

You're Uni-What?
By Rev. Steven A. Protzman
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First Reading: The Theology of Unitarian Universalists by Marilyn Sewell¹
Second Reading: The Stairway of Existence by Hafiz²

Sermon Part I

Unitarian Universalism is one of America's best kept secrets. Even those who have heard of us don't know much about our religion. After a light hearted look at some of the common images and stereotypes people have of UUism, we'll explore the "elevator speech" to discover ways we can tell people about our faith and invite them to join us.

I was at a minister's gathering at the hospital in Ravenna a few weeks ago and as I waited for the seminar on the hospital's pastoral care program to start, I struck up conversation with the couple next to me. He's a Methodist minister and his wife is a health care professional. When we introduced ourselves, I told them I was the newly settled minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kent. He didn't respond, but she immediately replied: "Oh, yes, you're the people who can worship anything you want to." In case you're wondering what goes through a minister's mind at a time like this, it's often snarky.

Here's what I was thinking: "Actually, most people don't know this, but once you're part of the inner circle of UUs, we gather in secret to worship the Flying Spaghetti Monster. We seek truth, meaning and the perfect red sauce." You'll either be pleased or surprised to know that I kept those thoughts to myself and instead I replied: "While it's true that we don't have a creed or doctrine or dogma and each of us has different beliefs and ways of making meaning of life, we are a people who are held together by covenant, by a shared commitment to social justice, and by our vision of the beloved community. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and that all of life is interconnected."

People who do know about Unitarian Universalism have a variety of misconceptions about who we are. The religious right refers to us as a cult. Right. A cult that challenges you to think for yourself and not just blindly accept what you're told but to engage in a life long search for truth and meaning. No projecting happening there. I've heard us described as being vegans who drink free trade coffee, wear Birkenstocks, listen to Public Radio, are bleeding heart left wing liberals with multiple masters degrees, drive priii (that's the plural of Prius) and worship the Goddess. They've obviously confused UUs with California. If they've even heard of us, and sadly, we remain American religion's best kept secret, most people think of Unitarian Universalists as a group of disorganized people who have no convictions, no purpose, no backbone and our churches as places where anything goes. Nothing could be further from the truth.

UU blogger David Neiwert writes that: "We are an odd group, we Unitarian Universalists. Conventional wisdom says that we're soft in all the places our society

values toughness. Our refusal to adhere to any dogma must mean that we're soft in our convictions. Our reflexive open-mindedness is often derided as evidence that we're soft in the head. Our persistent and gentle insistence on liberal values is evidence of hearts too soft to set boundaries. And all of this together leads to a public image of a mushy gathering of feckless intellectuals that somehow lacks cohesion, focus, or purpose. You can only believe this if you don't know either the history or the modern reality of Unitarian Universalism. The Unitarian-bred belief in the nobility of the human spirit was the spiritual foundation on which a plurality of America's founders had sure footing as their convictions crystallized into revolution against tyranny. It fueled the passionate oratory of Daniel Webster, the wisdom of Ben Franklin, and the incisively clear writings of Thomas Paine.

It sent Paul Revere out into the cold of an April evening, and set Thomas Jefferson to the task of writing a Declaration. It lit the spark of progressive change that drove Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Julia Ward Howe to organize for women's rights. It sent Jane Addams, Dorothea Dix, Albert Schweitzer, and Clara Barton out to bring health and hope to the poor. It gave voice to poets from Whitman to Plath to Cummings, novelists from Dickens to Melville to Vonnegut, and musicians from Bartok to Grieg to Seeger. It fueled the boundless imaginations of Buckminster Fuller and Rod Serling and Frank Lloyd Wright. It kept Christopher Reeve alive and breathing and working for his causes. I still hear it crackling hot and fresh every time UU-bred Keith Olbermann goes on one of his trademark rants."³

In Europe Unitarianism dates back to the Reformation and is a long and rich story of heroic people who struggled and even died for the ideas of freedom, tolerance, and the use of reason in religion. We trace our roots back to the early Christian church for our core theological ideas, including as Marilyn Sewell mentions in the first reading, the idea that God is one, God's universal mercy, and Jesus' core message that love is far more important than doctrine. But it's even simpler than that. The medieval Sufi poet Hafiz sums our faith up in one word:

We are not
In pursuit of formalities
Or fake religious
Laws,
We are
People who need to love, because
Love is the soul's life,
Love is simply creation's greatest joy.⁴

Can it be that as Unitarian Universalists we are simply a people who need to love? A love motivated by knowing that all of life is one and that our truest calling, regardless of where or how we find meaning in life, is to love the world toward peace and justice? Imagine, when you tell someone you're a Unitarian Universalist, and they say: "A Uni-what?" you can respond, "we're a people who need to love, because love gives us life and joy".

Final Reading: The Elevator Speech by Dana Worsnop⁵

Sermon Part II

Now that you've had a primer on Unitarian Universalism, do you think you could explain it to someone in a meaningful way, in say, the span of an average elevator ride, anywhere from 30 seconds to two minutes? Or would it take a trip to the top of the Sears Tower plus coffee on the observation deck to explain our liberal religion? My colleague Jane Dwinnell tells a story about her elevator speech. "I was at the General Assembly in Salt Lake City a few years ago and had just come out of my hotel in the morning. A crowd of UUs, all with our nametags and T-shirts and political buttons was gathered at the curb waiting for the light to change. A businessman in a suit, carrying a briefcase, was in the midst of this unusual looking and lively group. He turned to a woman near him and said, "Are you with a meeting here? What kind of group are you?" To which she replied, "We're part of a liberal religion having our annual meeting. You wouldn't be interested."

The light changed and people began to cross the street. I walked up to the man. "Hi, we're Unitarian Universalists having our General Assembly. Ours is a liberal, non-creedal faith where people come together in community to discover their own spiritual truths and to work together to make the world a better place. Although our religion arose during the Protestant reformation and used to be primarily Christian, now Unitarian Universalists look to all the world's religions for inspiration and keys to ethical living." "Sound great," he said. "I'm from Albany, New York and I'm here on business. That sounds like something I've been looking for. Do you think there's a Unitarian Universalist church there?" "Sure," I said, "Just look them up in the phone book. You'll be glad you did."⁶

Ever had the opportunity to talk about your faith that way? While he was president of our Association in the first decade of this century, the Rev. Bill Sinkford challenged us to work on our elevator speeches; to be able to describe what Unitarian Universalism is and our unique understanding of a church where humanists and theists, atheists and agnostics, mystics and pagans, all of the aboves and none of the aboves come together to make meaning of life and discover how to live lives of meaning. Do you have an elevator speech? If not, it's time to create one. As with creating theology, the best place to start is with what others have said. As you listen, I invite you to see what words and phrases resonate for you.

Rev. Peter Morales, former UUA President: "I am a UU because I am convinced I need other people who love what I love. I am a UU because I want to join hands with others to create a community where we grow spiritually, where we support one another, and where we work together to create a world in which everyone matters, everyone is free, everyone is respected, and everyone lives in peace. I am a UU because I have seen what love, understanding, and commitment can do. And finally, I am a UU because I am convinced that if we let the love in our hearts guide our ways, the possibilities before us are breathtaking."

Rev. Chris Schriener: “Our denomination is unique because every Unitarian Universalist has the right to develop a personal philosophy of life, without being told what to believe. We can learn from all philosophies and religions, and also from science and the arts. We explore important life issues in a caring community, united by shared values rather than by shared theological opinions. And no matter what we do believe about theology or philosophy, we try to live a good life and leave the world better than we found it.”

Victoria Mitchell: “Unitarian Universalism is composed of diverse communities operating without a common belief about God, the universe, and death. Instead of creed, we share a spirit and vision of radical inclusivity, individual agency, and social justice. It is a safe space to stand out, stand up, and change your mind, particularly during life’s transitions. We embrace personal discovery and growth through learning, engagement, and service. Our only doctrine is love.”

Rev. William Sinkford, former UUA President: “The Unitarian side of our family tree tells us that there is only one God, one Spirit of Life, one Power of Love. The Universalist side tells us that God is a loving God, condemning none of us, and valuing the spark of divinity that is in every human being. So Unitarian Universalism stands for one God, no one left behind.”

Rev. Kathleen McTigue: "If you hunger for spirituality without dogma, if you long to put yourself to work healing a suffering world, if you want a faith community that helps you deepen into life's questions even when there are no final answers, Unitarian Universalism may be your religious home."⁷

So why is your elevator speech so important? I've heard from some of you that you wish you'd known about Unitarian Universalism a long time ago. You wish you'd known that there are communities of people who celebrate life as a gift, who welcome and celebrate diversity, places where it matters much more how you live and love rather than what you believe, a spiritual home ready to help you discover that place where your passion and compassion meet the world's needs. There are many people right here in the Kent area looking for what we have to offer and they may find it because you're ready to share the good news of Unitarian Universalism.

Imagine what we could do together if 100 or 200 or even more kindred spirits found us and joined us in our work of inspiring love, seeking justice, and growing in community. As Peter Morales said, the possibilities are breathtaking! *Ding* Going up! Are you ready to share the good news of our liberal faith?

References

¹ Sewell, Marilyn, "The Theology of Unitarian Universalists", article, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marilyn-sewell/unitarian-universalist-theology_b_870528.html, Dec. 2017.

² Hafiz, "The Stairway of Existence", <http://www.poetseers.org/the-poetseers/hafiz/hafiz-poems-the-gift/the-stairway-of-existence/index.html>

³ Neiwert, David, "Of Madmen and Martyrs", blog, <http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2008/07/of-madmen-and-martyrs.html>

⁴ Hafiz, Ibid.

⁵ "Unitarian Humor", <http://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/what-is-unitarianism/uu-humour>

⁶ Dwinnell, Jane, "The Elevator Speech", sermon, Jan. 2009, <http://www.uusociety.org/sermons?s=140>

⁷ Dwinnell, Jane, Ibid.