

Being a UU can be a complicated business. How do we communicate what our faith is about?

I find that the more I understand something in depth, the easier it is to explain it, to reframe it in a way that others can hear.

My wish is that my words today will help you find your own way of expressing what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist – both to yourself and to others.

Wikipedia – the online authority of choice these days – tells us that...

“The defining belief of Unitarian Universalism is that religion is a matter of individual experience, and that, therefore, only the individual can decide what to "believe." The roots of this belief can be found in the Unitarian insistence on freedom of personal conscience in matters of faith. As a result, while Unitarian Universalists have no required creed, they treat as a sacred value the complete and responsible freedom of speech, thought, belief, faith, and disposition. Unitarian Universalists believe that each person is free to search for their own personal truth on issues, such as the existence, nature, and meaning of life, deities, creation, and afterlife. UUs can come from any religious background, and hold beliefs and adhere to morals from a variety of cultures or religions.”

Well. That seems pretty straightforward and easy to explain.

The article goes on to say.. “Unitarian Universalists believe that what binds them together as a faith community is not a creed, but a belief in the power and sacredness of covenant based on unconditional love.”

In short, we are a covenantal religion, and I’ll get back to that in a moment.

When I was in seminary, we used to work on our “elevator speeches” about Unitarian Universalism so that we could explain our faith to someone in just a few short moments, and perhaps interest them enough that they would want to know more.

My elevator speech started with four words.

One Love, All In

Let me unpack that. Our Christian Unitarian forebears believed that God was not three parts, but was One Unity, One Love. Our Christian Universalist predecessors believed that a just and loving God saved everyone, and no one went to Hell. Both of these ideas were considered heresy at the time – and in some circles still are heresies.

One Love, All In.

Although many of us are not Christians, or theists, and we draw from many spiritual sources, this idea remains at the core of our faith. Love is our foundation, and that love extends to all people, and to the world itself. No one is left behind.

The second line of my speech was this:

No world but this one, no Heaven but what we make.

There may or may not be an afterlife in another realm, or reincarnation, or something beyond the material world. We don't claim to know. What we do know is that THIS world is what we have to work with – here, now. That whatever Heaven or Hell we make is right here. So we seek to extend that greater love to all, and to see that everyone is included in a just and loving society. Everyone.

One Love, All In.

Which brings me back to the idea of covenant.

Now, in our roots religion, a covenant is a formal alliance or agreement made by God with a religious community or with humanity in general. Since we have a number of varying opinions about deities and their existence, our covenant is somewhat different.

It's a covenant of right relations, and that covenant doesn't just apply to other UU's, or people who hold similar political and social views. It applies to the whole world. All In.

And covenantal living is not easy.

There's a quote that is often attributed to Transylvanian Unitarian Francis David – "We need not think alike to love alike." It's a great line, but it seems to have its origins with John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist faith.

In 1755, in a sermon titled Catholic Spirit, he wrote:

But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.

But what happens when our differences are not small? When we choose to manifest our love in different ways? What do we do when we're not feeling quite so affectionate to those with other opinions?

We have agreements about how we work together. Lots of them.

And they're all based on the 7 principles that we covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And even with those guidelines, it's still difficult. Because every one of those words has multiple meanings and interpretations.

Being a UU is rarely simple. We can't just swear belief in a creed and be done with it. Revelation is not sealed. We're always discerning the meaning of life and how we live together. Real life bumps up against our intentions. Freedom bumps up against responsibility. Individual conscience bumps up against the democratic process. Every day is filled with choices.

Being UU means embracing complexity and uncertainty.

And because we are not a creedal faith, one of the familiar charges leveled against Unitarian Universalism is that we can believe whatever we want – and that may be kind of true, but we can't behave however we want.

Among other things, our behavior is bounded by respect, compassion, and the desire for a just world. That desire for a just world is the foundation for our social justice work.

And social justice work is hard.

Theodore Parker, one of the great Unitarian ministers of the 19th century, wrote these words:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

I'm not sure that this is entirely true, because I also see it being bent the other way. Because the moral arc of the universe does not bend by itself.

We who struggle for love and justice, we are the ones who bend the arc through our efforts.

And we also must be willing to bend. For the crooked timber of our lives to be made straight.

To learn the value of repentance and atonement, to seek and ask forgiveness, to make right the wrongs we have done to each other, to our fellow beings, and to our planet.

To learn again the value of sacrifice, to be willing to change so that the whole world may live.

To be willing - even at the cost of our own comfort - to change the social and economic system that leaves us few choices about how we live our lives, before that system wounds the world beyond repair.

These are big things to ask of anyone. So why do it? Why be UU?

This is a question each of us must answer for ourselves.

For me, it is because we share a spiritual vision for the world.

One Love, All In

I'm proud to call myself a Unitarian Universalist. It's not easy at times. It requires that I'm open to transformation. It requires that I am willing to examine my actions and beliefs, and to change when necessary in service to that vision.

And because of you, it is not just some grim struggle. (Grim struggle is not healthy.) Because we have each other, we have companionship, and music. There is coffee and conversation. There is laughter. There are weddings to perform. Lives to remember and celebrate. There are children and youth to teach and to learn from. There is community and solidarity. There is the shared joy of small victories, and the occasional triumph of the right. There is love.

We have a vision for the future, a vision we are working towards - together. It gives meaning, and purpose, and direction to our lives.

Say it with me now. One Love, All In.

May it be so.