

Who Will Accept Our Invitation?  
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Who will accept our invitation? Who will accept our invitation to become part of a liberal religious community?

Here's one woman's story, Julie's:

I stumbled upon Unitarian Universalism, [she wrote,] when I took a secretarial position at a Unitarian fellowship. To my happy surprise, I found a community of people committed to *this* life rather than to a life hereafter. Within that commitment I observed an honest regard for self, and for the other person. No "ought to's" that made living a daily round of guilt trips in the name of perfection. No perfection. And a lot of stumbling. [Bruce Marshall, *Holy Curiosity: Stories of a Liberal Religious Faith* (1990), p. 6]

Julie was looking for a religious community whose members were living in *this* world, not preparing for the *next* one; a community accepting of an imperfect, stumbling humanity.

Last month I preached on radical hospitality. Let's make sure our doors are open to everyone, I said, even those who are not like us, even those who make us uncomfortable. Today I'm taking a look at who might accept that invitation, at who might decide that this is where they want to be, that they've found a spiritual home among us.

Here's another woman's story, Viola's:

One day, while the TV news recounted yet again man's inhumanity to man, I became outraged. My eyes flowed with tears, and I wailed to no one in particular, "Why does this happen? What can I do to help?" I began then a career of volunteering my meager talents. When I asked my fellow volunteers where they went to church, I was invited to visit the Unitarian Universalists. [*Holy Curiosity*, p. 64]

Viola was looking for a religious community committed to justice, for a religious community that supports those engaged in relieving the world's pain.

A Gallup poll, a few years back, found that Americans have six spiritual needs:

- (1) the need to believe that life is meaningful and has a purpose;
- (2) the need for a sense of community and deeper relationships;
- (3) the need to be appreciated and respected;
- (4) the need to be listened to -- to be heard;

- (5) the need to feel that one is growing in faith, and
- (6) the need for practical help in developing a mature faith. [George Gallup, Jr., "Six Spiritual Needs of Americans Today," *Fellowship in Prayer* 43, 4 (August 1991), pp. 31-36, cited in Robert L. Randall, *What People Expect from Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 22]

These are needs that I have -- all of them -- and I suspect that most of those who accept our invitation could identify with this list. They're searching for meaning and purpose, for community and relationships, deeper relationships, for appreciation and respect, for a listening ear, and for a sense that as they grow and mature, their religious faith will grow and mature as well.

You'll note that there's nothing distinctively Unitarian Universalist on this list, nor is there anything that we might consider theological baggage. These are needs that *any* religious community should be prepared to meet. These are needs, I should think, that Unitarian Universalist congregations could meet as well as anyone else.

Here's another woman's story, Judy's:

Of all the world's round holes this square peg has ever tried to adjust to, [she wrote,] the Unitarian Universalist church is the only group I ever found that gives me feelings of belonging, safety, and acceptance. I need my church as a refuge.

I need it as a substitute family, for mine has never been close, nor has it offered the acceptance my church has.

I need the human contact it gives me, for I tend to forget about others in my solitary pursuits. I need the opportunities it gives me to be a social person. I need the church because it gives me the chance to educate some liberals about how human the physically disabled are. [*Holy Curiosity*, p. 108]

Judy was looking for a family, for a community in which she could sink roots and grow wings.

For Julie and Viola and Judy, the Unitarian Universalist congregation was the right place; it was the religious community they were looking for.

Is a Unitarian Universalist congregation, is *this* Unitarian Universalist congregation, the right place for everyone? It stands to reason that the answer is No, that for some people this isn't the right place. But I'm concerned that if I try to make distinctions, if I start to suggest who might belong here and who probably doesn't, that I'll quickly get into trouble. You'll be able to give me examples of someone who is a happy member of this fellowship, or of some

other Unitarian Universalist congregation, when I've just said that someone like them would probably be happier elsewhere.

Or worse yet, one of you may leave, feeling that I've disinvited you.

In an attempt to sidestep these possibilities, or at least to shift the blame, I'm going to appeal to an outside authority: Belief-O-Matic, the twenty question quiz of the on-line religious website, Beliefnet.com. Now, right away you can see that the name is a problem: Beliefnet, Belief-O-Matic. Their emphasis is on beliefs, while we tend to think that how you live, how you relate to others, the commitments you make -- these are more important than what propositions, what credal statements, you ascribe to.

But before I tell you more about the Belief-O-Matic quiz, here's another woman's story, Helen's:

Here I was, hesitating to enter a whole new religious community. My fears soon proved to be for naught. It was a group of loving, caring, and warm people who held common goals and values.

As I slowly became involved, I liked the way I felt about the fellowship. At first I was skeptical because it wasn't like any other church I had known. No thunderous church choir. No missionary group. No preacher shouting off the rooftop. But, yes, I could be happy here.

This is because the people were just as wonderful as I had remembered from my past. They were everything one could hope for in a religious community.

I like being here. I feel at home. At last. [*Holy Curiosity*, p. 109]

Helen wished to be free of the authoritarian religion she had grown up in, but she felt incomplete if she wasn't part of a church.

Now, back to Belief-O-Matic. If you take the quiz, by the way, you have to put up with quite a lot of advertizing. I've taken the quiz, the Belief-O-Matic quiz, and my Unitarian Universalist score is 100%.

At least, that's what I thought until I took the quiz again yesterday, just to make sure I was up to date. I was shocked when 94% was displayed on the screen. I had received, by the way, 100% for "secular humanist." That's a little odd, since I would call myself a *religious* humanist, not a secular humanist, and I would also call myself a metaphorical theist.

I quickly took the quiz again, making a few very small changes in my answers, and my 100% UU was restored.

Here's what gets you a perfect score – here are the beliefs that will do it:

1. an abstract god, rather than a personal, corporeal god, or no god at all.
2. natural explanations for the physical world and for humanity, not Genesis as a literal explanation.
3. death as death, or at least not as the start of eternal punishment, with this life *not* understood as a take-home test to qualify for the next one.
4. multiple explanations for the ills of the world, none of them supernatural.
5. liberal views on abortion, homosexuality, women, divorce, and “social betterment programs.”
6. a reverence for nature.

I’ve condensed my responses to their twenty questions into six points. Of course, there’s no way you can summarize Unitarian Universalism in six short bullet points, but this isn’t bad as far as it goes. It seems to me that if someone looking for a religious community, looking for a spiritual home, took the Belief-O-Matic quiz and came out with a high score for Unitarian Universalism, it would not be a waste of time for them to check out their local Unitarian Universalist congregation. Or, if they’re more cautious, they could start by checking out the Unitarian Universalist Association’s website, [uua.org](http://uua.org).

Here’s yet another story of an introduction to a Unitarian Universalist congregation; this is Gloria’s story.

From my first Sunday service, [she wrote,] I was convinced that I had finally come home. I was welcomed warmly by the members and invited to the social events. I was extremely shy and introverted and had low self-esteem because of past life experiences in an authoritarian marriage and religion. When I was first asked to participate in a service, I was terrified, but I forced myself to cooperate, as I knew this was an egalitarian religion, where every member’s contribution is necessary and meaningful. Encouraging my first feeble efforts to say a few words in public, the fellowship gradually increased my self-confidence by their total, unswerving acceptance and support. [*Holy Curiosity*, pp. 115-16]

Gloria was looking for a home; she was looking for a group of people, a community, who would accept her just as she was, and then encourage her and support her as she blossomed.

These little stories I’ve shared, by the way, the stories of Julie, Viola, Judy, Helen, and Gloria, are all drawn from the Rev. Bruce Marshall’s book, *A Holy Curiosity: Stories of a Liberal Religious Faith* [(1990) (but substantially edited)]. It’s also the source for the readings earlier in the service. Marshall was on the faculty, back in the late 1980’s, of Unilead, my then district’s week long summer leadership school. The stories are from essays that the students

wrote during the course of the week, in response to questions posed by Marshall. A number of the stories included in the book are from our fellow students the summer that Kerry and I attended Unilead. Our writings, by the way, did not make it into the book.

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I've been trying, in a somewhat haphazard way, to give you a feel for who might welcome an invitation to a Unitarian Universalist congregation, who might feel that this could be the religious community for them, who might feel, like Gloria, that coming here is like finally coming home.

Now, for the last few minutes, I'll try to be less haphazard and more systematic about who might most readily find a Unitarian Universalist congregation the right one for them.

A Unitarian Universalist is most likely to be a person (1) who values reason, (2) who is committed to the future, the future *here*, and (3) who finds meaning and purpose in life in the living of it. I'll expand a little on these three criteria.

[1] First, **reason**. I don't mean to disparage other approaches, or to deny the role of reason in other faiths, but if we Unitarian Universalists are known for anything, it's for using our heads. We believe in reason, in the scientific method, in empirical research, in the value of experience and experiment. This is a predominant theme in our history.

During the Reformation, Michael Servetus, a Spaniard, studied his Bible and concluded that the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine that God consists of three separate persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, could not be found there, could not be found in the Bible. The Bible, he concluded, does not support a Trinitarian concept of God. For this he was burned at the stake and became a Unitarian hero.

Also during the Reformation, Laelius Socinus, an Italian, gave reason a weight equal to that of scripture. While he died when he was only 37, he was a major figure in the planting of Unitarianism in eastern Europe.

On this side of the Atlantic, during the 18th century, those who would later be known as Unitarians, using reason and denying the automatic authority of the Church, rejected the idea that we humans are inherently sinful and affirmed a more optimistic view of human nature.

At the same time, those who became known as Universalists studied their Bibles and used their common sense and their moral consciences and came to the conclusion that God would not condemn anyone to eternal punishment.

Then in the 19th century, Emerson and the other Transcendentalists explained that our *own* experience should count as much as the experiences reported in the Bible.

In the 20th century, Humanists argued that we should rely more fully on the scientific method, and that we could get along quite well without the supernatural.

With this solid foundation of reason and empiricism, we can now discover that the house that is Unitarian Universalism has many rooms. There's a room for feelings and human empathy and compassion. There's a room for music and poetry. There's a room for metaphor and personification. There are rooms for mystery and ritual and mysticism and spirituality. But the foundation that supports all these rooms -- and we continue to build new ones -- the foundation is reason.

[2] Second, **commitment to the future**, the future *here*. This commitment means, first of all, that our focus is on *this* life, on *this* world, not on some other life, that one enters only by dying, not on some other realm, like heaven. The kingdom of God, if and when it arrives, will be *here*, not up there somewhere. And you don't have to use the phrase *the kingdom of God*. Personally, I'm partial to *the realm of peace and justice*.

Now, I should acknowledge that we Unitarian Universalists don't all share the same view of what awaits us at death. Some of us believe in some sort of survival after death – and there are several different possibilities here. Others believe that when you die you're dead, period. And still others take a wait-and-see approach. But where I think we agree, is that the focus of our attention, of our labor, should be *here*, and that, whatever awaits us on the other side, it's *not* eternal punishment.

The second part of our commitment to the future is our acceptance of the idea that *it's up to us*. That is, the future of humanity, the future of our planet and of our civilization is up to us humans. God isn't going to do it for us. There's no supernatural force that will come to our rescue: it's up to us.

The third part of our commitment to the future is that we *care* about the future, we care passionately about it. We want our grandchildren and our grandchildren's grandchildren to have a home on this planet. We want the world to be a place of peace and justice; we want the environment to be preserved so that the world will continue to be a moderately friendly place. And we realize that we're all in it together. For *our* grandchildren to thrive, grandchildren on the other side of the globe must thrive as well.

Hanging next to the door in my study is a tile, and on the tile are the words of Gandhi: "We must *be* the change we wish to see in the world." That's the fourth part of our commitment to the future. We can start the realm of peace and justice right here. We can be the model religious community that will attract some, and inspire or challenge others.

[3] I offered three criteria for identifying Unitarian Universalists. So far, I've said a few words about our commitment to reason and about our commitment to the future. Now for the third criterion. A Unitarian Universalist, I would suggest, *finds life's meaning and purpose in the living of it*.

What is the Meaning of Life? Capital M, capital L. That's one of the Big Questions. One asks the Zen master, or the hermit on the mountain top, what is the Meaning of Life? As I see it, it's a question that cannot be answered. I suspect, in fact, that it's not even a proper question. It's like "what color is 104?" or "what was there before creation?"

Some will tell you that God provides the answer, that God gives meaning to life, that God gives us a purpose. Perhaps I was late to class that day, but I don't get it. I don't think it matters what your idea of God is, I don't see how appealing to God helps.

Just as we, not God, are responsible for assuring our survival in the years ahead, so are we, not God, responsible for finding meaning in life, or, better, for *giving* meaning to life.

Some day, way off in the future, our sun will run out of fuel; all the stars eventually will burn out. The universe will no longer support life. Does that make life meaningless? I don't think so.

Or perhaps, we'll all live forever in heaven, in eternal bliss. Does that make life meaningful? Again, I don't think so.

No, I think we have to look elsewhere for meaning, for purpose. The mother will find it in her new born child. We find meaning and purpose in wiping the tear of the crying child, in helping the stranger who is lost, in holding the hand of the widow, in serving hot chocolate to those who come in from the cold, in spending an hour with Beethoven. There are so many ways.

Now you can say that in a thousand years, or a million years, none of these things will matter; they will all be long forgotten. That may be so, but so what?

I remember talking to Santa Claus a few years ago. I asked him what he talks about with the little children who come to sit on his lap. Santa Claus told me that he guides the little tykes away from their lists of stuff. He asks them questions that get them thinking in a different way. "What have you done to make someone else happy?" "What have you done to help others?" "What *really* made you feel good?" Santa Claus, at least this Santa Claus, was a Unitarian Universalist.

To sum up, reason is number one for us. We're concerned about our future in *this* world; we'll worry about the next one when and if we get there. We take *responsibility* for finding life's meaning and purpose, and we can find meaning and purpose in the living of our lives. Amen.