

**“UU Values”**

**Sermon by Rev. Jim Eller**

**All Souls  
Unitarian Universalist Church  
Kansas City, Missouri  
[allsoulskc.org](http://allsoulskc.org)**

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“Truth will guide us. Love will keep us through the good day and good night.” One way to understand our faith is to see it as the marriage of truth and love, but our faith is not an easy faith to describe.

Two years ago we were asked by our Unitarian Universalist Association to be the test site for a new media campaign. We experimented with increasing our visibility, using radio, television and billboard advertising. It was fun to turn on NPR or 102 FM and hear our faith affirmed in public. We had mixed feelings about using billboards, but they were the most effective. The billboards bought a number of people through the door. One of the billboards said, “A Different Trinity: Freedom, Dignity and Justice.” This billboard drew the right wing Christian media, who claimed we had no right to use the word “trinity”; it belonged to true Christians, not to us. They called the Unity headquarters and raised hell about our billboard. The Unity staff responded by calling and writing us, to offer both their support and to offer an apology for anything they might have done to lead people to believe that these were their billboards. Yes, we are sometimes confused with Unity and the Unification Church, and no, we are not associated with Sun Yung Moon.

It is hard to capture our faith in a phrase or a slogan. Other billboards tried to do this. “The Uncommon Denomination,” and “A Place Where Different Faiths Are Welcome: Yours” were others. We are a welcoming faith. We do not have one set of beliefs. There are people in our congregations of many differing views. We really do make a place where many beliefs are welcome. We welcome agnostics, atheists, humanists, pagans, Buddhists, Christians and theists. All are welcome. What we believe in common is in part the wrong question. We have many shared core values, including sharing openly and respectfully our differences about faith, about belief, and about our sources of inspiration.

The right question is, how do we believe? We choose religious discovery and are open about our beliefs. We are people who think and hold that faith is not made less by the use of reason, doubt, and discovery, but made stronger and more authentic. Yes, we are a church where integrity matters.

About a year ago I was doing a wedding for an interfaith family. The bride was Roman Catholic, although more in name than in fact. They seldom attended that church. The mother of the bride asked me to describe our church and faith. I said that for us integrity matters. We are people who do our best to live our faith. We are truth seekers and lovers of Life. “I like that,” she said. Most of our friends at our church feel much as you do. We don’t believe most of what our church says. We just go because we have always gone and our friends are there.

I understand the momentum of history and relationship, but for most of us, this is simply not enough. We find it hard to believe one thing and say or do another.

Our core UU values are honesty, respect, integrity, and spiritual and intellectual curiosity. We want to engage Life. We welcome dialogue and even debate, which can bring us insight and bring us closer to Truth.

Yes, this is a church that welcomes agnostics and atheists. A life of goodness, integrity and honesty does not require belief in God. We also have and welcome believers of many sorts. We have Christians, Buddhists, pagans, world religionists, seekers and just plain old Unitarian Universalists. What we have in common is spiritual openness and a deep religious and intellectual curiosity.

Historically this has been called our affirmation of Freedom, Reason, and Truth. We find Love, respect and goodwill central to finding truth and building a caring community and a faith tradition.

Orthodox religion is usually Q & A. They have both the Right Questions that ought to be asked and The Definitive Answer. For most of us this is not enough. We are interested in both the questions and the answers, and usually have a lot more questions than the orthodox want to consider, and we do not settle for just Q & A. It is like in high school or college math courses. Q & A is not enough. You are required to share the work you have gone through to reach the answer, and even if you come up with a less-than-exactly-correct answer, if you can show real thoughtfulness in the process you still get partial, if not full credit.

This is why each summer and during our Exploring Membership class we ask people to share their religious odysseys. The Holy is present in the development of character and in our expressions of goodness. God, if you will, is in the particulars.

I remember an Exploring Membership class I attended some years ago. Jo was sharing with the class what it was like for her to grow up in a conventional mainstream protestant church. She was always a person who asked thoughtful, imaginative and interesting questions. She remembered being in her childhood church school. She asked her teacher who was talking about Jesus, whether it was possible that Jesus was married. She was told that it didn't say anything like that in the Bible. Then she asked, "Is it possible that Christ could have been a woman?" That was the last straw. Her teacher asked her to leave the class and never return. "What kind of family do you come from any way? Surely, they are not Christians!" That was her last time in a church for thirty years. She did not attend another church until she discovered a UU church. She just wished that it had been sooner. Her story is not all that unusual, especially among UUs. We often say that people are UUs without knowing it, and express remorse at not knowing it sooner.

Both of her questions are really very interesting. Current scholarship makes a strong case that Jesus was probably married to Mary Magdalene. The feminist movement in liberal Christian circles is using the word Sophia to describe the feminine side of wisdom, present in what they call Christ.

Just last year, I visited with renowned Biblical scholar, John Shelby Spong. He made the case that Mary was the wife of Jesus using the story of Mary and Martha as proof. Martha asks Jesus to order Mary into the kitchen. This, says Spong, would be consistent with the role expectations within a Jewish household of that period. This is a fun point and easily could become its own sermon, but that is for another time. What is important here is that we are open to religious discovery, and in our church there are no wrong questions.

We are truth seekers. We support our religious quest with the power and in the context of a caring community. Week in and week out we affirm our covenant, to seek the truth in love and to help one another. Love, as well as truth, is what guides us.

This support, care and even love, is at the heart of our freethinking religious movement. Some even go so far as to call ours a “saving faith.” This saving is not done in the here after, about which none of us can truly know, but in the here and now. We save lives by struggling for justice and through our welcoming ways. Welcome and affirmation are some of the ways of love.

Kathryn knew all of her life that she was a woman. She was one of the many people who are born without a clearly defined gender identity. She was somewhere in the middle physiologically. They called him Carl, and raised him as a boy, but that was not who she was. It took years to convince her mother, and even her doctor. But, the world changed. She wanted to change with the world. It was not easy for her family or her work colleagues, but she knew, as she had always known, it was what was best for her. Kathryn was the first

transsexual in any of my congregations. She and her mother agreed that she needed a new circle of friends to help and support her as she worked and learned about this new way of being. They decided that the UU church would be welcoming. They were right. She was a person first and her medical condition and its treatment were second.

There were good days and bad days. She did not do well, when she was fired for work performance issues having nothing to do with her performance and everything to do with the change in her appearance. She became sad and confused, but her church friends were there with her. They saw her through. She is doing fine and now years later is happily employed and happily married. She is alive and well, I believe with all of my heart, because we, UUs, loved her through it. This is a real story, but it is not that unusual.

We are those like our waitress from the reading who have a way of seeing the children, and those who others too often refuse to see. Some call it justice. I call it love.

Historically, the Universalists believed in the “Universal Fatherhood of God and the Universal Brotherhood of Man.” All people are loved by a loving God and all people are brother in the true spirit of Life. We no longer use that language. We are a progressive and changing movement. We are in process and sometimes our language changes. The way we express this faith changes, but the core values are the same. Now we call it the worth and dignity of every person. We talk about the Oneness of Life and of the Human Race. It is the same faith.

This faith led our forebears to stand with Martin Luther King in Selma. It is the same faith that leads our Association to change our bylaws. In the 1970’s, we became concerned about women’s rights. We had been leaders in the Women’s Suffrage Movement. Now, women in our movement were saying that the brotherhood of man did not include them. We redrafted our affirmation of faith, which began

our UU Associational bylaws. The result is what we now call the Purposes and Principles, and our sources of religious authority. See page 1 in the hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* and turn one page left.

The biggest change was more than our statement being more inclusive of women. The process brought our relationship with our world into clearer focus too. We adopted the Seventh Principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” We were the first religious movement in our country to explicitly name the environment as a source of the holy.

One way to understand our way of being religiously liberal is to say “We are a people for whom Life matters.” We say Yes to Life in particular and in general. We affirm each and every person as a part of this sacred wonder we call Life. We affirm our wonder filled world and the sanctity of our relationship with our source of Life.

Two or three years ago at General Assembly, our annual national Associational meeting, the representatives of each congregation gathered in a hall with their banners symbolizing the presence of each congregation attending the meeting. Our annual banner parade is a moving event, a celebration of our coming together. A few minutes before the banner parade was to begin, one of those carrying a banner had a serious heart attack. His heart had stopped. CPR was begun. People were just waiting to go into the Assembly, so they were playing and busy chatting with one another, but word began to spread that something serious was taking place. The paramedics were called and soon arrived. Silence fell over the group. So many of us wanted to support the fellow UU lying in distress, but what can you do in a situation like that. Then someone began to sing “Spirit of Life,” the most popular hymn in our Association. They sang it quietly like a deep whisper, and kept on singing until the man was well out of the building. He left unconscious with CPR still being administered.

Word of the incident spread. Word came back the next day that he had survived. Our GA cheered.

I do not think they sang him back to life, but surrounding with love and music surely didn't hurt chances of survival. We have a faith that affirms Life and knows that the Life of every person matters.

We are a church of reason where there are no wrong questions. We are a place where differing beliefs are welcome, including yours. Our church is a community in which we choose to love alike and not necessarily to believe alike. We create in our UU congregations opportunities to seek the truth and love and to serve our highest values. We encourage people to live with authenticity and integrity. You are encouraged to share your truth and your beliefs that we might all be richer from the wisdom of each others' light, love and hope.

Jim Brown, one of our UU District Executives, was once asked what Unitarian Universalists believe. He said, I cannot answer for all UUs. We have a diversity of beliefs, and I am a UU. I can tell you what I believe, and this can provide one voice and one vision that is within our movement. Sharing our stories and sharing our faith journeys makes us each richer within a community of seeker. This is our way of faith.

# Readings August 28, 2005

## UU Religion, by Rev. Daniel O'Connell

UUs will testify to the transforming power this religion called Unitarian Universalism has had and continues to have on their life.

For some it has made the difference between life and death. For others it has made all the difference in how they approach their deaths.

I have had the privilege of asking UUs with terminal illness if and how Unitarian Universalism has made a difference in how they approach their impending deaths.

Bernie the Humanist – told me he grew up a secular Jew, but was always a bit afraid of death. Years ago, becoming a UU and discovering Humanism, has eased his mind and focused his priorities in his last days.

Around Labor Day last year, my mother was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. She has at least a few years of life left.

She tells me she grew up with a certainty of hell and damnation. She began attending a UU church shortly after my birth and became choir director there, more recently at our congregation in Stockton, CA. She is on disability now, mostly in bed, so she is easy to reach by telephone. She tells me Unitarian Universalism has convinced her God is Love, and she no longer fears death.

## Freethinking, by Rev. Tom Owen-Towle

Unitarian Universalist Terry Sweetser puts it in “Free for What?”:

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.

We spend our entire lives not *repaying*, which we can't possibly do, but rather *responding* to this infinite spirit of love. Loved, we love in return. The Reverend Tracey Robinson-Harris relates the story of a five-year-old boy who, in the middle of a long and frightening night, wakes up in tears. He was staying with his grandfather as his parents tried to put the pieces of their lives back together again. He did not know what would happen to them or to himself.

When the boy awoke, he called out, "Grandpa, I'm scared." "It's all right," said Grandpa. "I'm here, I'm here." And indeed he was, sleeping in the other bed in the same room, right there, asleep yet alert, listening for his grandson's cry. The boy heard the reassuring words, "I'm here," yet, still crying, he said: "I know, Grandpa, but is your face turned toward me?"

That's the quintessential Unitarian Universalist query: Is our face really turned toward the loved one, the stranger, even the enemy? Do we truly see others as worthy human beings?

## Does the World Know I'm Here? By Rev. David 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.