

*In This House***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By the Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on June 5, 2022**

- Q. What is a Unitarian Universalist? A. Someone who believes in life before death. A. Someone who faces all questions with an open mouth.
- Q: Why can't UUs sing very well in choirs? A: Because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next verse.
- A Unitarian Universalist died, and to his surprise discovered that there was indeed an afterlife. The angel in charge of these things told him, "Because you were an unbeliever and a doubter and a skeptic, you will be sent to Hell for all eternity—which, in your case, consists of a place where no one will disagree with you ever again!"
- Thomas Starr King is credited with describing the difference between Universalists and Unitarians: "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn men; Unitarians believe that man is too good to be damned."
- UU bumper sticker: "Honk If You're Not Sure"
- A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon a UU asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?" "I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage. "Oh, good—then you'll fit right in!"

I presented at a conference on Friday. My presentation was titled Sacred Shame: Spirituality and the LGBTQ+. After the conference a few people came up to me and asked where our congregation was, told me that they drive by there and will definitely attend services, and that they have been looking for a congregation that has their values and finally found it in All Faiths. I'm constantly reassured by comments like this that we are indeed a sanctuary in Southwest Florida for those who think like us, share our values, and remain a place where people can question, search, and find community.

In the book *Our Chosen Faith* UU layperson Betty Mills describes Unitarian Universalists. She writes, "Who are these UU's, standing around the coffee table on Sunday mornings, discussing last night's movie and next Fall's election; reviewing the morning's sermon, designing tomorrow's educations, storming over next century's oceans? [They are] Joyful celebrants of the gift of life, mixing nonsense with the quest of the ages, turning secular need into concerned action, serving wine on the lawn and petitions in the foyer!" Betty has it right. You might imagine that I get asked what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Do you? I get asked so often that I feel like I'm coming out as a UU every day. Often, I have used others' words, like the ones that come to me in email or on Facebook, to describe it. Other times, I have used songs, like Iris DeMent's marvelous reminder to "let the mystery be." But most of the time, I, like you, have had to struggle to come up with my own words to describe this faith, and I can assure you it hasn't always been easy. Unitarian Universalism is a different kind of faith, and how we talk

about it will thus reflect these differences. This morning I hope to share with you some ideas that have emerged for me, ideas which have helped me to better share my faith with others. Even though over and over again we hear people tell us, "I sure wish I'd learned about UUism sooner," many of us are reluctant to tell people about our congregation.

Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, you, or someone like you started coming to services at a congregation. Perhaps you had been away for a long time. Perhaps you found yourself hungry for some unnamed something that was missing in your life. Perhaps your child began asking questions you couldn't answer without the answer sticking in your throat. Perhaps you went back to the church of your childhood but found that you no longer belonged there. Searching for a place to belong, you made your way to a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Perhaps this one, perhaps another. Entering into this house, or one like it, perhaps you found yourself feeling peculiarly comfortable, energized by the ideas, warmed by the hearts of the people around you, encouraged by the commitment you saw to values not unlike your own. Perhaps you even felt like you had "come home" and began coming regularly and getting involved.

Now our story heads toward its critical moment. One day, at your office, or at a dinner party, or at coffee with friends, it slips out that after all these years, you are going back to church. One of your friends or co-workers asks you, "I don't know much about Unitarian Universalism. What is it you believe?" The fateful question has come. You may stumble, blush, stammer out a few words about what you *don't* believe. Make a joke or two about it. Then you may give up. Your friends give you a look that makes you feel two feet tall. And you come back to this congregation you find so meaningful, hoping someone like me will help you come up with a better answer that you can give the next time.

Does this story sound familiar? If it doesn't yet, I imagine that you will find yourself in such a position at some time. Unitarian Universalism is an interesting faith to explain if you approach it from the same perspective as traditional religions. I, too, have struggled with language to describe the deeply felt convictions I hold in my heart. I, too, have been known to tell others first what I don't believe, instead of focusing on the positive aspects of my faith. I, too, have felt that awkwardness when faced with someone proclaiming firm convictions of the conservative or fundamentalist variety, who cannot understand my faith that is filled with ambiguity and diversity.

I imagine that an evolving faith, as ours is, and I trust always will be, brings with it the possibility of faltering words, changing viewpoints, open-ended questions and answers. The challenge before us is to creatively find a means to capture our religious values and beliefs in words and symbols that others (and we) can understand. One way you can begin thinking about this is related to belief.

Most people, I expect, equate religion with belief. That's not unusual. Many religious traditions are based on belief: belief in a particular kind of deity; belief in a ritual, such as baptism, as a means for salvation; belief in a book or books as the only word of God; belief in a creed that specifies exactly what you must assert as true in order to belong or be saved...

Beliefs are important, but for Unitarian Universalists, what binds us together is not belief but rather our perspective, or our attitude toward life. Where others see their religion as based on a particular set of beliefs, our religion begins with a set of affirmations about life, about the

universe, about humankind. Our principles and sources state these affirmations quite beautifully. Unitarian Universalism begins with the deep seated conviction that human life is valuable.

We do not set people apart into groups of saved and unsaved, but rather affirm the dignity and worth of all people. With this perspective, we are compelled to treat others with compassion and to work for justice for all people. With this world view we cannot easily dismiss the "other" as less than human, and are thus challenged to live with others in peace and as much harmony as we can muster. And our principles remind us that we see the world as interconnected. The earth, the stars, the universe are not separate from us, they are us. As seekers of truth, we have let the wisdom of scientists and philosophers teach us the deep reality of existence that we, and all living creatures, even inanimate life, are made of the same stuff. We are indeed the stuff of stars, and our religion honors that interconnectedness. This perspective, from which our religion finds its source, is simple yet also complex. Let me take a few moments to dig a bit deeper, and offer you three responses you might give to your friends, after you say, "I'm a Unitarian Universalist."

The first question your friend might ask you is, "What Bible or religious text do you believe in?" This question has to do with the source of our religious faith. We list six of these sources alongside the principles, because they are enormously helpful in reminding ourselves of the depth and breadth of our religious tradition. These sources include scripture, but they also include our own experience and the experience of others as a guide to truth.

When your friend asks you about Unitarian Universalism, perhaps you might say this. For us, when it comes to religion, the book is open. As an evolving species on an evolving earth, we are committed, as religious people, to continue learning, to continue seeking, and to accept new revelation that is bound to come. We find revelation in books, in people, even in photographs, for the holy can touch our spirits in ways we may never have dreamed.

The next question we are asked may sound something like this: "I understand UUs can believe anything they want. Is that true?" That question, believe it or not, has to do with heresy. I love telling people that I am proud to be a heretic, though it has been known to take a few by surprise. Heresy, in many people's minds, conjures pictures of those who would not accept orthodoxy and tradition. Well, we certainly fit historically into that category. Our spiritual ancestors were those who questioned, who challenged, who listened first to the inner voice within calling them to what they saw to be the truth. That image of heresy is important, and I challenge you to learn more about the many heretics who make up our religious history. Today, however, I want you to think of heresy in this way. The word "heresy" derives from a Greek word that means "able to choose." "Able to choose" is a very important aspect of our faith. If we operate out of the assumption that revelation is not sealed, then we have the possibility and the responsibility to choose our religious beliefs as they are revealed to us. Yes, people say of us that we can believe anything we want, but that's not true.

Unitarian Universalists believe what we must believe, what our senses, our learning, our earth, our communities and our wise people teach us we must believe. We could choose to believe the earth is flat, but that would be against what we have learned to be true. So we choose instead to believe what we know to be true: that the earth is round and that we are a part of its life. So when your companion over coffee asks you that difficult question, another response could be: We espouse a religion that honors our responsibility and capabilities to choose. Because we know that others, too, must do their own choosing, we value diversity and try to embody a loving acceptance of life's differences. We take responsibility for our religious choices and change them

if new knowledge or understanding deem it appropriate. We are considered heretics, yes, but heretics who believe that the holy is found not in conformity, but in the wide diversity that makes life and our living it so wonderful and rich.

We believe and live as if life, indeed all existence, matters. As living creatures, we have been blessed with the greatest gift of all. We did not ask for it, we do not deserve it, yet it is ours to make something with. Life matters not because people alone matter, it matters for itself alone. And because it matters, we find ourselves living life in a way that enables us to make the most of this great gift.

While we may have varying opinions about the possibility of life beyond death, our faith teaches us that it is in this life that we can make a difference. The price tag for that great gift of life is death. Forrester Church, one of our most thoughtful Unitarian Universalist ministers, reminds us that religion is our response to the dual reality of being born and having to die. Throughout our lives we will struggle to understand the meaning of both. But if we live as if life matters we can face death with the certainty that while we lived we did the best we could. And then we can "let the mystery be" about what comes next.

The leader of our denomination, Susan Frederick-Gray tells us, "As a people—a people of faith—that say we are committed to justice, compassion, and equity. As a faith that says we are committed to the inherent worth and dignity of all people. As a faith that says we are committed to respect for the interdependent web of all life—we have a critical role to play in this time.

Two things that are absolutely clear. #1—This is no time for a casual commitment to your faith, your community, and your values, and #2—this is not time to think we are in this alone.

This is no time for a casual faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we are first and foremost religious communities, religious communities that practice love as our foundation—and we are living in times of heartbreak, violence, struggle, and pain. In this time, we need communities that remind us of our humanity in this very inhumane time."

I've given you some answers to questions. But none that you can let roll off your tongue. Remember these three words when people ask you about our UU faith: Freedom of Belief. From the very beginning, deep in our foundation is the celebration of what each of us believes. You will hear me say that when you walk into this house you are not to be told what to believe. In this house we ask what you believe and encourage you to go deeper. One other thing we can easily do answer questions is to offer our testimony. Yes, UU's can testify too. Tell people why you are a UU, why you come to All Faiths, how your UU faith has changed your life and your community. Testify brothers and sisters Testify. You won't need to memorize anything or carry flash cards. Tell the story in your heart, the story that is always at hand. Tell about your love for this faith.

If you are here in this sanctuary this morning or if you can hear my voice-In this house you are free from all that ails our world. In this house you gain the fortitude to back out into the world, in this house you will find those who think like you, value what you value, and believe in building beloved community. In this house you will find sanctuary and I urge to return again and again. We must commit to being part of this congregation by showing up and staying awhile. It is good for our weary spirits.

May it be so.