

Welcome/Intro

Good morning and welcome, to all who are searching for their own personal religious answers, and especially to those whose answers seem to generate more questions. Please respond to my welcome phrases with "Welcome Home."

- To those who are visiting today and those who are the founders of this fellowship, and everyone in between, "*Welcome Home!*"
- To those who are young and those who are old, and everyone in between "*Welcome Home!*"
- To those who are gay and those who are straight, and everyone in between, "*Welcome Home!*"
- To athletes and disabled persons and everyone in between, "*Welcome Home!*"
- To all who seek and question and mourn and celebrate, "*Welcome Home!*"

We always welcome guests to our community and hope you will find something here for yourself and for others. Guests please stand or raise your hand.

Responsive Reading: #594 Principles and Purposes for All of Us

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

We believe that each and every person is important.

We affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

We believe that all people should be treated fairly.

We affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.

We believe that our churches are places where all people are accepted, and where we keep on learning together.

We affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.

We affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

We believe that all people should have a voice and a vote about the things which concern them.

We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

*We believe that we should work for a peaceful, fair,
and free world.*

We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all
existence of which we are a part.

We believe that we should care for our planet earth.

SERMON:

Here are some quotes from a couple of famous people:

"Prayer means that I sit consciously inside of the experience of whatever
the divine, holy is. And then I incorporate that into myself and I'm able
to live it out better than I would otherwise.

God works thru human beings in being able to be part of the God process.
Prayer is something you are, not something you do.

I see the bible as teaching three things:

1. Every person is created in God's image and must be treated as holy.
2. Every person is loved for just what they are.
3. Everyone is called to be all they are capable of being.

How do you live that out?

Organized religion has become behavior control. You need to do what is
right because it's right.

The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects."

When you hear the words that I read, you probably believe that these are
the words of one or more Unitarians. If these people aren't Unitarians,
they should be, right? But these are the words of a member of United
Church of Christ and an Episcopalian. In fact you may know them: U.S.
President Barack Obama and Bishop John Shelby Spong.

These and many others seem to have the same theology and philosophy as we
do, yet even when confronted, they tell us that "Unitarians are great
people, but I belong at UCC or with other Episcopalians."

What do they get there that they don't find with us? Obama says it's
spiritual community. Spong says:

"It would be too easy for me to be a Unitarian. ... It is by living in the
tension between the past and the future that my Christian life is formed.
... I can appreciate my Unitarian friends who do not want to be bothered by
ideas that make little sense today, but I could not be me if I were not

caught between the experience of the past and the articulation of that experience in the words and concepts of today."

My nephew David did not attend church or Sunday School very much growing up, but when he did, it was at Unitarian church. He almost failed his Eagle Scout award exam because he didn't seem sufficiently committed to a belief in God. While he was finishing his Aeronautical Engineering degree at Purdue University and interning at NASA, (this guy is pretty bright and scientific), he fell in love with Lori, a fundamentalist Christian. As part of their relationship and eventual marriage, he "gave his life to Jesus."

When I inquired several years later how he was able to change his faith perspective so drastically, he reminded me that he had been diagnosed with ADHD in college because he couldn't concentrate. But when he took Jesus into his life, he had no more problems with ADHD. He is now a member of a Methodist church, very focused but still burning with energy.

To paraphrase a once popular song, "What do they have that we don't have??"

Consider Dr. Martin Luther King and his wife, Coretta Scott King. She says: "Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin, and Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston."

"We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."

So what do we hear as reasons why these capable, dedicated, Unitarian-like people have chosen other faith communities?

1. Spong says that he still remains inspired by and attached to the ritual decades-long history of the Episcopalian religion and finds his identity in excavating the truths that its doctrines were based upon.
2. Obama has said that he needs more warmth and a spontaneous sense of community rather than so much intellectual exercise.
3. Mrs. King felt that Unitarianism would not speak to the community that she and her husband wished to serve.
4. Nephew David says that what matters to him is personal "results."

There's another story that happened right here when Bishop Spong came to speak, sponsored by this congregation. One woman who attended his lecture saw the Unitarian literature that was available and said that she wished that she had known about us a long time ago, but that now she was so connected to the people in her Presbyterian church (although not theologically) that she couldn't imagine giving that up at this late date.

So we have a growing list of why we don't "have" these obvious Unitarians:

1. They didn't know we were here, when they needed us most.
2. They knew about us, but we didn't meet their needs:

- a. History and ritual
- b. Community warmth
- c. Life transformation
3. Social pressure.
4. A sense of spiritual support.

This begs the next question:

Do we even care? If so, why?

I would like to offer a bit of an answer as to why I care. I REALLY REALLY care, but I really, really didn't care until [1984], on the night that Ronald Reagan was re-elected to the US Presidency. We were members of a medium-sized Unitarian church in Wisconsin. These people were like extended family for us; in fact, we preferred spending time with them to contact with our own family members. But frankly, I didn't care if we ever got any new church members. These would just be "intruders" into our happy "family."

The assessment of Reagan's successful campaign was not completely that he had done such a great job for the country (according to the Republicans) but was partially attributable to the support of the Christian conservative right wing. I suddenly realized that if we did not grow and strengthen an institution like Unitarianism, we would be swallowed up by institutions that did not believe as I did or even respect my beliefs at all. It was sort of a small example of what was said about the Nazi's during the 1930s: "They came for the Jews, but I didn't object because I wasn't Jewish ..." until it reached the point of "and then when they came for me, there was no one at all to object."

So now I am pretty evangelical about Unitarianism. However, I do not believe that we should just be dragging people in just to build up our strength. Not only should we not even accept people who advocate harmful behavior, but I don't believe we should try to recruit those who don't match us theologically. If an individual's personal values are derived only from an imam or the pope or even the Queen, then I believe we wish them well---somewhere else. We also should not get caught appealing only to those who seem to be able to support us financially. Evangelism must be separate from survival, so the oft-heard comment that "we need more members so we can balance the budget" is not only immoral but probably self-defeating, since new members cost a congregation a certain amount.

That said, however, I believe we need to make ourselves more available to those who need us:

- people who are trying to "build their own theology,"
- people who can't seem to find a religious community that accepts the truth they have already found for themselves,
- people who want their children to be raised with religious questioning instead of religious answers.

First and most of all, this means we need to be outspoken Unitarians. In a philosophical or even political discussion with friends or co-workers, we can make the open statement, "I'm a Unitarian, and I feel that ..." and then, if the listener seems to feel the same, saying, "Sounds like you'd

like the Unitarian church." I like to wear this Chalice bracelet when I'm in groups of people. Sometimes people ask what it means; once it helped me discover that a long-time friend of mine on the other side of the country was also a Unitarian. I KNEW we had something in common!

Second, I think we CAN improve our fellowships and congregations toward some of the behaviors that others wish for: more demonstrable warmth, some special programming during the week, a little more ritual once in awhile, reaching out to those who are less fortunate or are discriminated against because of elements of their identity.

Third, we can respond to the needs of our own congregants, especially when they are new to the congregation. This is where I often fall short personally. My personal avenue into a new group is to volunteer to work at something. However, many new people arrive at our doors with their own particular emotional or situational needs. Being greeted with a request to serve on a committee sometimes sends them away just as quickly as they came. Of course, I don't think we need to become the social service agency for everyone who walks past the front door, but if someone comes to us looking for support in their day-to-day lives as they explore their own religious questions, we should provide as much of both as we can.

As Southern and Norton suggest in their book Cracking Your Congregation's Code, a typical newcomer is seeking to fulfill one or more of three main goals:

1. A spiritual basis and meaning of life that materialism has not been able to provide.
2. A need to belong.
3. A way to strengthen family structure.

If we first try to help them with what THEY are seeking, most will build THEMSELVES into strong, giving congregational members. Then this will be their religious home.

Fourth, I believe that we do not need to apologize for a commitment to values that are larger than just the preservation of our own congregation. Recently in one of our congregation's Board meetings, the Vice President said that she really respected me (the President) but that she sometimes thought I was more dedicated to Unitarianism than to our congregation itself. At first I was a little hurt, but then I realized that she was right, although I thought I had been a little more discrete than that. Later, though, I realized that I should be proud of that, although I am not whole-heartedly committed to the denomination itself but to the values that we read about earlier in the service—the seven Principles. I think our congregations should be equally committed to those Principles, or something similar—values outside ourselves, bigger than our own congregation. In order for those values to thrive, our denomination must thrive, and ergo our congregations must thrive.

You may remember a song from the Broadway musical Music Man, in which the leading lady describes the man of her dreams as being "more interested in me than he is in himself, and more interested in us than he is in me." Paraphrasing those lines, I would say that we want congregants who are

more interested in their congregation than they are in themselves, and more interested in Unitarianism than they are in their own congregation. However, these are not conflicting commitments. When we dedicate ourselves to our own congregation and its growth, we support those values that it represents, and in the end, we enhance our own lives.

So now would be a good time for each of us to ask ourselves:

1. Do I want this fellowship to grow?
2. If not, why not? If so, why?
3. If I recognize the value of strengthening this congregation, what am I willing to do to see that happen?
4. What might change here if we succeed in making this fellowship a religious home to more people? Is that OK?

Discussion

How did you first year of Unitarianism? Did it "hook" you at first? Why or why not?

Do we want to "spread our message" or are we happier keeping it to ourselves?

Closing Song: #1058 Be Ours a Religion

Be ours a religion which like sunshine goes everywhere—
Its temple all space, its shrine the good heart, its creed
all truth, its ritual works of love.