them for an hour on Sunday morning.

In honor of nice, round numbers, following (in no particular order) are ten reasons that you might not be a Unitarian Universalist:

¹ This sermon was inspired by "A Candid Welcome," by Rev. Meg Riley:
http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/192622.shtml?utm_source=f

² <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/thomasjefferson.html>

one

You might not be a UU if you're looking to believe "anything you want." One of the most misguided myths about our faith, this sloppy, well-intentioned shorthand corrupts the freedom we gain in declining to unite around a shared statement of belief. Lack of a creed does not mean "anything goes." You can't believe "anything you want."

"When we come together as Unitarian Universalists," says a colleague, "we give up some of [our] freedom to believe in ways that are not responsible. We give up the freedom to believe in harmful or unjust things. We accept the burden of reasonable beliefs. We as UUs agree that our meaning making must not be at the expense of others, or to the exclusion of others."³

Another colleague is a bit more succinct: "You cannot 'believe anything you want.' You must believe, with all your heart and soul and mind, that love can transform the world."⁴

two

Along with responsibility to develop individual truth and meaning, we UU's get cozy with the Big Questions: Why are we here? Why is there evil in the world? What happens after we die? You won't feel comfortable calling yourself a UU if these questions unsettle you, and you'd prefer that someone just tell you what to believe. Many religions respond to these mysteries with answers that border on cocky.

In what I like to think of as a stance of cosmic humility, we aren't sure that it's possible for our human minds, dazzling as they may be, to fill in the gaps around The Great Mysterious.

three

You might not be a Unitarian Universalist if you believe that "whoever dies with the most toys, wins" -- not that I've seen that bumper sticker lately, but the sentiment seems to have infected our larger culture: *what's mine is mine, I built it, I've earned it, go get your own*. Do you hear the scarcity metaphors? Life is comprised of stockholders, "zero-sum games and pies with only so many slices."⁵

In contrast (and when we're operating from our fullest selves), we UU's take seriously the notion that we live in an interdependent web. We choose to trust in abundance, "continuity, circular flows, and widening ripples...mine-and-thine." Strong is what we

³ Andrew Tripp: <http://www.uureading.org/worship/worship/sermons/sermons-archive/498-no-such-thing-as-a-free-search>

⁴ Rev. Dan Harper's blog: www.danielharper.org/blog/?page_id=457

⁵ Deborah Stone in *The Samaritan's Dilemma*

make each other and, as one of our hymns puts it, “the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you’re done.”

four

Because we take relationship so seriously, you might not feel comfortable in a UU congregation if you’d rather sit do your own thing than do the hard work of living in community.

While it’s true that our Unitarian granddaddy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, urged individuals to avoid conformity, that was in 1841: a different cultural context. Times have changed, and Unitarian Universalists have come to accept that personal freedom and individual autonomy aren’t as useful to us, as core values, as being in right relationship. As my colleague explains beautifully,⁶

Although we promote freedom, it is not freedom at all costs. This is not a religion for lone rangers. This is a religion for lovers of freedom who are called into community, because in community we are held accountable for the consequences of our beliefs.

Our larger culture has taught us, all too painfully, that isolation and disconnect kill the spirit. As a people of faith, our relationships come before above any one issue or person, putting the common good first.

five

You might not feel comfortable among UU’s if you believe that sexuality should be confined to heterosexual marriage. Ours is a faith that values people as whole beings, and our sexuality as a gift that affects our biology, our self-image, our intimate relationships, and even some of our ethical decisions.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association, in partnership with the United Church of Christ, has created an age-appropriate, lifespan sexuality curriculum called *Our Whole Lives*. The curriculum illustrates our conviction that when children, youth, and adults learn about our bodies in healthy and appropriate ways, we make better decisions.

This week, this testimony appeared on *The Atlantic* website:⁷

At 16, I consider those [Our Whole Lives] classes incredibly valuable... I feel confident in my ability to make responsible sexual decisions for myself, and I left the

⁶ Rev. Krista Taves, in her sermon “The Spiritual Imperative of Choice.” See www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/sermons/submissions/8788.shtml.

⁷ <http://m.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/01/a-16-year-old-reflects-on-the-sex-ed-classes-she-took-at-6-and-13/283202/>

class with nuanced views on issues like gender equality and relationships (romantic and platonic alike). What... conservative parents need to consider is that [this] information is not inherently dangerous. It is highly preferable, in fact, for children and teenagers to receive accurate, complete information from a reliable source than to spread the gossip and half-truths of their friends or the Internet.

six

Speaking of relationships, you might not be a UU if you think there's a "right" and a "wrong" way for intimate relationships and families to take shape. Some religious traditions believe in a "Divine order,"⁸ for example, proclaiming that God's intention is for marriage to be between a man and a woman.

As UU's, we honor love first: love is what makes a family. Or, this: "Gay and lesbian couples, feminist men and women, transgender and bisexual people, and multiracial and multicultural families are part of the great gift of human diversity that makes life interesting."⁹ And all are welcome here, to be celebrated as they are.

seven

A UU congregation might not be the place for you if you believe that other peoples' suffering -- whether it's the result of discrimination, ignorance, or just plain randomness -- is not your problem.

Our ancestors -- particularly our Universalist kin -- didn't shirk from the suffering of the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the disenfranchised. Our ancestors understood two truths that we still hold up today: first, that oppression is often structural, built into our human institutions from the ground up; and second, our personal liberation is bound up in others' liberation. We modern-day UU's believe that no one is free while others are oppressed -- and those of us who have privilege and power are called to stand on the side of love, until everyone is free.

eight

You might not be a UU if you believe that the world's problems will get better through prayer -- well, it depends on what "prayer" means to you. What we don't believe is that God (whom you may or may not believe in) is a puppeteer, who manipulates the world according to how piously we talk to him.

We don't believe that, in response to evil, God will charge into town smiting people left and right until only the righteous remain. That's a theological game of Russian Roulette. If you believe in a Superhero God who's stirred into saving a city if we just pray hard

⁸ http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/gods_design_for_marriage/marriage_gods_idea/gods_design_for_marriage.aspx

⁹ Rev. Meg Riley, "A Candid Welcome."

enough, then you can believe in a God who punishes wicked cities by destroying them with hurricanes. We call that nonsense.

We're it. We're both the cause of suffering and the sole agents of healing. Or, as my hero Carl Sagan said -- in reference to a photo taken of Earth from 3.7 billion miles away -- "Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves."

nine

You might not feel comfortable in a UU congregation if you believe that the Earth is 6,000 years old; if you're one of the 33% of Americans who don't believe in evolution¹⁰; or if you've ever visited the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky to view its explanation of "Biblical history [a]s the key to understanding dinosaurs"¹¹ as anything but an anthropologist.

Our Unitarian family tree is filled with scientists; for as long as they've been breaking the world down into its parts for study and testing, we've been curious and eager to know more about our Blue Boat Home (actual age: 4.5 billion years) and the creatures who inhabit it. Understanding the universe -- from its subatomic particles to its supernovas -- only enhances our awe and wonder. Rather than assuming "dominion" to use and abuse our fragile planet, we UU's view ourselves as stewards of the Earth precisely because we understand ourselves as part of the unfolding of the Universe's story.

ten

Speaking of Earth, you might not be a Unitarian Universalist if you believe in country over planet. I'm all for patriotism, but there's a difference between loving this complicated, dazzling, sometimes arrogant, adolescent nation of ours... and believing that we're uniquely special, and therefore entitled to assert our ways onto other countries.

Howard Zinn¹² defines "American exceptionalism" as the idea "that the United States alone has the right... to bring civilization, or democracy, or liberty to the rest of the world, by violence if necessary." It means that we have a special role in history or a special claim on morality; sometimes it's implied that our specialness is ordained by God.

¹⁰ <http://www.livescience.com/42251-politics-evolution-belief.html>

¹¹ <http://creationmuseum.org/whats-here/exhibits/>

¹² "The Power and the Glory: Myths of American Exceptionalism." See <http://bostonreview.net/BR30.3/zinn.php>.

I can't believe that. My life has taught me otherwise. My U.S. passport is filled with colorful stamps from well over a dozen countries. I wouldn't exchange it for citizenship in any other country.

This is my home, the country where my heart is. Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine... but -- since I've traveled around the world, I know firsthand that other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

It's telling to me that these words are one of the most beloved UU hymns, and that "God Bless America" appears nowhere in our UU sacred texts.

The interdependent web knows no borders. Our beautiful, crazy, colorful patchwork of a human family shares the planet, and nobody's more special than anyone else.

If you're feeling especially "UU" this morning, please join me in closing our service with this hymn, #159, "This Is My Song."

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
but other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
This is my song, thou God of all the nations;
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*