

THE UNKNOWN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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If someone accused you of being a Unitarian Universalist would you make yourself known? Would you own the title? Better yet, how would you know a Unitarian Universalist if you met one? Isn't one of our problems as UUs that we are somewhat of an unknown quantity to the rest of the world? Unitarian Universalism is the best kept secret in the religious marketplace.

My late friend and colleague Robbie Walsh, formerly in Duxbury, reported that there was a story in the newspaper about a seminary professor in Kansas City who was put on trial by the Southern Baptists. He was accused of being a universalist. Robbie comments:

It's no wonder they were suspicious. He stated publicly his belief that all people born into the world are children of God. And as if that were not enough, he also supported the ordination of women. Case closed? The professor denied the charges. "I'm not a universalist," he said, and he convinced them. After four hours of deliberation they voted 21 to 11 to let him keep his job.

Robbie then reflects:

Now, I confess to being a universalist. In fact, I am a Unitarian Universalist. But I wonder. If I were arrested and charged with being one, would there be enough evidence to convict me? The Kansas City story proves that having the right beliefs is not enough. The professor believed that all people are brothers and sisters, that every person has a piece of the divine spark, that women are the equals of men in the sight of God. That was not enough to bring in a guilty verdict. No, if they are going to pin Unitarian Universalism on me they will have to be able to show that I participated in and supported a Unitarian Universalist church. That is the only way to be sure. Beliefs, no matter how noble, must be embodied in a living institution or they will have no convicting power.

This is a good time as any to ask the question, "What are the distinguishing marks of being a Unitarian Universalist?" Dr. Helen Gordon, speaking at a church fund raising dinner in Bakersfield, California, offered the following dozen suggestions, tongue-in-cheek:

1. *We are a very friendly people. If you aren't friendly too, out you go!*
2. *We are very genuine people. Even if we do have an occasional phony in our midst, he's a real phony!*
3. *We don't pretend to know all the answers, and we're proud of our humility.*
4. *We believe in tolerance. In fact, we can't stand intolerant people.*
5. *We are non-competitive. In fact, we are more non-competitive than anybody.*
6. *We believe in equality; every one of us is as good as the next person and a whole lot better.*
7. *Dogmatism is absolutely forbidden.*
8. *Freedom of belief is rigidly enforced.*
9. *People who don't believe in anything are free to persuade others to the same point of view.*
10. *Church meetings are run very democratically because the Moderator insists upon it.*
11. *Of course we have our critics--but they're just a few paranoid people who are out to get us.*
12. *We can resist criticism. We can resist anything but temptation.*

One of the signs of a mature religion is its ability to laugh at itself, to have, as someone has said, a sense of humor about absolutes. A religion that can't laugh at itself will soon become stodgy, stuffy, self-righteous and fanatical.

Unitarian Universalism tries to instill a sense of humor about absolutes, a sense of humor about itself, not to scoff at holy things, but to free holy things from sanctimonious piety. I like Robert Frost's line: "Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee/ And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me." Life is

too serious to be taken too seriously. If we are God's frozen people than a little bit of humor will help thaw us out. So that's one more requirement, you must laugh in church. But it must be holy laughter.

So, be assured, that when you join a UU church or religious society we take you seriously, but not too seriously, and we ask that you take us on the same terms. We know that whoever you are, no matter how much you may know, that you are finite, limited and human, that you don't have all the answers to life's big questions, and neither do we. That's why we need one another. All we have are hints and guesses, and the insights and example of those who have struggled to articulate a faith in times past. Knowing this about ourselves, that we all live with uncertainties and ambiguities, it is good to laugh heartily in church once in awhile. It reminds us that we are all in this mysterious business called life together and that we should try to help one another and make the best of it.

When you join a Unitarian Universalist church (or any church for that matter) you are making a symbolic statement about your relationship to the members of that particular congregation. Similar to a covenant of marriage you are saying "for better for worse, in sickness and in health" I accept these people as members of my extended spiritual family. I will do my best to relate to them as lovingly, caringly and as honestly as I can and I expect that they will do the same with me.

Joining a church is getting very specific about the admonition to love your neighbor as your self. It does not mean that you do not love and care for people who are members of other churches (or none). It doesn't even

necessarily mean that your best friends are members of a UU church. What it does mean is that you've made a covenant to make a special effort to relate to this particular group of human beings in a loving way. To paraphrase a line from the New Testament, if you do not learn to care for those you have known and seen, how can you possibly care for those you have not known or seen.

As with any family, so with this extended spiritual family, love is hard work. It requires a commitment of time and money to make it work. We do not always like or agree with the members of our personal families, but for the most part we do manage to accept, tolerate, forgive, and attempt to understand one another in spite of our differences. And that's the way it is, or at least should be, in the UU extended spiritual family.

When you join a Unitarian Universalist church it also means that you acknowledge, however begrudgingly, that you are related to the Uni-Uni clan in other churches around the nation and world. These too are my people for better or worse because no church exists in isolation from others, not even a free church. When you join the Unitarian Universalist Church in Barnstable, Norwell or Podunk, Alaska, you don't join the UUA--you join a local church not a denomination--but since your local church is affiliated with the UUA the connection to a larger movement of liberal religious churches and fellowships is implied.

If you ever have the opportunity to attend a UUA General Assembly, or a district regional conference, you would have a much greater appreciation of the importance of our UU super extended family. The UUA statement of

principles and purposes which we read earlier in the service is an expression of our larger spiritual identity.

The roots of our UU family tree go all the way back to the beginnings of our Judeo-Christian heritage, to Jesus and the prophets, to Moses and ancient Biblical authors. Though some of us may not define ourselves as Christian there's no denying our historical roots and the fact that our rites and ceremonies, our thought forms and theologies, derive from Judeo-Christian sources. We didn't fall out of a Buddhist bush or a Hindu tree though we may appreciate and borrow from those great religious traditions for our own use and purposes, as did Emerson and the New England transcendentalists.

The hallmarks of our approach to religion are what Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur called Reason, Freedom and Tolerance. The only time a Unitarian king ruled in Europe, in Transylvania, he issued an Edict of Religious Tolerance granting freedom of religion to Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and Unitarians. The year was 1568. This year marks the 450th anniversary of that important event in our UU history.

To practice reason, freedom and tolerance in a modern context means not only that we appreciate and tolerate other faith traditions beyond our own, but that within our own household of faith we learn to appreciate and respect those among us who would define themselves as UU Christians, Jews, pagans, humanists, theists, atheists, pantheists, or some other ist, as well as those who don't know what they believe or how to define themselves and for whom a label does not exist other than "human being--please do not bend, spindle or mutilate."

To join a UU church means that you must be willing to accept and embrace pluralism and diversity, a unity that embraces and affirms differences, and celebrates them. Because of this we cannot meet the religious and spiritual needs of everyone all of the time. The best we can do is to try to meet the spiritual needs of most of our membership most of the time. Those who want or insist on more will probably go elsewhere.

The truth of the matter is you have to take some responsibility for nurturing and developing your own spiritual life beyond what happens here on Sunday mornings. Only you can grow a faith which is meaningful for you. As Whitman once said, "No one can grow for another, not one." What we can offer are some tools, and examples, and encouragement and support for walking the spiritual path.

You don't have to walk alone, at least not all of the time. You can walk with others and share, but no one can do the walking for you. So walk with us, and talk with us, and help us to walk our talk.