

A Sermon by The Reverend Kathleen Hepler
The Experiment of Unitarian Universalism
September 20th, 2015

The first time I heard about Unitarian Universalism was in college. A dorm-mate was pregnant and while, there was a movement afoot to legalize abortion, it was not yet so. Someone told my friend that she should go see the Unitarian Universalist minister in town. It turned out that a contingent of UU ministers across the country were helping women with unplanned pregnancies and also working to make abortion safe and legal. My roommate ended up going to London for her abortion. I am saddened to tell you that she did not survive it.

Note to self: this religion is really engaged in the issues of the day; and they care about women. I wonder what kind of religion this is. I had been raised Lutheran and not just me, but my entire family, had chosen to leave. I was not an advocate of organized religion to say the least. I knew too much about how religion had been used to gain power and control over others and to oppress through the years. Even as I knew also of the good religions have done, and can do.

The second time I heard about UUism was a few years later while attending a meeting about hunger in a UU Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. There were signs on doors letting people know what meetings were where. As I approached I saw one that said "Hunger in St. Paul", I passed one that said "Nourishing Your Spiritual Hunger", and another that said "Overeaters Anonymous". I wondered if this church's theology had something to do with food!

A year or so later a friend invited me to come to that same church. Which, I did. Then began an awakening for me, a conversion really. There was so much freedom there, for I was asked not to profess a creed, but to take responsibility for my own beliefs. There was so much love there, for there was an ethic of welcoming all, however imperfectly practiced. And, there was something within that diversity that everyone seemed to agree on: the proof of the religious pudding (Oh no! Another food metaphor!) was not in what you heard or said on Sunday morning, but in how it inspired you to serve the common good.

I struggled for a while to really accept that even though Judeo-Christian scripture was sometimes read in church and even though Christmas Eve was kind of a high holy day...this was *more than* a Christian religion. It's not that it was not Christian; it was more than Christian. I attended a Seder for the first time in my life and noticed that some families came to the church because they were interfaith. I struggled for a while with taking responsibility for my own beliefs and felt overwhelmed with that task at times. I jumped right into the serving the common good part though because that, I later was able to articulate, is core to my own spiritual beliefs.

It took some time for me to get out of the mindset that religions had to be huddled around a creed. I wondered, what holds these people together? And, right away I learned that being a UU means that I would always have to manage the reactions like fear or anger or disbelief or surprise or inquisitiveness about such a religion existing at all! And I had to teach myself what to say succinctly about the core of Unitarian Universalism.

What would you say the core of this faith is, given that it is a creedless endeavor? How do you describe what it means to be a "free" faith where everyone does not have to believe alike?

Through the many years that I have been a Unitarian Universalist there is periodically an article or a scholarly paper or workshops that attempt to say what it is that is the *core* of Unitarian Universalism. We are creedless because we recognize that truth evolves and that when anyone declares that they have the Truth...the once and for all truth....watch out! That kind of truth has been used to bludgeon those who have different beliefs all through history.

Our world is rife with examples of such religious violence. We see this dynamic as it is attached to racism in the non-response that Donald Trump gave to a man who rose at a town hall meeting "accusing" Barack Obama of being a Muslim. Trump did not rise to the American occasion where the appropriate response would have been: 'So what? We have freedom of religion in this country. Barack Obama is a Christian, but it does not matter what religion he is in this land of the free. What matters is how he lives his life.'

Perhaps, then, it is freedom that is at our core.

What would you say is the core of Unitarian Universalism?

In the 1970s Charles Howe wrote: "The true core is that strong, free, vibrant intellectual center always demanding response in the world. That center always in process, always moving ahead through time, leaving its imperfect products in its wake, products that we, by entering that center, are challenged to improve. "

In the 90s, Rev. Richard Spark said that the core of UUism is "community".

The Reverend David Bumbaugh wrote that the center ought to be the "interdependent web", our seventh principle. Oh by the way, we do have 7 principles. (printed at the end of this sermon). They are guidelines that point us in a direction. Perhaps they are the center. What do you think?

Not too long ago, some minister (can't remember who) speculated that there is no core at all! A brave speculation I think, since we humans seem to want a core in our religions! "Why does there have to be a core?" this person asked. A very post-modern question to be sure.

Sometime recently The Reverend Dr. John Buerhens wrote, "That sense that religion must be practical and influence the moral and spiritual context in which we live remains absolutely central to UUism today."

The Rev. William Ellery Channing, called the Father of American Unitarianism, would have said that the core of that faith in 1828 was the gospels of Jesus, even as he would have also said that Jesus was not part of a divine trinity, but an astounding teacher. He would have also put at the idea that what he called the seed of the holy is in each person.

Early Puritan theology had been all about God as sovereign, terrible, and distant. Post-revolutionary New England religion restored the ancient theology of the imago dei-the image of God found in every human being. In an 1828 sermon, "Likeness to God," Channing declared, 'We approach the Creator by every right exertion of powers ... (given) us. Whenever we invigorate the understanding by honestly and resolutely seeking truth...whenever we invigorate the conscience by following it...or encounter peril or scorn with moral courage...whenever we receive a blessing gratefully, perform a disinterested deed;

whenever we lift up the heart in true adoration...think, speak, or act with moral energy...then the divinity is growing in us.”

The historical core of Unitarianism was, then, *one God*, not three, Jesus as the teacher whose gospel shows how to live a moral life, and that a seed of the sacred resides in each human being. The image on the front of your order of service has a chalice surrounded by two circles. One of these circles represents the Unitarian part of our history.

The second circle represents the other part of our history, Universalism. Hosea Ballou, a Universalist, wrote in his seminal work called *The Trites on Atonement* (1805), wrote that “An infinite God would not infinitely punish finite and imperfect human beings”. Ballou would probably say that the core of Universalism is that all humans will be reconciled with God when they die. The Universalists called this “Universal Salvation” and it was a departure from the idea that the Divine is punishing and harsh. I like the phrase Ballou wrote that “in the relationship between God and people, God is not the dissatisfied party”.

The historical core of Universalism was that God loves all human beings no matter what, and that each will reunite with God upon their death....Universal Salvation....all are saved. This was radical at the time and in some ways still is. God loves all people no matter what their imperfection or sin. There is no hell. If we are not afraid of hell, what encourages us to do good? Our tradition has always answered that there is much natural good within human beings.

The Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1961.

One of our ancestors, Unitarian minister and social activist Theodore Parker wrote with tongue in cheek that the “Unitarians think they are too good to be damned by God, and the Universalists think that God is too good to damn them”!

The chalice in this image is the design of Hans Deutsch, a Dutch artist who was helped by the Unitarian Service Committee during WWII. The USC helped Jews and Unitarians escape during the war and to relocate after the war. This chalice became the symbol for that brave movement, and now for our faith.

You notice that the chalice is off to one side in the circle. This symbolizes that there is room to continue to include more wisdom and experience into the endeavor that is called Unitarian Universalism. Leaving space for on-going revelation.

One God. God is Love. Go about creating the beloved community. Leave room for what truth will arise next.

There is a wonderful YouTube sermon by UU Minister Rev. Tandi Rogers about a conversation she had with a young evangelical Christian named Jason on an airplane. It is a respectful and ultimately redemptive conversation.

Rev. Rogers overhears them talking about having been to a conference on planting new churches. Since this is what she does for the UUA, she wanted to have a conversation with them about what they learned. When they learned she was a Unitarian Universalist the conversation, as one would guess, shifted!

Jason asks her if she took Jesus to be her lord and savior. Rev. Rogers tells him that she loves Rabbi Jesus and what he taught, yet does not believe that he brings eternal salvation...that she seeks salvation through love and justice in *this* life. The young man asks her, “But how do you reconcile the scripture John 14:6 “I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.”?

Rev. Rogers responds by saying that she goes to the verses immediately before that where it says, "In my Father's house are many mansions." This means to her that there are many ways to approach the ground of all being that some call God. She adds that she is glad his way works for him!

He asks her if UUs believe in conversion. She says, "Some do. I do." They go on to share their conversion stories into their mutual faiths. Jason's was a story of abusive parents, his own struggles with drugs, and the day that someone invited him to church. He found within the community and its creed, acceptance and love. His eyes filled with tears as he told it.

Tandi tells her conversion story: the church of her youth telling her that she was evil because she was bisexual, yet feeling herself a child of God. A friend invited her to a UU church. She found within this creedless community acceptance and love. Her eyes filled with tears. The two of them are bonded by the telling of these stories.

Rev. Rogers asks Jason if his church speaks against homosexuals. He said almost reluctantly, "Yes". She tells him that she just does not get this and goes on to quote from the 22nd chapter of Matthew: "Teacher which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second *is like it*, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." She goes on to say that while we might have different ways of describing God or the ground of being (great mystery/holy one/ love that will not let us go/ fierce love/ spirit of life; loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is what we Unitarian Universalists do!

Rev. Rogers ends this story by telling us that the older evangelical man traveling with Jason asked him at the end if he had "saved" her. She heard Jason say to him, "She is already saved".

We are saved by our efforts to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Each of us have stories to tell about our travels to this faith. If you are here for the first time, we welcome you into your authentic story. Each of us might say something a little different about what is at the core of Unitarian Universalism. Here is what I would say:

All life arises from the same Source. Something larger than we can ever imagine fuels the love of this planet, although we may each call it, or understand it, differently. We humans are far from perfect but we are born as blessings, not sinners. We can cause great harm, but there is much health in us. We are called by this Eternal Mystery, this God, this Bending Toward Justice, to help bring about the Beloved Community on earth. We are called to a fierce and courageous love.

I end with this poem by Miguel Otero Silva

When nothing remains of me but a tree
when my ashes have been scattered
beneath our mother earth;
when nothing remains of you but a red rose
nourished by that which once you were;
when the breath of the kiss we exchange today
has embarked upon a thousand different breezes;
when even our names have become

mere sounds without echo
asleep in the fathomless sound;
then you will live on in the beauty of the rose,
and I in the rustling of the tree,
and our love in the murmur of the breeze.

Listen to me!

My wish for us is to live also
in the spoken words of men and women.
I would survive with you
in the deep life stream of humanity;
in the laughter of children,
in the peace of humankind,
in love without weeping.

Therefore,
as we must give ourselves to the rose and the tree
to the earth and the wind,
let us give ourselves, I beg you, to the future of the world.

So it is and will be with us.

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