

ReNew to UU: What Do Unitarian Universalists Believe?

Sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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This is the second in my series of sermons renewing our understanding of Unitarian Universalism. Today we take up the subject of what Unitarian Universalists believe. As I began to organize the material for this sermon, I thought back over all the previous sermons I've delivered on what UU's believe. I was flabbergasted to realize that in 15 years of writing sermons, I have never written a single one about Unitarian Universalists beliefs. I feel like it is something I talk about *a lot*, and yet, nary a single sermon that brings together the breadth and specificity of our tradition's beliefs. I attribute this to the idea that the surest way to annoy a bunch of Unitarian Universalists is to tell them what they believe! In a sermon entitled *What Do UUs Believe?* you can count on the one thing I'm not going to tell you is what UUs believe.

We are, from deep within our history and our foundational philosophy, a creed-avoidant lot. Perhaps the closest you can come to ascribing a common belief to UUs is the right of individual belief. Yet, even there you will find some who argue that until we knuckle under and accept a common creed we will never be a cohesive group that can say *this* is what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. I disagree with that view. I believe that creeds are divisive, that they set walls between us and draw unnecessary lines defining who is in and who is out. This has, throughout our denominational history, been the more prevalent view; no creeds for us.

As a result it can be rather difficult to define the things that hold us together as congregants and as congregations. We often end up in the negative defining the things we are not rather than the things we are, the things we don't believe in rather than the things we do. From outside these walls the view is even murkier. You hear it often said that Unitarian Universalism is where people don't believe anything, or where people believe anything they want. Neither of those views, of course, is correct. Here you bring and you develop the belief that you are compelled to by experience, by reason, by tradition, but it must be belief that is life-affirming.

That still leaves a pretty wide field, and so it calls each of us to be theologians, to explore and test and refine what our deepest explosions, to determine where our deepest hunger meets the world's deepest need. Because this can be a difficult and time consuming process, because we are not handed a sure road map for success, because the very word theology is draped in dull and orthodox bunting, it is tempting to skip the theological formation and move right into action. There is a lot of doing that needs being done in the world. But without the theology, the grounding of ultimate value, how do we know if we are doing the right things? How do we persuade others to join in if we're doing it without conviction?

Yes, I have experienced the centuries of dust piled on that dull and orthodox bunting of theology, but I have also experienced theology as the very stuff of life, the why in the what. Frederick Buechner said that "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." That's what we are ultimately shooting for, regardless of how we believe we are called to it – the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

And that, my friends, takes theology— call it a worldview or meaning-making, if you like—but it’s all rock and roll to me. And it is an area where we are all on an even footing, where no divisions or distinctions between people because none of us has the absolute answers. It is as the great Lucy Van Pelt once said in a *Peanuts* strip, “My topic today is the purpose of theology. We must always keep our purpose in mind. Our purpose as students is understandably selfish. There is nothing better than being in a class where no one knows the answer.”

So, how do we do theology when none of us knows the answer? How do we do that understanding that we will all most likely arrive at different answers? The seven principles and purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association offer some guidance. They are the best thinking of our assembly gathered over time, based in tradition but not sealed there.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These are great principles, and pretty difficult to fulfill if you think about what it would mean to truly promote the worth of every person and a world community of justice for everyone. But principles are not enough. As George Santayana said, “We cannot be religious in general.” And so within the context of the Unitarian Universalist principles we must each develop our own credos, statements of our own beliefs and assessments of what is of value to us as individuals.

One of the best statements of belief I’ve ever seen was written by my colleague David Rankin. You’ll find it in many places, including the small blue books on the Welcome Table in the Fell Room and printed on wallet cards, handy for when you get stuck trying to explain your new church to Aunt Sylvia at Thanksgiving dinner. Rankin’s statement is written not as a purely personal declaration, but as a way to come closer to describing what holds us together as Unitarian Universalists. It includes 10 points. The first is what I have just talked about.

1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theology, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.

I think this statement is representative of Unitarian Universalist belief, but I sometimes wonder if it is as descriptive of our actions. I hear with too much regularity that humanist UUs cringe when they hear words about God or the wisdom of Jesus, while Christian and theist UUs are hurt when words about God or the wisdom of Jesus are quickly followed by a disclaimer or apology. Surely, if we fully encourage the development of a personal theology we must embrace whatever that

theology might turn out to be. This is Rankin's second point, a natural outgrowth of gathering in religious community with many theologies.

2. We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.

I love that Rankin couples the idea of toleration with the art of listening, for I believe that it is the listening that can grow toleration beyond a mere indulgence to fuller appreciation. It also begins to bring forth the importance of personal experience held up in point number three.

3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.

Point number four I've preached several sermons on lately so I won't belabor it, but revelation is not sealed and experience of the numinous that points us toward truth is available to all. Rankin puts it this way:

4. We believe in the never-ending search for Truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.

Point number five encapsulates several ideas important in our heritage: that science and religion have no inherent conflict with each other, that embodied faith reaches beyond Sunday morning; that the church has no monopoly on what is sacred. It says this:

5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.

Point six harkens back to the Seven Principles.

6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty and justice-and no idea, ideal or philosophy is superior to a single human life.

Point seven calls us out of ourselves and more deeply into the world. It does not simply reiterate the unity of experience, but offers that the purpose of a religious life includes wider connection and care for the world.

7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural products of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.

Point number eight speaks to the animating force behind our values and our actions. It uses the word love, though you might choose other words: God, compassion, spirit or others. It says:

8. We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.

Point number nine seems at first glance rather more pragmatic, affirming our reliance on the democratic principle, but as the explanatory sentence says, it is more than mere pragmatism but a desire to enfranchise and empower all persons.

9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism-so that people might govern themselves.

The final point you've heard from me too many times to count. It's my favorite Schleiermachean point: the importance of religious community. It says:

10. We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.

This is an idea as old as religion. For millennia human beings have gathered in religious community for mutual support. In 1648 the founding document of the Puritan churches reaffirmed it saying that "one person is incapable of being a church."

And so here we are today, one of the descendents in that long line of churches, inheritors of a tradition not confined by tradition; not beholdng to any particular creed yet sharing something of belief that brings us together. These are ten things that I'm comfortable saying Unitarian Universalists generally believe. You may dissent from some, add others, and hopefully bring more specificity than this short statement can offer. But I will claim these as a good start.

- We believe in the freedom of religious expression,
- in the toleration of religious ideas,
- in the authority of reason and conscience,
- in the never-ending search for Truth and
- in the unity of experience.
- We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being,
- in the ethical application of religion,
- in the motive force of love, and
- in the necessity of the democratic process.
- We believe in the importance of a religious community.

An Indian mystic¹ said, “A religious person is one who contributes to the world some beauty, some joy, some happiness, some celebration that was not there before.” Unitarian Universalists are sometimes obsessed with trying to figure out who we are; and, often, we define ourselves, instead, by what we are not. But I hear in Osho’s definition an identity I want to claim for myself and for this church. We are a religious people. We are birthing beauty and truth and love in the world. Theology, in the form of our individual credos and in the formed of embodied actions, is a necessary and invigorating part of that identity. May it be ours.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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¹ Osho. The reader should not take the inclusion of these words as an endorsement of the man or of his philosophy beyond that contained in this single quotation.