

What is Unitarian – Universalism?

“Unitarian Universalism is a fierce belief in the way of freedom and reverence for the sacred dignity of each individual. With Jefferson we “have sworn eternal hostility against every tyranny over the mind.” Unitarian Universalism is co-operation with a universe that created us. It is a celebration of life. It is being in love with goodness and justice. It is a sense of humor about absolutes. Unitarian Universalism is faith in people, hope for tomorrow’s child, confidence in a continuity that spans all time. It looks not to a perfect heaven, but toward a good earth. It is respectful of the past, but not limited to it. It is trust in growing and conspiracy with change. It is spiritual responsibility for a moral tomorrow.” – Edward Schempp.

Edward Schempp was the plaintiff in a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case that declared mandatory Bible reading in public schools unconstitutional.

Drinking From Our Sources

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What does Unitarian-Universalism offer us?

I would say it offers its members a broad tapestry of spiritual and philosophical wisdom – which draws from many sources and it is this rich diversity that makes us unique as a “religion”! We are not locked into one specific dogma or way of thinking and we have never ever claimed to have a handle on the “Truth”.

We have historically been branded as “heretics” because we have had the audacity to declare that every man, woman and child should be

free to explore what religion and spirituality means to them, and what role, if any, those things should play in their lives. For other religions, with their dogma and creed and structures of paternalistic hierarchy, such talk is outright dangerous because freedom to think and explore threatens those very structures of control and authority.

As UU's we call on our 7 Principles to guide us and if we apply them as humanly possible as we can, we can enjoy a good life with purpose and meaning. We have explored these Principles over the last Program year. These 7 Principles are inspired by our 6 sources and it is these Sources that also make UUism unique as a religion – or “non-religion” as you choose.

And let's make one thing clear. We don't have to have a deep understanding of the 6 Sources but it is useful to have some understanding of them for they are what Unitarians have turned to over the centuries for inspiration. A UU minister, Rev. Kathleen Rolenz said, *“Throughout history, UU's have moved to the rhythms of mystery and wonder, prophecy, wisdom, teachings from ancient and modern sources and Nature herself”*.

The first Source reminds us that we are free to experience and explore *“the transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life”*.

How do we experience *“transcending mystery and wonder”*. Well, “let me count the ways”. Actually I don't have enough fingers to count them all, or time! Florence Nightingale (Unitarian Christian), quoted in 1873: *“For what is Mysticism? Is it not the attempt to draw near to God, not by rites or ceremonies, but by inward disposition? Is it not merely a hard word for 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within'? Heaven is neither a place nor a time.”*

I have 2 wonderful older sisters. Florence and Margaret. Margaret passed away a few years ago but I remember when I was about 12 or 13 having a discussion with her about religion. One thing I still recall was her words, *“we create our own Heaven and Hell here on earth”*. Heaven and Hell are not “places” to go when we die- we create them while alive in how we choose to live our lives. To bring us closer to experiencing “God”, the “Mystery” or the “Divine”, we need to look within.

The earliest of Christians practiced meditation, for example, following the example of Jesus. Calming the thoughts or mind, being mindful, can be done anywhere – by ourselves at home or in this room together, in a group led by Richard Maxwell (our Buddhist priest) for example, or in Nature – sitting still by a river or seashore, watching the sun rise or set, or a long walk or even running alone can bring stillness and clarity to the mind and inner peace. So peace of mind can encourage a practice of lovingkindness (as the Buddhists say), the word for which is “metta” in Pali, the original language of the Buddha, and “metta” is a derivative of the word for “friend”. So mindfulness or LK calls us to be kind to all.

Driving back from London after Thanksgiving Weekend, after dropping our daughter Ciara off at the Greyhound station to return to Toronto, Dorothy and I passed by the People’s Church near Reece’s Corners. On its sign was this verse: *“If you love one another, God lives in you”*.

And that’s it! This one short verse summarizes what Christianity is all about. No need to complicate it with dogma, rituals or creeds. If Christians learn to live their lives with loving kindness and compassion, they will “know” their God by how they live, think and act.

One of very few movies I have watched more than once: *“Dead Poets Society”*. Robin Williams plays an English teacher John Keating, who teaches in a private all-boys schools.

In one scene, he gives this piece of advice to his students: *“medicine, law, business, engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, music, beauty, romance, love – these are what we stay alive for”*.

These kinds of experiences can sometimes be transformative – a simple example is the beautiful meditative pieces of music that Steve plays to end our short meditations – they often move me in some indescribable but lovely ways. We all have examples of beautiful music or poetry for example, that transforms us in some way.

Music has even inspired the formation of a Church. The Music of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane is a means of spiritual communion at the St. John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco. Its founder Franzo King describes it thus:

“The worship of God is what we encourage, and we’re using the music of John Coltrane. The vibe is a rapturous out-of-your-head-ness, where instead of the choir and the hymn book there is the sinuous, transcendent music of the jazz-saint, John Coltrane”.

I am not endorsing this Church – just describing how Coltrane’s saxophone music inspired a husband and wife in 1965 to be so moved – *“to feel a spiritual communion with God”* - that they created a church. I love jazz and how it allows musicians to be flexible, to improvise, to flow with the music and its rhythms. Its musical diversity is very “Unitarian”!

The remaining UU Sources offer the opportunity to draw from the wisdom of the Native Americans and other Earth-centred traditions which teach us to love Mother Earth, our only home. Humanist teachings that *“counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, which protect us from irrational and fearful beliefs”*.

And finally to draw inspiration from the words and deeds of prophetic women and men. In short, we are free to explore – we are encouraged to explore our own spiritual path – a responsible search for truth and meaning.

I was raised in the Church of Ireland (a branch of the Anglican Faith). I attended church and Sunday School regularly and at age 16 one Sunday evening I was confirmed into the Faith, along with about a dozen other teens by the Bishop of Clogher and Down. I still believed that living a Christian life was the best way to bring meaning into my life but a little over a year later, as I encountered new experiences in my world, I had dropped out of Church, deciding that I could no longer rely on Faith alone to guide me.

Reflecting back I realized, for example, at Christmas time, that the most important invisible force in my life as a young boy had not been the Baby Jesus, but Santa Claus. Santa was real – he came down the chimney and left me wonderful presents at the foot of my bed. It was easy to believe in Santa.

But then it dawned on me, as it dawns on all children, that Santa is a myth or a lie. A good lie but still a lie – and maybe the same was true of story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. After all I was confused about what a virgin was – nobody ever clearly explained where babies came from after all. I was a very innocent child.

However, Like Unitarian Christians I can still be inspired by Jesus the man, the itinerant Rabbi who did not preach in synagogues but did his teaching on the streets and hillsides, by the sea-shore and in the desert. *“Deeds not Creeds”* and like Unitarian Christians I eventually came to reject the magical thinking of his miracles, his Virgin Birth and his physical resurrection. Instead I found it worthwhile to draw inspiration from the parables of Jesus, such as the story of the Good Samaritan, his love for all people and his anger at the Pharisees and their self-righteousness and abuse of power.

Jesus spoke Aramaic and in that language the word for Truth is *“Sherara”* which means this: *“that which liberates and opens possibilities; that which acts in keeping with universal harmony”*. Sounds very Unitarian. No-one can experience this if their spirit and mind are constrained by dogma and creed.

By age 18 I was exploring humanist philosophy and realizing also that great insights about humanity and all life could be gleaned from the sciences.

It is perhaps not surprising that most scientists would describe themselves as humanists, secularists or atheists. An exception is Francis Crick who is a devout Christian and who won the Nobel Prize (along with Craig Venter) for the discovery of DNA. Progressive theologians however, see no conflict between the insights of science and religion.

Science can compliment our spiritual growth and understanding and challenges us in exciting ways. But here we must distinguish between religion as defined by dogma and creed and spirituality which to me is a personal journey that we explore by going both

within ourselves and in reaching out in connection with all living things on earth and in humbleness with our origins in the Cosmos. Spirituality is learning what it is to be truly human and how to live with meaning and purpose.

The late very popular astronomer Carl Sagan said: *“The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.”*

Is there anyone in this room who could not be in awe - understanding that all living things are made of the same building blocks – the chemicals that formed in the interiors of collapsing stars and arrived on earth in the dust of comets.

Astronomers now estimate there are 2 billion galaxies. Some people may think such mind-boggling information trivializes human kind – we are just specks on a planet that itself is just a speck in an enormous Milky Way galaxy which is just 1 of 2 billion galaxies!

For me, however, it is humbling to know that being here is really a “miracle” of actual cosmic events and wondering if we are the only planet with life – so far there is no scientific evidence for extra-terrestrial life. We should be utterly and truly amazed that we are alive at this very moment. As one of those prophetic voices, the Dalai Lama declared:

“Nothing is more amazing than the fact that I am alive at this moment in time”.

And when we come to die, we should be comforted knowing that Death is part of Nature’s plan. That the prospect of dying should not diminish us in any way and hold no control over us - for to fear death is to fear living fully, to enjoy the present moment.

So Science offers me a lens through which I observe the world and understand it and offers me a deeper appreciation of its mysteries and wonders. Science compliments the spiritual exploration by bringing insights and understanding. Another simple example: science has confirmed the link between meditation and reduced stress hormones in our blood. It has confirmed that being kind is what produces civilized societies – not the survival of the fittest or most aggressive. And it has discovered that people who cultivate kindness and compassion, and those who enjoy close friendships, of being in community with others and who work to improve their communities, live longer and happier lives. This is important stuff!

It is truly sad to see what is happening south of the border. The U.S.A. began as a grand experiment! The first truly free and democratic nation on Earth. The founding Fathers were cognizant of the fact that most immigrants to America had fled from religious conflicts, places of religious persecution. Thomas Jefferson passed into law the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and then the separation of Church and State became enshrined in the Constitution and religious freedom in the Bill of Rights. It is no coincidence that as well as Jefferson, several of the first 5 or 6 US Presidents were Unitarians.

Although never a mainstream religion, Unitarianism flourished in the U.S. and broadened beyond its Unitarian Christianity to become diverse and inclusive, accepting 6 sources of spiritual wisdom and philosophy that we draw on today. Then in the 1960's amalgamating with the Universalist Christian Church to give us the name Unitarian-Universalist.

Let me conclude with a couple of quotes –

Although Mitch Albom, Detroit author of *Tuesdays With Morrie*, is hardly classified as a prophetic voice we are called to draw on, he said this: *“the way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something which gives you purpose and meaning”*.

But that is the beauty of UUism – we have 6 sources but there is no reason to restrict ourselves to only those 6. There is so much more to explore and UUism gives us its greatest gift – freedom!

Which brings me to my final quote which I paraphrase by writer, philosopher, Chet Raymo from his book’s title: *“When dogma is gone, everything is holy”*.

Carpe Diem! Be curious and bold, be open to new ideas, be free to explore, be skeptical. Enjoy your life!

