

Unitarian Universalists: Who Are We? What Do We Aspire to Be?

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Unitarian Universalism saved my life, so I owe quite a personal debt to our faith. Like so many of us who discover this religion, I was in crisis. It was the '70's when women were finding themselves and losing their husbands. I was one of them. I was in Lexington, KY, recently separated from my husband, and I was surprised to find that the Baptist church, where we had been attending, no longer wanted my services as a teacher for their young people—I was a sinner, you see. So there I was in my therapist's office, in tears, bemoaning the fact that I had lost not only my husband, but also my whole social structure. What was I to do? She answered, "Why don't you go over to the Unitarian Universalist church? There are a lot of divorced people over there."

And so I dared to venture out, frightened and insecure. I didn't go to the Sunday service, but to Friday night volley ball. It was a popular event, and I sat there on the sidelines through several games, while others rushed in to take their places, not noticing me. Then someone—a Black man—looked down at me and said, "Don't you want to play?" "Yes," I said, and he reached down and pulled me up into the game. His name was Titus, and he was from Africa, doing graduate work at the University of Kentucky. I had never been in a church where there were Black people. And so this Southern woman, who grew up in a small town in Louisiana in the '40's and '50's, was pulled into new life by a Black man. It was a moment I have never forgotten.

Not only was I allowed to teach the children at my new church, but I was immediately put on three committees. The next summer I was program chair. And seven years after that I was on my way to Starr King in Berkeley to become . . . well, I didn't know what. During my interview, Ron Cook, a teacher there, asked me what I wanted to do with my life, and I said simply, "I want to be all used up." Ron said, "Well, parish ministry should do that for you." I tell these stories because I want to witness to the power of a faith that said "yes" to me over and over again, and that made possible for me a life more rich and fulfilling than I could ever have imagined. This is a faith that has done that for many others as well, and I stand here grateful beyond words.

On the other hand, Unitarian Universalism, as it is so often practiced, drives me crazy. I find myself rather regularly saying, "I can't believe they did *that!*" How could this tradition that set

me free and nurtured me, a tradition that values the intellect, values reason, allow so many really contradictory, incomprehensible, really *ridiculous*, things to go on?

May I cite some examples:

The first time that I said to myself, “What is wrong with this picture?” was when I presented my first worship service at that fellowship in Lexington, KY. I was brought up a Roman Catholic and then later became a Southern Baptist, so naturally, I was fond of Jesus. So for my service, I decided to read from the New Testament and talk about Jesus. This caused an uproar like unto none the church had known for years. “We do not read the Bible here, and we do not mention Jesus,” I was told. That stance was . . . well, confusing to me, especially in light of the history of Unitarianism. But there are still many churches and fellowships where this kind of religious subject matter is, shall we say, unacceptable, even heretical.

Then when I went to seminary, a woman who was studying to become a UU minister lost her beloved dog, Wildfire. As I remember, she was a rabid vegetarian, but Wildfire chewed great bones from the butcher. Anyway, Wildfire died, and this woman organized a memorial service for her dog, and she invited all his canine friends in the seminary neighborhood to attend the service, a service which included communion. The Associated Press picked up the story, of course, and a picture went out all over the nation, with a dog sitting on its hind legs, taking communion. The article said that the attendees at the service “neither barked nor balked at the holy wafer.” Fortunately, this woman never did become one of our ministers.

A more current example: a UU church in my area spent the better part of two years arguing over whether or not the minister could use religious language. One group in the church proposed giving the minister a list of words that he could not use in the worship service—words . . . well, like “worship service” and of course “prayer” and “God.”

Another church in the district spent several years arguing over what color hands should be on their G.A. banner. It seems that their banner had three or four different colors of hands, and there was controversy over how many and what colors should appear there. There were charges of racism, back and forth. It is much easier for us to accuse one another of racism than it is for us to address with decisive action the devastating results of racism and poverty in this culture.

These kinds of conflicts are going on in too many of our churches, soaking up all of the institutional energy, while all around us—in our face—we see ecological indifference, a justice system gone terribly awry, growing hunger and homelessness. Where is the church? What is wrong with this picture?

Five years ago I wrote a monograph about the very subject of our conference this weekend, and I don't want to overlook what I said then, because it still stands. So I want to review that, briefly, but then I want to go deeper.

Five years ago, I said that we were losing members—we have continued to lose members, though not at the rate of the mainline churches, and we lost members again this past year, not many, but mainly in our largest churches.

Well, which churches are growing, then? The Mormons are growing. They require two years of missionary work from their young, and that 10 percent of income be given to the church. Fundamentalist churches are growing. Their message is clear: accept Jesus as your savior, and change your life. The mainline Protestant churches are losing out to what is known as the emergent church, where young people are flocking to hear the radical message that they should take seriously the words of Jesus, in his preferential option for the poor. Some Unitarian Universalists, when they become true seekers, decide to go elsewhere—to become Buddhists or Catholics or Jews. Somewhere, anywhere, where there is some serious commitment demanded, some real religion.

In that monograph, I started with a gentle analogy—I said that in human beings, often there is a shadow side to the qualities which we admire the most, and so there is in Unitarian Universalism a shadow side to our most positive qualities. We need to acknowledge that shadow side, reflect upon how it might be holding us back, and decide what changes we need to make, if we are to flourish as a movement.

The shadow side to our rich intellectual life is our distrust of the body and of emotion. This fear may be a partial explanation of our lack of diversity, in terms of race and class.

The shadow side to our strong tradition of the word is our reveling in words for their own sake, and never getting around to action.

The shadow side of our humanism, which is grounded in empiricism and the existential virtues of the human spirit, is a fear of the sacred.

The shadow side to our tolerance is our acceptance of inappropriate behavior by immature or destructive individuals. In the name of being “open” or “democratic,” we have created a radical cult of the individual and a concomitant disregard for the health and welfare of the community.

The shadow side of our theology of love and acceptance is that we are reluctant to acknowledge and confront evil in ourselves, in others, and the systemic evil in our society.

The shadow side of our free faith, with its ultimate measure being the individual conscience, is seen when we interpret that freedom as simply “freedom from” and not “freedom for.”

Well, that’s what I said then. But in preparing for this talk, I wanted to go deeper, I wanted to get under these cultural problems to see if I could find a common denominator. I have come to believe that our core problem, and the problem that must be addressed before other issues will be resolved, is this: *we are a religious movement that no longer takes religion seriously.* Now let me try to unpack that statement a bit.

Let’s begin at the beginning. What is religion, and why have human beings sought a religious life for so long as they have walked the earth?

Ever since the “Fall of Man,” as it is commonly called or, as I see it, our evolution into conscious beings who know we are going to die—the fall into consciousness, as it were—we have sought out the meaning of our existence. That search, expressed collectively and in community, is known as religion. We wish to participate in something larger than our individual concerns. Sometimes that desire is focused on a political system or a secular goal, but when it is focused on the spiritual dimension or the numinous, and when it is organized into a system with a history and practices and beliefs and a hierarchy of leaders, it is called a religion.

The religions of the world are different in certain ways, but they share certain similarities. For example, the prophets of the various religions are carriers of the numinous dimension, and they function to interpret that dimension to those of us who wish to mature spiritually. The church, the synagogue, the temple, the mosque attempt to mediate between the two dimensions, the divine and the everyday, and to help adherents to grow in spiritual depth and practice. *The duty of the church, then, in short, is to advance within individuals and within the corporate body the consciousness of the numinous, or the divine.*

How does the spiritual searcher move towards maturity? The path involves the diminishing of ego and a merging with a larger reality. The various traditions have different ways of describing this phenomenon. When Carl Jung was asked what is the meaning of a human life, he said that it is to move the center of the personality from the ego to the self, or the universal unconscious.¹ Meister Eckhart and other mystics speak of becoming “nothing.” The devoted Christian may say, “I want to do God’s will.” The Buddhists say that Enlightenment comes when we fully internalize that there is no “I,” that all is one.

¹Robert A. Johndon, *Balancing Heaven and Earth: A Memoir of Visions, Dreams, and Realizations* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 186.

Whatever tradition they may follow, people who are devoted to the life of the spirit are similar, in certain significant ways. We find similar qualities of character: humility, compassion, kindness, a sense of gratitude, a capacity to forgive, respect for all living things. There is a lack of defensiveness, an other-centeredness, rather than self-centeredness, a lack of personal investment in outcome, and a trust in life itself.

When I considered it, I began to realize that our challenges as a religious movement seem to rest in this one core misunderstanding that holds sway in all too many of our churches and fellowships—rather than seeing ourselves as a religious community, wishing to mature spiritually, both personally and institutionally, we seem to exist chiefly to meet the needs of the individual. If a search committee asks the congregation what they are looking for in their new minister, most people say they wish to have someone who stimulates them intellectually. If a church board moves to policy governance and asks the congregation what ends are important, they are likely to speak in terms of programs: we want good preaching, good music, a fine R.E. program. In other words, what's in it for *me*, in terms of stimulation, entertainment, education? This is not a mission—this is not a vision.

Institutionally, we are vulnerable to the least healthy among us. We refuse to set boundaries when people act out and damage community; a small group attacks the minister, and we believe that's OK, that's their right, and so no one challenges them; leadership is suspect, at all levels, since leadership might imply structure—or forbid the word, *hierarchy*--and containment of some kind; we consistently underfund our churches and fellowships, our seminaries, and the UUA, thereby disempowering leadership. Over and over again, we see that our mission as a religious institution gives way to the flagrant needs of the individual.

I once did a sermon on “The Seven Deadly Sins of Unitarian Universalism.” I concluded that we did pretty well on most of these—I mean, we're really not slothful or greedy or all that envious—and “lust” is not a defining characteristic. I mean, I can't imagine anyone saying, “Now those Unitarians, they're a lusty lot!” But the granddaddy of all sins, the sin that separates us from God and from one another, well, we have that in spades, and that is the sin of pride.

When I was a graduate student, I served a small fellowship in the Bay Area as a consulting minister. This meant that I preached twice a month, attended all board meetings, and did all the pastoral care for \$6,000 a year. Thirty people on a Sunday was considered a good attendance. One day I ended our worship service with the hymn “Amazing Grace.” When we got to the talkback at the end of the service, an elderly UU woman in the front row started ranting about the hymn, saying that she was “not a wretch” and that she was not going to sing any song that had words in it that called her a wretch. Then someone in the back row raised his hand to speak. I knew him well. He was a young man who had AIDS, in the days before the

medication to preserve life had been discovered. He was weak and tired and torn. He said, “Sometimes I go down to the Salvation Army, and we sing ‘Amazing Grace’ down there. I like that song. I know I’m a wretch.”

As a people, Unitarian Universalists are out of touch with our own wretchedness, our own human neediness. This is why I like to visit Black churches: I may not agree with the theology, but all the worshippers know why we are there—because we know we “are standing in the need of prayer,” as the old hymn goes, and we are there to be blessed.

Unitarian Universalists are likely to be characterized by strong egos battling against one another and against any form of authority, rather than by a people who know they need to be blessed. We are proud and elitist, rather than humble; we believe ourselves to be self-sufficient, smarter than the average bear, rather than in need of grace; we tend to be satirical rather than ironic, readily making fun of others, whom we consider inferior; many of our churches and fellowships believe that we have “outgrown” the superstition of our Christian forebears and are on to better things, like eco-roofs or communion services done with donuts or M&M’s.

Whatever happened to religion? Whatever happened to the people of the Radical Reformation who so cared about their faith that they marched to their fiery deaths, singing hymns? Whatever happened to the passion of Norbert Capek, who continued preaching and educating in Prague, resisting the threats of the Gestapo, until he was carried away to his death? Several years ago I visited Deva, Romania, and climbed the dusty, rock-filled path to the ruins of a castle at the top of the hill. I stood there beside the dungeon—really a deep hole in the ground—where our prophet Francis David was thrown to sicken and die. “We need not think alike to love alike.” Francis David died so that we could be free—not to squabble over petty concerns, not to run our own ego trips, not free just to reject, but to choose—to choose to follow our conscience, and to choose love. This is freedom with commitment; freedom with limits, constraints; freedom that is grounded in spirit; freedom that is harnessed to holy purpose.

The final words of Earl Morse Wilbur’s two-volume *History of Unitarianism* are telling, and should still inform us: “Freedom, reason and tolerance . . . are not the final goals to be aimed at in religion, but only conditions under which the true ends may best be attained. The ultimate ends proper to a religious movement are two: personal and social; the elevation of personal character, and the perfecting of the social organism, and the success of a religious body may be judged by the degree to which it attains these ends. Only if the Unitarian movement, true to its principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance, goes on through them and finds its fulfillment in helping men [people] to live worthily as children of God, and to make their institutions worthy

of the Kingdom of Heaven, will its mission be accomplished.”² Getting past the language (choose your own metaphors), what would it mean to us today, to “live worthily as children of God”? What would our churches and fellowships look like if they were “institutions worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven”?

Well, that’s for the others on the panel to discern. If they, in fact, even agree with my thesis. However, if I were king of the Unitarian Universalists—and there has been no such thing since King Sigismund—I would suggest that the route to change is leadership, both ministerial and lay. I would recruit young ministers who are (1) people of deep faith, wanting to go deeper; (2) natural leaders; (3) people with emotional intelligence as well as cognitive power. I would give these potential leaders scholarships for seminary, thus removing some of the financial burden.

For lay leadership, I would provide rich opportunities for both spiritual formation and also for best practices in institutional leadership. I would try to use our resources to support health and to discourage dysfunction. I would make sure that our association and all its member organizations know that we are first and foremost a *religious* movement, and that whatever change in society we hope to make should be grounded in our spiritual life.

In summary, to be relevant to a population who are lonely, alienated, and given to the false values of the market, (1) we need to be clear about our mission: we are a church, passionate and purposeful about religion, and (2) we need to cultivate leaders who will bring spiritual integrity and bold leadership to our institutional life.

²Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945), 487.