

The Ultimate Religious Act Is Choosing
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
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“The ultimate religious act is choosing,” or so my title proclaims. You may be wondering whether that’s true, or you may be unsure what it means. But set that aside for now. Here’s a story about choosing. This one’s true – I can’t always make that claim.

Behind our house at 68 Amherst Road, in Pleasant Ridge, Michigan, was the most wonderful sandbox. It was large – there was plenty of room for two small boys and their friends. And it was deep. We had a couple of shovels left over from the War – shovels that soldiers had used to dig fox holes. And with those shovels my brother and I could dig down many feet into the ground. We could create mines, or with some branches and a few sheets of newspaper and a thin covering of dirt, we could create traps of the unsuspecting.

One day, a schoolmate was with me in the sandbox, Richard Hamlet. He lived a few blocks further from the school than I did, near where the train stopped, the train that my father took to work. Somehow Richard and I got the idea that it would be interesting to investigate from how high up you could drop an empty soda bottle without its breaking. We performed our experiment, each time dropping the bottle from a little higher up. Finally, the bottle broke, and we had our answer.

My mother, however, was not pleased with our scientific exploration. She dispatched Richard Hamlet home, advised me that I should not bring him to our house again, and told me that because of the broken glass, I would not be able to use the sandbox again. I had made a choice, and it had been a bad one. Would you believe me if I told you that that was the last time I ever made a bad choice? I didn’t think so.

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“The ultimate religious act is choosing.” I didn’t make that up. I’m quoting someone who was quoting someone else. [See Kate Tweedie Erslev, *Full Circle: Fifteen Ways to Grow Lifelong UUs* (UUA, 2004), p. 5, quoting the Rev. W. Roy Jones, Jr.] **hold up her book** I’d like to share with you this morning my thoughts on four choices that await us.

Here’s a choice we have to make, individually and collectively, the first of my four. I’m not sure whether it’s a religious choice or an ultimate choice, but it’s an important one, and it’s staring us in the face. We have to choose whether to preserve our world for future generations. I’m talking here about global warming and more generally about humanity’s exploitation of our poor planet – exploitation that is driving species after species to extinction.

Some of you will recall that back when things got started, on Day 6, to be precise, God said to his newly created first humans, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living

thing that moves upon the earth." [Genesis 1:28] If God is to be trusted – and if you can't trust God, who can you trust? – then we, we humans, can do what we want on this planet of ours. We're supposed to fill it up with people; we're supposed to subdue nature; and we've been given dominion over the fish and the birds and all the living things that move upon the earth. So if there's a problem, it's not our fault, it's God's.

Or maybe that's jumping too fast to a conclusion. Perhaps if we listened to what God would say to us today, and not just to what he said to our ancestors six thousand years ago – or whenever it was – perhaps we'd hear a different message. "Enough already," I can imagine God saying, "you've multiplied quite enough, you've been sufficiently fruitful. It's time to take a break. And you've let this dominion stuff go to your head. What kind of lord would wipe out his subjects?"

Quite a few years after Day 6, God became dissatisfied with humanity and decided to make a fresh start. That's the story of Noah and the flood. [Genesis chapters 6-9] When it was all over, God realized that he had made a mistake and said he would never again try to destroy us. Here's the account in Genesis.

8 ¶ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,
 9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,
 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.
 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." [Genesis 9:8-11]

God has made a covenant with us – he will never again try to destroy the earth.

What this means is that we have no one to blame but ourselves. God gave us the authority, God promised that he would not mess things up again. So we're in charge, and we're well on the way to making our planet unlivable.

The attitude we've had toward our planet, towards our beloved Mother Earth, reminds me of two young boys, trying to find out from what height they could drop a soda bottle without its breaking. It's not a good experiment. Once it's broken, you can't put that soda bottle back together again. So let us choose to preserve our planet; let's leave our grandchildren a home.

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God has made a covenant with us. We also have a covenant with each other in our great Nation. I've moved on to our second choice. A covenant, or you could call it our Social Contract. As citizens, we have agreed to preserve our nation. We have agreed that all are equal before the law. We have agreed that life and liberty and the ability to pursue happiness are important to all of us. Most importantly, we have agreed that we are all in this together.

But what do we see? We see a Nation that is starving itself through a misguided commitment to individualism. To prosper, indeed, to survive, we need good education for everyone; we need good healthcare for everyone; we need to maintain and modernize our infrastructure; we need to invest more in scientific research; we need to stop digging ourselves deeper and deeper into debt.

Our leaders are afraid to raise taxes, subscribing to, or intimidated by the rhetoric that what's yours is yours, and no one else can have it. We forget that without a government, without a legal system – laws, courts, lawyers, police officers – without a banking system and a transportation system and a communications system – without all this and more, our property would be worthless. This [*hold up a \$20 bill*] would just be a piece of paper with a picture of some dead white guy on it.

Our prosperity acts like a magnet to attract people from around the world who are seeking a better life for themselves and for their families. We let them do our back-breaking work, and then we treat them like criminals. And somehow those who view the Bible as the Word of God, whose every commandment must be obeyed, somehow they forget that one of the themes of the Hebrew Bible is justice for the alien:

33 When an alien resides with you in your land, [as God explains in Leviticus,] you shall not oppress the alien.

34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. [Leviticus 19:33-34a]

Ours, more than ever before, is an interdependent world. We cannot thrive if other nations do not thrive. A bully cannot expect respect or cooperation from others.

We assume that our social contract, that the covenant among us, that the fabric of our society is strong and cannot break. Must we put it to the test?

Our reckless attitude toward the welfare of our entire nation and toward our relations with other nations reminds me of two young boys, trying to find out from what height they could drop a soda bottle without its breaking. It's not a good experiment. Once it's broken, you can't put that soda bottle back together again. So let us, as a nation, choose to recognize that we are *one* nation, that *every* person is important, and let us choose to recognize that we are one nation among many, and that we have not been given the right to rule over the others.

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The ultimate religious act is choosing. We have to choose – and our children will eventually have to choose for themselves – we have to choose whether to be Unitarian Universalists or not. This is choice number 3 on my agenda. Of course, in this room, most of us have already made that choice – that's why we're here.

Many Unitarian Universalists come originally from other faith traditions – or from no faith tradition at all – and choose to become Unitarian Universalists. And many Unitarian Universalists are raised in our faith, but still at some point they must choose to pledge themselves with their faith tradition or choose to follow a different path. The choices we make are not irrevocable, and they're not always permanent. The door is always open, not only for those coming for the first time, but for those returning after an absence – you are always welcome back.

But what does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? How do you know if you are one? How do you know that this is where you belong? Here's one answer, or partial answer. It's in three parts.

First, Unitarian Universalists recognize that revelation is not sealed. Whatever your view of the Bible is, we would say that it – the Bible – is not the final word. Whatever William Ellery Channing or Hosea Ballou said back a couple of hundred years ago, that's not the final word either. Whatever our Commission on Appraisal said in its report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (2005) – a report well worth reading, by the way – whatever they said in their report on our theology, that's still not the final word.

There is no final word. We keep our past with us. We would have no roots without it, and so we would be taken wherever the wind would send us – but we remain open to the new – not to jump onto every fad that comes our way, but willing to listen and to explore. As Kerry explained last week, for example, our ritual of lighting the chalice at the beginning of each service was unknown to our ancestors – Channing and Ballou never did it – but it is now a powerful tradition among us.

The metaphor of the interdependent web of all existence, with the recognition that we are only a part of that web, likewise was a new revelation not too many decades ago, as was our acknowledgment of earth centered religion as a sixth source of religious wisdom: “spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

We don't know what Unitarian Universalism will look like in 2108, but I am confident that it will be both the same and different. (I'm planning a sermon on the future of Unitarian Universalism one of these days.)

Second, as Unitarian Universalists we recognize that we are all responsible, each one of us, for our own conscience.

If I remember correctly, I was in the eighth grade when I was part of the confirmation class at the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. I remember having reservations about some of the doctrines we were expected to confirm as prospective members. But, finally, I set aside my doubts and went along with the program, unwilling to publicly dissent from what was expected of me, and rationalizing that if Bob Gibson, the youth minister, an intelligent,

well-educated young man – if Mr. Gibson accepted the resurrection of Christ, then who am I to deny it.

In this congregation, in this faith tradition, we would hope that our children would *not* accept theological doctrines just on the basis of authority. We would hope that we are bringing them up to think for themselves, to make their own decisions. (And we trust that they will voluntarily decide, when we are old and feeble, to embrace their duty to look after us.)

No one will tell you, here, what you *must* believe, but we will tell you that religious, theological, and moral questions are serious questions, questions that should engage us. We won't tell you who to vote for, but we will tell you that voting is important, and that it is your duty as a citizen to make well-informed decisions about who to vote for.

Through Sunday morning worship, adult education classes, and Chalice Circles, we hope to equip you for your spiritual journeys, to enable you to make informed choices. And if you need a helping hand, a gentle voice, or a sympathetic ear along the way, the caring committee and your ministers are available for you.

The third part of being a Unitarian Universalist that I'll mention this morning is the need to be part of a religious community, to be a member of a congregation. Just being skeptical about traditional Christian doctrines does not make you a Unitarian Universalist. The concept of being a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it, it's valuable concept. But, really, it's a concept that we need to move beyond.

And what, then, does it mean to be part of a UU congregation? First of all, we need to recognize that it means different things for different people, for people in different situations. We would not expect the same participation from, for example, the nurse who works on Sundays or the elderly resident of City Hospital or of Butterfield Trail Village's health unit that we would from the healthy, middle-aged empty nester. Ultimately, each of us must decide for ourselves what it means, to be part of the congregation. We are each responsible for our own conscience.

But if you ask me, I would suggest that showing up is the first step in becoming part of the congregation. Not every Sunday – life offers too many opportunities for that to be realistic – but most Sundays, and without looking to see who the speaker is, or what the topic is. And after showing up for a while, you're likely to notice that we have greeters and ushers, that someone appears to have made the coffee, that we have a choir, and that people in it seem to be having fun, that our children aren't downstairs by themselves but we have teachers for them, that someone has planted a lot of bulbs out there, that someone picks up the pieces after a child accidentally breaks a bottle. And maybe you'll feel an urge not to be left out, and you'll start making coffee or singing in the choir or tending our grounds. And eventually you'll discover that we have committees that plan things and keep the church running.

Somewhere along the way, on your journey toward full participation in this beloved community, it will occur to you that it must take money to keep this project going, and you may

want to be let in on the secret of where the money comes from. I don't want to tell you now, but you can catch up with me after the service.

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Here is our fourth and final choice for the morning. We choose how to live. Now, some people just seem to drift along through life without making any real choices, passively following the path of least resistance, making small choices but never big ones. They're missing something, aren't they? And they're not likely to get a second chance.

I have for you three questions that you might ask yourself, when you're taking stock of your life as you prepare to check out. Did I treat myself with respect? Did I treat others with respect? Did I take advantage of the opportunities that life offers? Of course, you don't have to wait til your near the end of the final act to ask yourself these questions. Occasional check-ups along the way can be beneficial.

Consider the first two questions: Did I treat myself with respect? Did I treat others with respect? They may remind you of the commandment in Leviticus, to love your neighbor as yourself [Leviticus 19:18b], which is endorsed by Jesus [Luke 10:27] and serves as the introduction to the parable of the good Samaritan. [Luke 10:30-37], and these two questions may remind you of the first of our seven principles, our affirmation of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

I won't try, at least not on this morning, to tell you what the criteria are for determining whether you are treating yourself and others with respect. This strikes me as a better exercise for individual contemplation or for small group discussion than for pontification from me. But I would submit to you that they're both important, both questions, and that they're inseparable.

My third question is Did I take advantage of the opportunities that life offers? By opportunities, I don't mean robbing banks, because that's where the money is, and I don't mean dropping soda bottles from high places to see whether they'll break. And I would not insist that the opportunities that I've taken advantage of – or not taken advantage of – would be the right ones for you.

For me, becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister at the age of 61 and accepting the call of a wonderful congregation in northwest Arkansas have been two wonderful opportunities, but I could develop a long list – from summers on my grandparents' farm in Connecticut to ten days in South Africa with fellow students from Wesley Seminary.

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Have I convinced *you* that the ultimate religious act is choosing? Have I convinced *myself*? No, I haven't convinced myself; I probably haven't convinced you. I'm still not sure what would make a religious act ultimate, and I'm not even sure what would make an act religious. But let's leave these questions for another day.