

Can You Keep a Secret?
Rev. Dave Hunter
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville
April 15, 2007

Judging by our numbers, our numbers nationwide, the number of Unitarian Universalists, I would say that the answer to my question is, yes, we can keep a secret, we can keep it quite well, thank you. We *can* keep Unitarian Universalism to ourselves. But *should* we? That is the *real* question.

How many of you were brought up as Unitarians or Universalists or as Unitarian Universalists? [*show of hands*]

Like most of you, I found Unitarian Universalism as an adult. I found our faith through marriage. How many of you acquired your UU faith from a spouse or partner? [*show of hands*]

Actually, my case is more complicated. My first wife, though a UU, did *not* let me in on the secret of Unitarian Universalism. After a wedding in her church, in suburban Washington, we didn't go back to church again. My second marriage began in another Unitarian Universalist church, in suburban Philadelphia, 26 years ago, and Kerry Mueller, my second and permanent wife, *did* invite me to come to church with her.

* * *

Here are three stories of how people found Unitarian Universalism, of how people found us despite our tendency to keep our religious faith to ourselves.

1. Sarah was a dry cleaner.

Actually, I should start this way:

Once upon a time, there was a dry cleaner, and her name was Sarah. Sarah was a conscientious dry cleaner, and before putting the clothes into the dry cleaning machine, she would check the pockets. One afternoon, going through the five pockets of a man's sports jacket, she found a flyer [*pull flyer from pocket*]. The flyer advertized a forum on workplace environmental hazards, to be held at the town's Unitarian Universalist church, on April 20, which was just a few days away. This was a topic of interest to Sarah, and she decided to attend.

But then in looking more closely at the flyer, she discovered that the date of the forum was April 20, six years ago.

She was disappointed, but she decided to look at the church's website, to see if they were *currently* doing anything on the environment. On the website, she didn't find what she *thought* she was looking for, but she found enough that intrigued, challenged, and invited her, that she decided to visit on Sunday, and she's been going to that church ever since.

2. Here's another story, about Jerry. While Sarah's story actually has a kernel of truth behind it, this one I made up entirely – but maybe during coffee hour one of you will tell me that it reminds you of how *you* found *this* congregation.

It was Saturday night, and Jerry was out on a date. They had left the movie and he was looking for a secluded place to park for a while, to discuss the movie with his date. He had stumbled onto a lonely country road, but there was no shoulder to pull off onto. Then, up ahead, he saw the sign for a church, and had the inspiration to pull into the church parking lot. As he pulled to a stop, he whimsically said a silent prayer: "Dear God, if you bring me success tonight, I'll come back here to church in the morning."

I'll spare you the details, but he *did* come back the next morning – did I mention that it was a Unitarian Universalist church? He liked what he heard and how it felt, and the congregation's hospitality made him feel at home.

3. Here's another story that might have happened; it's about Jean. Actually, it's more about a building. The building was in an older city. The city had been in decline for decades; its industrial base had gradually shut down. But one neighborhood was experiencing the prospect of gentrification. Starbucks was coming to a building that had had many uses in its 130-year history. It had been remodeled many times, and few would have guessed that it began its life as a church.

One day, during a lull in business, Jean was rummaging through a closet in the cellar, under a stairwell. It was the kind of closet that you put things into but never take things out of. Jean felt like an archeologist, digging through the layers of ancient civilizations. In the very back of the closet was a pile of what looked like about a half dozen books. Using a broom handle, she pulled them out and discovered that they were hymnals, damaged beyond belief by mold and mildew. She opened one at random [*hold up **Church Harmonies***], and here is what she read [*pianist start playing #144, Singing the Living Tradition*]:

The morn of peace is beaming–
Its glory will appear;
Behold its early gleaming,
The day is drawing near;
The spear shall then be broken,
And sheathed the glittering sword–
The olive be the token,
And Peace the greeting word. [*pianist stop*]

[*Church Harmonies: A Collection of Hymns and Tunes for the Use of Congregations* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1905 (originally published 1873), #393, words by Mrs. Colburn, set to WEBB, #144 in SLT)]

Jean felt drawn by this message of peace. She thought of a President who claimed to be a Christian, but who had led her nation into a war whose purpose escaped her.

The hymnal, she discovered, was that of the Universalist Church, and that evening she did a Google search on “Universalist Church.” The top hit was the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the remaining nine listings on Google’s first page were all Unitarian Universalist congregations. [checked April 9, 2007] After an hour of exploring the websites and locating the nearest UU church and reading *its* website, she knew that she had found her spiritual home.

* * *

There must be easier ways to find a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Many people come to a church for the first time at the invitation of a friend. That friend could be you.

But it’s hard to invite a friend to come with you on Sunday morning if you can’t tell them what your congregation is about. We despair at knowing how to describe a creedless faith. Have you heard about elevator speeches? Here’s the theory of the elevator speech. We should be prepared, in the time it takes an elevator to go from the 10th floor to the ground floor, to explain Unitarian Universalism, in our own words, and in a positive, affirmative way.

How many of you have an elevator speech ready to go? [*show of hands*] I’d like to have a workshop on elevator speeches later this spring.

But isn’t it high time I had my *own* elevator speech? That’s the question I asked myself a year ago, while in the midst of the search process.

My first idea was to rely on the principles and purposes that were adopted by our General Assemblies. You can find them, by the way, in your hymnal [*hold up SLT*]; turn a page back from hymn number one. I tried to put our principles in my own words, perhaps giving them my own slant:

- We believe in people – they’re not inherently evil, but have the possibility, if properly nurtured, of being pretty good, though certainly not perfect.
- We believe that people should treat each other well – the way you were taught in kindergarten – and that we should build a society grounded on justice.
- We believe that we should accept people as they are, but encourage them to sink their roots deeper and let their wings carry them higher.

- We believe that the truth will set us free, and that meaning is something you search for, not something that you're given.
- We believe in democracy, and in the institutions that make democracy possible, and that enable it to thrive.
- We believe that we live in the same world as everyone else; it's an increasingly small world, and we'd better learn to share it.
- We believe that we are a part of the interdependent web of *all* existence, and that we need to remember that we are *only* a part – perhaps not even the most important part.

Not a bad paraphrase, I thought to myself, but too long for most elevator rides.

Here's the next product of my brainstorming:

- Unitarian Universalism is the common ground of all the world's religions; it's what they all agree on.

I think that something like this is what attracts some people to Unitarian Universalism, and we do acknowledge as one of our sources, "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual lives."

But then I asked myself, "What is it that all the world's religions agree on? What *is* the common ground? Am I *sure* there *is* a common ground?" As I tried to think about this, it was not answers that came to me, but more questions: "Which religions would I include? And how do I define *religion*, anyway?"

I could see that I was getting into deeper and deeper trouble and should cut my losses and try a different approach.

The next day I was in Center City Philadelphia. While I was walking down Market Street, my mind returned to the problem of defining Unitarian Universalism, and I was reminded of a line from a novel: "The girls had been raised Unitarian Universalist, which seemed a nice, sensible compromise between having no religion at all and having to lie about what we believe. Enough religion to be respectable, but not enough to get in the way." [from Marge Piercy, *Fly Away Home*, as quoted in Tom Owen-Towle, *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation* (Boston: UUA, Skinner House Books, 2004), p. 57]

Perhaps I should simply say, in my elevator speech–

- Ours is the church for people who are not religious.

That's simple, easy to remember. I'm sure some people could relate to it immediately, but it left me disturbed and uneasy. I felt bound to protest: *we are* religious.

At that point I found myself in front of a ten-story building. I decided to ride up to the top floor, and then try out my elevator speech on whoever was in the elevator for the downward trip. I wasn't sure what I would say, but I thought the time had come to just do it.

What I would have learned, had I bothered to look at the building's directory, was that the top several floors were occupied by an evangelical Christian missionary organization. As the elevator doors closed for the descent to the lobby [*pianist start SLT #42*], music started playing [*SCHOENSTER HERR JESU, #42 in SLT*] and everyone started to sing:

Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nature,

But as they started to sing these traditional words, I was inspired – or perhaps crazed – to try to out-sing them with somewhat different words:

Our brother, Jesus
Teacher to the nations,

I don't see Jesus as our lord or as a ruler, but as our brother and as a teacher.

They continued:

O Thou of God and man the Son,
Thee will I cherish,
Thee will I honor,
Thou, my Soul's Glory, Joy, and Crown.

As they sang, I tried to compete. I sang:

At home today as you were then,
You are my neighbor,
Though hid in mystery,
Your vision still inspires today.

I would *reject* the idea of Jesus as simultaneously human and divine, at least, as divine in a unique way, but I certainly acknowledge that Jesus's vision of the kingdom of God, or of the realm of peace and justice, can still inspire us today.

It was a memorable elevator ride. [*pianist stop*]

* * *

If we are to share our Unitarian Universalist good news, we must know what it is. If we don't ourselves know what our secret is, how can we share it with others?

So here it is, as I see it, at least as I see it this morning – here it is, our Unitarian Universalist secret, in two parts. First, Unitarian Universalism *is* a religion, and, second, ours is a *saving* message. In short, we are a religion that offers salvation. Let's take a look at these two claims, one at a time.

First, Unitarian Universalism is a religion. This means a number of things.

We are *not* a social club. Though we have good times together, and enjoy each other's company, we are not a club. We have a deeper purpose.

We are *not* a sect or a cult. We're not exclusive, covert, or fly-by-night. We've been around for centuries; we're mainstream; we're respectable, though some might regret or deny this.

We are *not* a political organization. While our commitment is to *this* world, not the *next* one, and while we hope to be known by our deeds and not by a creed, we are *not* Amnesty International or the ACLU, and certainly not the Democratic Party.

We grapple with religious questions, questions that humanity has struggled with for centuries, indeed, for millennia, fundamental questions:

- We are alive – how shall we live? how shall we use our precious lives?
- We know that someday we will not be alive, that we will die – how does this awareness of inevitable death affect our view of the world, the way we treat others, and the way we live our lives?

These are hard questions. We cannot expect *simple* answers. We *can* expect our answers to evolve, as we mature.

We grapple with religious questions *in community*. As the word *religion* suggests, we are *bound together* as we go through life, supporting each other, sometimes challenging each other. A religious community is not just a bunch of people, but it is people who have a purpose beyond themselves, who even have a sense of mystery beyond themselves.

Those are some of the reasons why we should have no hesitation to acknowledge that Unitarian Universalism is a religion, that we are religious people, people of faith.

Our second secret – which we should proclaim – is that we have a saving message, we offer salvation. Here's what that means.

We can say to each person, “you are a person of worth and dignity.” To use a traditional metaphor, we are all created in the image of God. That means that *no one* need feel the burden of original sin; that means that *no one* need fear punishment after death. A loving God would not suffer anyone to endure eternal torment.

Here’s another aspect of our saving message: No matter what disaster may visit a person, Katrina, for example, or cancer, we would *not* say that it is the will of God.

Two other aspects of salvation should be mentioned. Salvation does *not* mean that we can sit on our duff and wait for riches or enlightenment to come *to* us. No, *we* are responsible – we have to figure out *for ourselves* how to live. We can get it *wrong*, and this life is not a practice session – this is *it!*

Equally important, salvation, at its core, is *not* an individual matter. We’re all in this together. I can hardly be satisfied if I am living in luxury while the rest of my family is impoverished. My family can hardly be satisfied if the rest of my town lives in destitution. The affluent nations can hardly be satisfied if the majority of the world is afflicted by poverty, war, and disease.

And if your idea of salvation is heaven, I would argue that the same principle applies: heaven would be *unacceptable*, if less fortunate people had been sent to the *other* place.

The kingdom of God, the realm of peace and justice – it’s possible, but we’re not there yet. It is our vision – may it be a vision that inspires and guides us.

Now is the time to give up our secret, to share our faith.

* * *

A number of years ago, a Unitarian Universalist minister, in church, on Sunday morning, did something very radical, some would say crazy, in very bad taste. I’m not sure what his topic was that morning, perhaps the AIDS epidemic, but he passed out to members of his congregation little balloon-like devices used to prevent disease and conception. It hit the wire services, if I remember correctly.

This morning, I propose to do something even more radical. I have here bumper stickers [*hold them up*], bumper stickers with Unitarian Universalist messages. With one of these on your car, you spread the good news of Unitarian Universalism, you share our secret. And you don’t have to say a word – unless, of course, someone asks you to explain, for example, “Different people, different beliefs, one faith” or “A different Trinity: respect, freedom, justice.” I did a quick survey last Sunday. I checked the cars in our parking lot, and there were quite a few without Unitarian Universalist bumper stickers.

Here's the catch. Don't take one unless you agree to put it on your car before you leave for home. Putting it on after you get home isn't good enough; I'm afraid it will gather dust and be forgotten. It's got to be *now*. There are six different messages ["Civil marriage is a civil right," "The uncommon denomination," "Different people, different beliefs, one faith," "Room for different beliefs, yours," "A different Trinity: respect, freedom, justice," and "Searching for a liberal religious home?"]; if you want to trade, that's fine. Any takers? I have 409 and paper towels with me, if you need to clean your bumper. [*distribute them*]

Unitarian Universalism is a religion, a wonderful religion. There are many people out there looking for what we have. Let us invite them in. We have a message of salvation. The world would be a better place if there were more Unitarian Universalists. Let us share our good news. Amen.