

**“How to Recognize A
Unitarian Universalist:
'UU 101' ”**

Sermon by The Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
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Sermon

Unitarian Universalists lean toward the natural and away from the supernatural. We are more interested in the supremely natural, than in supernatural beings. Yet, what we have in common is not our beliefs, but our support for religious freedom. "We need not believe alike to love alike," we say.

Steve was a member of my former church and a Unitarian Universalist. Steve was getting older: he had just turned sixty. Steve was lamenting the increase in his aches, pains and minor physical failures of one sort or another. Trying to be compassionate and pastoral, I offered, "This aging thing can be pretty tough, but it beats the alternative." He laughed and then said with a wry smile, "But are you sure?!" No, I am not actually sure about what happens after we die. I do not believe it is possible to know. So, about issues of an afterlife; I am an agnostic. I just do not know for sure. Steve's comments are not unusual in one sense. Unitarian Universalists tend to be those who ask the hard or unusual question. Many of us are those willing to look outside the box.

I may not know about an afterlife, but I do not believe in hell. This is my opinion and not the belief of all Unitarian Universalists. Historically, the Universalists were called Universalists because they believed in universal salvation, that is, no one died and went to hell: all are saved.

We are those who tend to ask the hard or unusual questions. Not long ago I was visiting with a professor who teaches at the local United Methodist seminary, St. Paul School of Theology. She confessed that her classes went much better and were far more exciting, if she has a Unitarian Universalist student or two. Her favorite students had all been UUs. This was strange to hear from a Methodist teaching more conventional Christian topics in what most would call a mainline seminary. She explained that UUs are those who ask what other students might think but are either hesitant to say or had not yet articulated. "UU students," she said, "don't fit neatly into

the regular church box. When they do research, they keep asking questions, and it takes us into new and interesting discoveries.”

How might we recognize another Unitarian Universalist, if we happen to be traveling or in a new town? Would they stand out? Would they look different somehow?

My wife told me some years ago, that she could always recognize women who are UUs. They are they are the strong ones who dress in artsy and ethnic clothing. An older member of our church has been telling me for years now that the way to recognize a man who is a UU is that they are the good looking ones who are not wearing ties. He keeps wondering why it is that I keep wearing one. We know that our children the ones that are definitely above average. And this last Sunday our guest minister told us how to tell the difference between a Catholic puppy and a UU puppy. “They become UU puppies,” he said, “when they open their eyes.”

We Unitarian Universalists are a community and a liberal religious movement that stresses religious freedom. We are those who have eyes open. We are those willing to ask the unasked question. There are no wrong questions here. We say to question is the answer.

Unitarian Universalists are insightful, observant, self-defining, and compassionate, and we are not easily defined. We believe more in deeds than creeds. It is our walk that is more important than our talk, even though we are pretty good at talking. We have plenty of iconoclasts among us, and are also strong builders of institutions for human betterment and the common good. We are religious, but seldom superstitious.

Because we do not believe like the more orthodox or conventionally religious in society, we are often misunderstood and have been treated with intolerance. In our early Universalist history, Hosea Ballou traveled around the colonial United States preaching the gospel of a loving God, a compassionate religion based upon reason and not

superstition. He preached that a loving God would not subject humanity to eternal damnation. Story has it that he was preaching one Sunday when a crowd began to gather outside his church and chant and jeer, protesting this heretical religion and preacher. Then someone in the crowd threw a rock through the church window. The baseball sized rock landed on the pulpit, narrowly missing Ballou's head. He caught the rock on the bounce, examined it and exclaimed, "This argument, while having substance, is neither well reasoned nor persuasive. Although brute force can be powerful, it is seldom as convincing a powerful idea or a new understanding." With that he continued his sermon. Whether this is truth or legend, I am unable to say, but the story is consistent with our historic and contemporary habit of wanting religious dialogue to be reasonable, to use common sense and to be persuasive.

Another story about the Reverend Hosea Ballou was a conversation with a dear friend, who knew that Ballou was a Universalist and did not believe in hell. As they were traveling together, his friend confided in him his concern for not only his soul and his fear that he would burn in eternal fire, but also his concern that without a real religion or the fear of hell, "what was to prevent him from stealing, or committing rape or murder." Ballou was puzzled, as the story goes, and shared that those were concerns that were generally on his mind. His fantasy life did not include these concerns, and he did not fear that he would commit them. "A clear mind and a compassionate heart have always been a sufficient foundation upon which to build a life and moral character." He was concerned for his friend and wondered about the nature of his urges and inclinations. For most UUs to worry about hell's fire and damnation seems more superstitious than reasonable.

We are a religion more concerned about the here and now than the hereafter. We are more concerned about the divinity in the world than any outside of nature, more concerned with the God in our hearts than the God in heaven.

There may or may not be angels, but there certainly can be angelic purity in our motives. There may or may not be a choir in heaven, but we can all agree that there are choirs that lift the human spirit toward that which is highest and best.

In my young adult years, I was experimenting widely. I read Carlos Castañeda and believed his work to be literally true. I read the *Autobiography of a Yogi* and believed it, too, to be literally true. I was feeling confused and sought counsel from a Hindu wise man, Swami Shatyahnanda. I asked him if it was true that yogis could make things appear and disappear, if they could move to the edge of death and return to life and other amazing feats. He laughed and smiled. "Maybe," he said, but "In Hinduism, we call this kind of thing spangles and baubles. It does not matter whether you can do these strange things; they are only there to distract you from the true path of knowing the divine within yourself and of loving others. All else is distraction."

I re-found my Unitarian Universalist this-worldly religion from the wisdom of a Hindu teacher.

There are some who look at our UU Association's website and say that they see nothing religious there. It is just about justice and what people are doing and there is nothing there about religion. How little they understand us.

I was visiting with a woman, a mother and a UU. She tells the story of one her children. Her son Bobby had gone off on his bike for a ride in the neighborhood. He had been gone a bit longer than she expected, so her daughter volunteered to look for him this Saturday afternoon in their relatively safe neighborhood. She said fine, and her daughter Nancy went down the street to find her brother. But, it had gotten to be longer than she now expected either child to be gone and she was getting concerned. It was about then that Nancy came walking in. "What took you so long?" the Mom asked. "Well, Bobby's bike was broken. So, I helped him fix it." Knowing that her daughter could hardly ride a bike let alone fix one, she

wanted to know how she had helped him. “Well,” Nancy said, “He was very sad that he had fallen and his bike was broken. So, I helped him cry. He’s feeling better and is walking his bike home now.”

How would we recognize a Unitarian Universalist or a caring religious liberal? We would recognize them more by their actions than their beliefs. “We need not believe alike to love alike,” we say. What would loving behavior look like to you? How would you know it if you saw people acting so as to make the highest and best of humanity visible?

Some people who claim to be religious ask you to believe in things that are out of this world, and this distraction takes us away from a true spirituality—a spirituality that is in this world, that is in relationship, that is in action. A spirituality that is in this world offer love to others that we know and would know. Our religion urges us to give flowers to the living. To tell those who we love that we love them, while we have them, because we do not know about the hereafter. We do not rely upon miracles; we see the wonder of every moment. We do not rely upon a magical God in the sky to save us or to send us blessings. We know that every day and every breath is both a mystery and a blessing.

I cannot tell you what all Unitarian Universalists believe, because we do not all believe alike. I can tell you what I believe and many of the things we religious liberals and Unitarian Universalists have in common.

I am a Unitarian Universalist and I have come to believe that life is but a flickering moment, but Being and Becoming are nearly infinite and are certainly eternal. I believe that once a thing has happened it has happened and that then joins all of the events in time that have ever taken place. Nothing is lost. Every act is recorded in the sweep of time and will exist in the collective memory of existence. My heaven and hell are the consequences, the beauty and horror of our actions and our creations. God is infinite presence. We do not have to wait for

heaven or hell. We are creating them every moment and every day. I do not believe we can save the world, but we can act with integrity, which is its own reward and its own heaven.

As a teenager, my good friend's father visited with me about religion. He was a retired Army colonel and the lay practitioner from a Christian Science church. He was in late mid-life, and said that it seemed to him that the best we could do as human beings was to polish the brass and to make the windows a bit clearer for a while, but it was never permanent.

Now that I am the age of my friend's father, I understand and appreciate even more his sense of the transient and temporal nature of our contributions to life, but what changes it for me is the how and the what of what we are doing. Not all polishing is the same. For Unitarian Universalists with our "this-worldly" emphasis, integrity matters. We cannot predict with certainty the outcome of our contributions to Life. We cannot be assured of a heavenly reward in the hereafter. Our reward is from the virtue of the life we lead. Virtue is its own reward. What we share is deeds more than creeds.

I look to the work of Horace Mann, a Unitarian who helped create public education in our country and I am inspired. His work changed our country for centuries, if not forever. I look at the amazing ministry and vision of Dorothea Dix who revolutionized the way of thinking about mental illness in our country and how it should be treated. Her work led to hundreds of hospitals being built for mental health treatment. Patients were treated rather allowing them to simply be put in jail cells and left there. I think of the amazing integrity of Elliot Richardson, a statesman of such stature that four times he served at cabinet level positions for both Democratic and Republican administrations. I think of Blanche Carstenson, who was a fun and delightful artist who helped beautify our community. I think of Dick King whose capacity to solve problems and negotiate political dilemmas led to countless positive contributions to our city and our community.

Yes, our lives are as temporal as the flicker of a flame or a bloom in spring, but our faith is not just temporal and is about more than just integrity, as important as that is. Our faith leans toward building justice and affirming Life and humanity. It is like the UU waitress in our reading. She saw the young boy and his deep hunger and was willing to risk affirming what she saw there.

We are those who say "Yes!" to Life.

Chalice Lighting

This morning, I'd like to share a story from a book I'm reading called *American Religious Humanism*, by Mason Olds.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, a group of Unitarian ministers in the mid-west developed a religious framework that came to be called Religious Humanism, which rejected belief in God and focused on human actions, interactions, and responsibility in this world. A couple of key leaders of this group were Curtis Reese, minister of the Unitarian Church in Des Moines, Iowa, and later secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference headquartered in Chicago, and John Dietrich, minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. This group also included the minister of this church at the time, Leon Birkhead, and the man for whom this room was named and who would later become minister here, Dr. Raymond Bragg.

As secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, Reese invited Dietrich to address the Unitarian General Conference in Detroit in October, 1921. Also speaking would be Dr. William Sullivan, minister of All Souls in New York City and a strong advocate for theism as integral to Unitarian identity. Sullivan came prepared with a resolution that Unitarians should adopt a statement of faith that asserts a belief in the existence of God. Following the speeches and discussions among the delegates,

the advocates for such a statement realized they lacked the delegates to win and so did not submit their resolution.

At that conference in 1921, Unitarianism chose to define itself as an inclusive, pluralistic religion. By rejecting a statement affirming theism, the delegates said Unitarianism is a religion for which freedom of conscience and religious liberty are more integral to our faith than belief in God. Ever since, Religious Humanism has been a significant part of the Unitarian denomination.

Today, some Unitarian Universalists base their faith on theistic points of view such as Christianity or panentheism and others base their faith on non-theistic points of view such as Buddhism or Religious Humanism. So, this morning, I light the chalice to Unitarian Universalism, a denomination that has become a pluralistic association of different religious points of view with a common commitment to freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and social justice.

Opening Words

Unitarian Universalism designates my faith and my institutional allegiance. While this covenantal identity is firm, my theological convictions are varied and shifting. I am a mystic and a humanist with naturalistic leanings and receptivity to disclosures of the divine. I meander comfortably amid the Judeo-Christian motifs and stories of my heritage. My religious vision is tempered by and grounded in earth-centered spiritualities, aligned with the wisdoms of Asian traditions, especially Taoism, and bathed in trustful agnosticism. In short, I contain a multitude of religious concerns. Our UU pluralism suits me fine – we are people of the big tent, open wide to all truth and to life itself.

Words from Tom Owen-Towle, adapted by Jim Eller

Readings

From *Free-thinking Mystics with Hands*, by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

The word freedom comes from an ancient Norse root verb that means to become loving. Freedom is not properly a state of being then, but more accurately a choice for becoming. So, in our religion, freedom is about becoming, never about being.

At our truest, freethinkers keep expanding. We stay evergreen, avoiding psychosclerosis, the hardening of mind and spirit.

Each human is confronted not by a single occasion, a single choosing, but by unpunctuated choosing. Among the myriad decisions none stands aside. In a lifetime of choice, a nationtime of choice, each matters!

The word heresy is actually a respectable term, at least by definition. It is derived from the Greek word meaning “to choose.” Unitarian Universalists contend that “choice”—not inheritance, fate, or default—determines the nature of one’s religion. We belong to the heritage of incorrigible choice-makers, an admirable lineage of heretics from Michael Servetus to Susan B. Anthony, from Benjamin Rush to Olympia Brown, from Whitney Young Jr. to Sophia Fahs.

From *Without Apology*, by Rev. A. Powell Davies

We are the consummation of thousands of years of religious history. We are thousands of years that have stripped off superstition and battled with tyranny; thousands of years that struggled to take fear out of religion—to take it right out of human life; thousands of years that have marched, sometimes joyfully, sometimes in agony, toward spiritual emancipation. We are indeed the consummation of something.

Yet in this world of blood and sorrow it is scarcely important, hardly worth mentioning, unless in addition we are the *beginning* of something, unless our religion is new—the

religion that has always been new in every prophet who died rather than forsake it; the religion that has been buried over and over again in creeds and rituals and sacred sepulchers and yet has always come to life; the religion that today is new all over the earth, stammering itself into utterance in every language known to humankind.

The religion that says freedom!—freedom from ignorance and false belief; freedom from spurious claims and bitter prejudices; freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it, freedom from the hates and greed that divide humankind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought, freedom for equal justice, freedom to seek the true, the good, and the beautiful with minds unimpaired by cramping dogmas and spirits uncrippled by abject dependence. The religion says that humankind is not divided—except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions—and declares a brother- and sisterhood unbounded! The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the worldwide love of one another.

"Does the World Know I'm Here?," from *Portraits from the Cross*, by Rev. David O. Rankin

It was a restaurant for confused tourists and local residents who had pawned their taste buds. The waitress took the parents' order, and then turned to their small son.

"What will you have?" she asked.

"I want a hot dog! . . ." the boy began.

"No hot dog!" the mother interrupted. "Give him what we ordered!"

But the waitress ignored her.

“Do you want anything on your hot dog?” she asked.

“Ketchup!” the boy replied with a happy smile.

“Coming up!” she said, as she walked to the kitchen.

There was silence at the table.

Then the youngster said to his mother: “Mom, she thinks I’m real!”

The odor of thick and greasy food permeated the room—but his was a hunger beyond all power to suppress.