

What This Unitarian Universalist Believes
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As you may know, while Kerry and I were away for a few weeks earlier in the summer, Kerry performed a civil union ceremony for two women in New Jersey, two wonderful women. As is often the case with weddings, it didn't start on time, and the photographer and I found ourselves in conversation during the wait. Or, at least I can imagine a conversation between us.

He had heard that Kerry was a Unitarian Universalist, and he was curious about what that meant. When he discovered that I was married to Kerry, and that I was a Unitarian Universalist, too, he took advantage of the waiting time to ask a few questions.

“What do you Unitarian Universalists believe?” he asked.

“He's not talking to me, is he?” I asked myself, as I looked around to see if anyone else was nearby, but no such luck. “Ours is a creedless faith,” I began. “There's no prescribed dogma that Unitarian Universalists are required to accept. We agree that how we live is more important than what we believe. We are bound together by a covenant – by an understanding of how we treat each other, how we relate to one another – by a covenant rather than by a creed.”

“OK, deeds not creeds,” he said, summarizing what he had heard, “that's all well and good, but you must believe *something*. What *is* it that you Universal Unitarians believe?”

I clearly hadn't gotten through to him. So I tried again, from a different angle. “The underlying question,” I responded, “is authority. What has authority in our lives? What is the source of religious authority?”

“For us the ultimate authority is in each individual. We have the freedom – and the responsibility – to decide for ourselves.

- We all must decide how to live,
- we must decide what's important,
- we must decide how we should treat others.

The preacher on Sunday morning isn't going to give us the answers.”

“OK, I understand,” he said – though I had my doubts about that – “but when you get beyond the preliminaries, what is it, really, what is it that you Unitarian Unificationists believe?”

I began to be afraid I would run out of ways to answer him. Perhaps it would be easier just to have a creed and be done with it. I could still recite the Apostles' Creed from my Presbyterian days. Why can't I do as well with Unitarian Universalism? I tried again.

“For us, religious questions are as important, probably more important, than religious answers. We take religious questions seriously. In our church, back in Arkansas, we have Chalice Circles. These are small groups of people who meet usually twice a month to discuss important questions, religious questions, questions that go deeper than what you can do in a coffee hour conversation. But, we don’t try to impose our answers on others in the group.”

I thought he might ask how he could join a Chalice Circle, but he went right back to the same old question. “Really,” he said, “that’s all swell and good, but there must be *something* you Unilateral Unitarians believe – what is it?”

I pretended I hadn’t heard his question, and just kept on going with my explanation. “For us, perhaps the most basic question is how shall I live, what should I do with my life, knowing that my time here on earth is short, knowing that this is it – it’s not a practice session for another life – knowing that death will end it all too soon, knowing that I care about what happens after I’m gone.”

He was beginning to look frustrated. “You keep giving me *questions*,” he complained, “I want to know what your *answers* are. What do you Unitarian Univisionists *believe*?”

I thought it was time to tell him about our principles and purposes. They’re not a creed, of course, but they do seem to bind us together. I really should memorize them, I thought to myself. It would make life easier. If I carried a hymnal with me, then I would always have quick access to them. You just turn to hymn number one and then turn back a page. Here’s how I continued the conversation.

“Unitarian Universalist congregations have agreed to affirm and promote ‘the inherent worth and dignity of every person.’”

Before I had a chance to explain what that meant, he jumped on what I had said. “So you believe in the inherent dignity and worth of every person. Big deal! What does *that* mean? I think I know what ‘and’ and ‘of’ mean, but ‘inherent,’ ‘worth,’ ‘dignity’? – they’re too slippery for me. It seems to me that your statement is either meaningless or it’s obviously false. And *every* person? If you’re saying that Osama Ben Laden or Adolph Hitler have worth and dignity – that’s just crazy!”

I considered rebutting him.

- Inherent worth and dignity means that everyone has potential – but some throw it away.
- It means that we don’t give up on people – there’s always hope.
- It means we’ve rejected the doctrine of original sin: humans aren’t inherently bad; we don’t inherit the sins of our parents and grandparents, let alone the sin of

Adam and Eve. And we're not sure that their eating the forbidden fruit was a sin at all.

It's not an empirical statement, but a statement of how we choose to view people, a statement of aspiration and hope. We aspire to the creation of a world in which the inherent worth and dignity of every person would be manifest, where we could all live together in a world of mutual respect.

But while I was gathering together my somewhat confused thoughts, he repeated his question: "Just tell me," he pleaded, "what do you Universal Unicellularists believe?"

I decided to go to the other end of the seven principles – I have trouble keeping track of the ones in the middle.

"We have respect for the interdependent web of all existence," I told him. "And we recognize," I continued, "that we are a *part* of that interdependent web. We're not separate from it, or above it. We're all in this together."

He paused for a moment, then he responded. "That's just another feel good statement. It's like cotton candy rather than doctrine. It's sweet but it dissolves when you try to engage it. But I think I see the problem. I want to know where you Unicameral Universalists stand on *religious* questions, and you keep talking about moral or political or philosophical stuff."

"But you've got me confused," he continued. "First you said that all men – sorry, all men and women – have inherent worth and dignity, then you said – or at least you implied – that we humans aren't really any more important than, say, gophers or possums or bumble bees. Does that mean that you believe that gophers and possums and bumble bees have inherent dignity and worth? That's absurd!"

I looked around, hoping for a sign that the wedding was about to begin, or that Kerry was nearby and I could pass the inquisitive photographer on to her. She was getting paid for this, after all, I was just the chauffeur. Are we more worthy, are we better than gophers and possums and bumble bees? I decided to admit my ignorance.

"I don't know what to say about gophers and possums and bumble bees," I told him, "but I *do* know that we human beings are the ones who have to take responsibility for our dear Mother Earth. We've messed the planet up. Now it's up to us to save her. If we want the earth to be a fit place for our grandchildren to live – and for gophers and possums and bumble bees, too – then we need to repent. We need to rethink our ways – that's what repent means, to think again – we need to rethink our ways and radically reform how we live, how we are treating our common home."

"I take seriously," I continued, "what God says in the first chapter of Genesis." I figured that a preemptive strike with the Bible would throw him off guard. "Do you remember

Day Six of the creation story?" Before he had a chance to answer I plunged ahead. Won't he be impressed that I know it from memory, I said to myself.

26 ¶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26, NRSV)

"That means," I explained, "that *we* have responsibility. God didn't give us dominion just so that we could destroy what God had created. God had already declared his creation to be *good*. It's our job to preserve it. We are God's stewards."

I didn't realize I had painted myself into a corner.

"So," he interrupted, "you Unitarian Univocalists believe in God. Why didn't you say that earlier?"

"Some Unitarian Universalists believe in God;" I responded, "some don't; some aren't sure; some don't think it's a very important question."

"I see," he said, though I suspected he didn't. "But what about *you*, do you believe in God?"

I gave him my standard answer. "If you can define *God* for me, then I'll tell you – or I'll try to tell you – whether I believe in God."

He rejected my terms. "Nothing doing. I just mean God, what everyone means by God, you don't need a definition. God is just God."

I decided to take the offensive. Now I'll ask *him* some questions. "Well, tell me this. Do you consider God to be omnipotent, all powerful?"

He hesitated just for a moment and then responded, "Of course, you can't imagine anyone more powerful than God."

I realized I should be ashamed of myself, but I could not resist the temptation to lead him into a trap. "And does this God of yours *love* us?" I asked.

This time he didn't hesitate, but walked right into my trap. "Yes, of course God loves us. *God is love.*"

"OK, if God is all powerful, if God is able to do anything God wants, and if God loves us, if God loves us the way a mother loves her child, then why does God let us suffer? Why does God allow war and disease and earthquakes? Why does God allow planes to crash? Why

does God permit HIV AIDS to decimate our population? Why does God allow babies to die of starvation? What kind of God is this?"

"Interesting questions," he responded. And then, escaping my trap, he turned them back on me. "How would a Univalent Universalist answer them?"

"Some would say," I responded, "that God doesn't exist anyway, so we don't have to bother with such questions. Some would say that the existence of this dilemma – the contradiction between a powerful God and a loving God – that this dilemma proves that a God of the traditional sort can't exist. Some would say—"

But he interrupted before I could finish the sentence. "But what would *you* say?" he demanded.

"It seems to me," I replied, "that we can think of God as all powerful, as omnipotent, *or* we can think of God as loving and good, but we can't really think of God as having both features simultaneously. Yet, both are important ideas, important attributes of God, or, I should say, important attributes of our *concept* of God."

"So you're not willing to commit yourself on the question of whether God exists," he concluded.

"Actually," I said, "I call myself a post-humanist metaphorical theist."

"That's a conversation stopper," he admitted. There was a brief pause in our conversation, then he resumed, "you've evaded the God question pretty well. What about Jesus?"

"What *about* Jesus?" I replied.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" he asked.

"There was such a man, if that's what you mean," I answered. "Jesus lived in the early decades of the first century of the common era. He was a Jew. He was executed by the Romans for what he taught, for the way he lived, and the example he provided to others."

This didn't satisfy him. "Don't you remember the Apostles' Creed?" he said, "what about 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead'?"

"That leaves out a lot, doesn't it," I replied, "his life, his teachings. He would eat with anyone, no matter how poor or disreputable. He was an advocate for the poor; he practiced nonviolence; he learned this his message of hope was not only for his own people, the Jews, but for *all* of humanity."

This didn't satisfy him, either. "But do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? That's the heart of the matter."

I answered his question with one of my own. "And who do *you* say that Jesus is?"

"Good question," he responded, "but I want to hear *your* answer."

"We Unitarian Universalists are *Unitarians*, not Trinitarians. That means that whoever Jesus might have been, he was *not* God."

"But," he objected, "if Jesus wasn't God, then his death on the cross was not a sufficient sacrifice to atone for the infinite sin of humanity."

"We Unitarian Universalists," I continued, "are *Universalists*. That means, and I'm speaking metaphorically here, that means that all souls are ultimately reconciled to God, that no one will spend eternity in hell, and therefore that humanity does not need to be saved."

"You leave me speechless," he said, somewhat paradoxically. "You raise so many questions. If there's no threat of hell, what incentive do you have to be good? Indeed, if Jesus isn't our Lord and Savior, why bother with worship? Why have a religion? Indeed, what makes Uniquivocal Unitarianism a religion, anyway?"

He had clearly gotten himself into a muddle. Or perhaps he had gotten *me* into a muddle. But without pressing any of the questions he had just asked, he went on to a new one. "What do Unipolar Universalists believe about death?"

That I knew how to answer, or at least how to evade. "Unitarian Universalists don't all have the same beliefs about death," I started.

"Some believe that when you die you're dead. Period, end of story. But many of these would say, we live on in the memories of those who survive us; we live on in our works. Others would say that when we die our souls merge with the Spirit of Life, that we live on, in some sense, but without individual consciousness.

"Some believe that heaven awaits us, either directly or after a period of purification. Others believe that reincarnation is our fate.

"Some of us expect a surprise and view attempts to describe what happens after death as poetry, as attempts to express in metaphor what is inaccessible to us. Others just plain don't know, and are in no particular hurry to find out."

"And you," he queried, "what do *you* believe about death?"

"As I see it," I answered him, "heaven and hell are here on this planet, in this dimension, if they are anywhere. We should work together to eliminate the hell that traps too many people.

We should work together to create heaven, or the kingdom of God, right here. We need to create the realm of peace and justice; we need to work towards a sustainable earth. We should not look for salvation in another life time, in another time or place. Nor should we expect any supernatural intervention to save us. It's up to *us*. It's *our* responsibility."

"By the way," he said, "I noticed, when you were discussing Jesus, that you didn't mention his miracles. Why did you leave them out?"

"It's interesting," I replied, "that two hundred years ago, our Unitarian forbears in this country considered the miracles to be quite important, as providing proof of the special nature of Jesus. But they also believed in reason; they believed in examining the books of the Bible in the same way that scholars would examine other ancient texts. As a result, it became increasingly difficult for them to accept as reliable, or as literally true, the accounts in the gospels of Jesus's miracles."

"So you Universal Unicyclists reject miracles," he concluded.

"It depends on what you mean by a miracle," I replied.

"You sure do like to play with words," he sighed.

"What else would you expect from someone trained in philosophy, law, and theology?" I asked rhetorically.

"I think the world abounds in miracles. Consider the beauty of the flowers over there, or that baby's smile, or the miracle of the love that can endure between two people for decades." I nodded towards the two brides. "Indeed, it's a miracle that each of us is alive. Just consider the odds! My parents, their parents, and so on – they all had to get together, at the right time. And then there's the ultimate miracle – that there is something rather than nothing, that the universe exists, that evolution has led to this."

"That leads to another question," he continued, "what's the Unifoliate Unilocular view of the Bible? Do you accept it?"

"We take the Bible seriously but not literally," I explained. "The Bible raises more questions than it answers. The Bible offers us many rules for living, but they're not all good ones. The Bible is the one book to have, if you're having only one."

At that point the pianist started to play, and I knew that I was off the hook. But he insisted on asking one more question. "If you could sum it all up, what is the essence of Unitarian Universalism? Can you put it in one word?"

"As a wise woman in our congregation reminded me recently," I replied, "that one word is *love* – abundant, eternal, irrepressible, inexhaustible, mysterious, miraculous, melodious

love.” Beneath all the layers, beneath all the fluff and nonsense, the bedrock, the core, the essence is love, nothing but love.”

But by then he was gone, already snapping picture after picture, as the brides came down the aisle.