

The Unitarian Universalist Billboard
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Once a month, Kerry and I drive over to Tulsa for a meeting of Unitarian Universalist ministers. We can go pretty fast for most of the drive, but there's a stretch of U.S. 412 that's frustratingly slow, especially during rush hour. It's also not very scenic – too many billboards. One billboard in particular has caught my attention as we drive by. It's blank. When I first saw it, I started fantasizing about the Unitarian Universalist message that we could put on that billboard.

Unitarian Universalism is the religion to have
if you're having more than one.

A catchy slogan, but its premise, that having more than one religion is a practice to be encouraged, needs further discussion. Here's another:

Unitarian Universalism feels good,
as a religion should.

Feeling good is important, but it's not, in my opinion, what religion is primarily about. Let's try again:

Unitarian Universalism: Tastes great, less filling

That won't do. I want Unitarian Universalism to be *more* filling, not *less* filling.

Thinking of billboards, my mind sometimes wandered, and one day I remembered the old Burma-Shave roadside signs. How many of you remember them?

It gave McDonald
That needed charm
Hello Hollywood
Good-by Farm
Burma-Shave

A series of signs were spaced along the road. They told little stories, always ending with the brand name, Burma-Shave. Have any of you ever actually used Burma-Shave? Some of their poems were more or less related to the virtues of Burma-Shave, with an undercurrent of sexuality.

The big blue tube's
 Just like Louise
 You get a thrill
 From every squeeze
 Burma-Shave

Others were about driving:

If daisies are
 Your favorite flower
 Keep pushin' up
 Those miles-per-hour

It's about driving, with a public service message warning against excessive speed. Here's another of that type:

Altho insured
 Remember, kiddo
 They don't pay you
 They pay your widow

I like the ones that refer to themselves.

If you don't know
 Whose signs these are
 You haven't driven
 Very far!

And this one is both self-referential and about safe driving:

Slow down, Pa
 Sakes alive
 Ma missed signs
 Four and five

The saddest Burma-Shave poem of them all, for me, is this one:

Farewell O verse,
 Along the road.
 How sad to see,
 You're out of mode.
 Burma-Shave

But maybe this approach is not out of mode. Maybe it's time for nostalgia. We could line the rural highways, I thought to myself, with Burma-Shave style signs extolling the virtues of Unitarian Universalism.

Faith and reason
 No need to fight
 In any season
 Religion lite
 Unitarian Universalist Association

Emphasizing the partnership of faith and reason – I like that. But “religion lite” – I don't think that should be what we're about.

God is gone
 We are here
 Life long song
 Only beer?
www.uua.org

That may be a little too subtle for the highway. It appears to emphasize our tradition of humanism, but beyond that I'm not sure myself what it means. I think it's aimed at those who spend all their time in front of the tube, beer in hand. Here's one for the Latino audience:

Original sin?
 No way
 Come join with us,
 José
uua.org

This verse does state in a concise way our position on original sin. Our rejection of the doctrine of original sin provides the theological foundation for our covenant together, as congregations, “to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” But I wouldn't want folks to think that we don't take evil and sinfulness seriously.

What's next?

Sonnets
 Not bonnets
 Seeds
 Not beads

- What this says is that we like poetry, especially poetry that follows a classic form, such as the sonnet.
- It says that we don't have a dress code – you don't have to wear your bonnet.

- It says that we give our children seeds of learning, seeds that if properly nurtured will grow into beautiful flowers or strong trees. We don't just give them beads to play with and quickly lose.

Is that sufficiently obvious for the highway? I didn't think so. And I'm concerned that this would be read as fostering an anti-Catholic bias, if the beads are understood as the beads of the rosary.

The next one is even more concise, if nothing else:

Polity?
Frivolity
Prayer?
Where?

That's a model in the economical use of words, but I've been told that if you start your pitch with the word *polity* you lose half your audience right there. Polity, by the way, refers simply to how we govern ourselves, as in *politics*. We have congregational polity, with authority vested in our congregations, not, for example, in a bishop. And the apparently negative attitude toward prayer in this verse cries out for discussion. Let's try another:

Spir'tual growth
Intellectual honesty
We have both
Without the monast'ry

That works – I like the juxtaposition of the spiritual and the intellectual – but then you get to the punch line, *without the monast'ry* – monastery avoidance is not a big religious motivator these days.

No more creeds
But rational stands
Love-filled deeds
And helping hands

That's pretty good on our noncreedalism, on our rationality, and on our emphasis on making the world a better place. But some might find it weak on spirituality, and others might object that it emphasizes good deeds at the expense of action to end oppression.

A faith
For all seasons
A church
That has reasons

That starts out well, “a faith for all seasons,” – that is surely what we must be, a faith for *all* seasons – but some would object to our calling ourselves a *church*, rather than a society, congregation, or fellowship. And saying that we *have* reasons, without giving the reader a hint about what these reasons are, might lead some to suppose that we are some sort of gnostic cult, with secret knowledge.

The blank billboard on U.S. 412 remained an opportunity, an occasion for fantasy. But then, as we were coming home from Tulsa late one afternoon, I had the terrible thought, the nightmare, the horrible realization. Maybe that blank billboard *is* our Unitarian Universalist message. Maybe we’re already paying good money for that billboard, and we have nothing to say. Maybe that’s *our* billboard, and it’s blank because we have *no* message.

Or maybe in our cleverness we’re telling the world that if you’re a Unitarian Universalist you can believe whatever you want.

What cruel thoughts! I was in a state of distress all the rest of the way home.

The next day I started thinking. What is at the core of our faith? How would I summarize Unitarian Universalism so concisely that one could get it at 50 miles an hour?

Indeed, do we have a core? Or is ours a “donut religion” – sweet but not nourishing, with a big hole in the middle?

I think we do have a core. We are not fluff; we are not empty.

So here it is, the essence, the core of Unitarian Universalism in three short bullet points.

1. As Unitarian Universalists, we remember that we are the product of our history and traditions.
2. We believe that revelation is not sealed: new truth will forever remain available.
3. While we may not reach agreement about God, we do agree that God’s neighborhood is *here*.

Actually, this is only part of the core, as seen by one person at one time. I could expand this list, but three points are enough for one sermon.

Thinking about the essence, the core values of Unitarian Universalism is a useful exercise, and I commend it to you. We don’t all have to come up with the same list, but I am confident that there would be a lot of overlap among us.

Now let’s take a closer look, let’s explore together my three statements.

1. First, we are the product of our history and traditions.

Our roots are in Christianity, with spiritual ancestors who were declared heretics during the early, formative, centuries of the Common Era. Our roots are in the Protestant Reformation, both in Calvinism and in the Radical Reformation centered primarily in eastern Europe. Our roots are in developments in Protestantism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, especially in the United States, as we rejected inherited views of the nature of humanity and of the nature of God.

Here's a little story that I feel illustrates how we can find nourishment in our history. It's a story about Jesus, and it's from the New Testament, from the gospel according to Matthew. [Matt. 15:21-28]

21 ¶ Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.
 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."
 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."
 24 He answered her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."
 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."
 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."
 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Our first response to this story is likely to be confusion. What do sheep and dogs and crumbs and miraculous healings have to do with us? But this story, like so much of the Bible, requires interpretation. After all, it was written almost two thousand years ago, in circumstances very different from ours.

As you know, Jesus and his followers were Jews. The key thing here is that this woman, this mother who so rudely imposes herself on Jesus, she was *not* Jewish; she was a Canaanite. She asks Jesus for his help in curing her daughter.

This leads to our second response, which may be one of shock. We are accustomed to the Jesus who says "love your enemies," to the Jesus of the parable of the good Samaritan. But here Jesus says to this mother, "Get lost, lady, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I'm here to help *my* people, not those who are different. Helping your daughter would be like taking the children's food and throwing it to the dogs."

Our shock continues with the mother's rejoinder. She won't accept this dismissal by Jesus and argues right back. "You may be a Son of God, Jesus, but you're sure not behaving like one. Even the dogs, after all, eat the table scraps."

Jesus hears her; he thinks about what she has said; and he realizes that he had made a mistake, that he had gotten it wrong. His message of love could not be restricted to his own

people; it was a universal message. All people should share in love; all people should be treated as having dignity and worth. And Jesus grants her her wish.

It's an incredible story. We'd thought Jesus was perfect, and here he's shown as in need of remedial moral education. And his teacher in this patriarchal society was a woman. It's quite amazing that this story has been preserved in the Bible.

If we pull up our roots and discard them, we lose a lot; we are left adrift; and we risk going with the latest fad.

In my view, we should strengthen our roots. For example, we can maintain our identity and preserve our roots by raising our children to be Unitarian Universalists, to be Unitarian Universalists who understand where we have come from. I would like our children, as they mature, to be at the heart of the next generation of Unitarian Universalists.

2. Second, we believe that revelation is not sealed: new truth will forever remain available. This is my favorite line from one of my favorite hymns, "revelation is not sealed." That's from "Light of Ages and of Nations," [SLT ##189 and 190], by the great 19th century Unitarian hymn writer, Samuel Longfellow. We'll sing it later.

Our history has been one of change and innovation. We accept new ideas. We value truth, even if that means setting aside once cherished beliefs. We value experience: our own experience as well as that of people in the Bible.

For example, the choir director at my old congregation, back in Pennsylvania, recruited me to be in the cast of "Free To Be You and Me," the intergenerational show that we put on in June of '03. In three different scenes I was paired up with three wonderful young persons. While singing was not new for me, my acting experience was limited, and to sing and act while performing some complicated dance steps – complicated for me, at least – it was a challenge.

Being in the show gave me the experience of patience, as small children refused to be one hundred percent task oriented. It gave me the experience of humility, as I observed those with natural talent that I lack. It gave me the experience of witnessing creativity, as I saw what eventually became an excellent show slowly emerge from chaos.

So let us be open to the new.

You may feel uneasy here. You may sense a tension, indeed, a contradiction between the two principles. First I say "hold on to history, hold on to the past." Then I say "be open to the new, accept change."

Yes, there is tension here, but I think it's healthy tension. We must hold on to the past, but not uncritically. We must accept change, but not simply for the sake of change itself.

Let's go back to the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. It's a story that combines the two ideas. It is from our heritage, but it advocates change, the acceptance of new ideas, of

new enlightenment. It presents Jesus' exposure to a new idea. At first he resists; then he thinks about it; then he realizes that it's a good idea; then he embraces it.

Let our roots ever be sunk deep, and may they be well secured, but let us always be open to new ideas, to new people, to change. As we ask in the hymn we sang earlier, "Spirit of Life," [SLT #123] "roots hold me close, wings set me free."

3. Third, while we may not reach agreement about God, we do agree that God's neighborhood is *here*.

My emphasis in this affirmation is on "here," not "God." We may have different concepts of God, and different views on the usefulness of the word "God". Personally, I find the image, the metaphor *God* too valuable to give up, once we set aside the impossible and acknowledge the unknowable. Regardless of our differences, as Unitarian Universalists we agree pretty well that our focus should be on *this* world, not on the *next* one, on *this* realm, not on some utopian realm beyond time and space.

We want our world to be one of peace, justice, love, and hope. We realize full well that we do not have such a world now. We do not await or expect the second coming of Christ to bring about the world of our dreams. We do not rely on the miraculous intervention of God. To the extent that God works in the world, it must be through humanity. The only hands that God has are ours, our hands.

What then are we to do? How do we, as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination, work to bring about the realm of peace, justice, love, and hope?

I would like to suggest six things that I think we can do, regardless of our political persuasion.

First, we can raise our children – and our grandchildren and all the children of this religious community – to have good values. We do that, primarily, by setting a good example for them.

Second, we can raise questions – questions about war, questions about global warming. We can ask questions – of ourselves, of each other, of our neighbors, of our leaders in Washington.

Third, next year will be another election year. We can vote. We can encourage others to vote. We can participate in political campaigns, with our time or our treasure. We had a special election a while back, don't forget, that was decided by one vote. So never assume that your vote won't make a difference.

Fourth, we can respond to needs and injustices. We can feed the hungry and provide shelter for the homeless. We can respond with a voice of moral outrage when our society visits injustice and oppression on our fellow human beings because, for example, of their race, sexual orientation, or religion.

Fifth, we can support those in this congregation who are working to help those who suffer, to help the victims of society, to help bring about peace, justice, love and hope. This congregation has many.

Sixth, and finally, we can be welcoming to those who would join us here. For I believe that Unitarian Universalism is a force for good in the world, and our effectiveness will be enhanced by greater numbers. As school starts and the fall season begins, it's a great time to spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism.

To close, here is one last Burma-Shave attempt:

Our faith in love
Our love in deeds
Our lives transcend
Our earthly needs

Amen.