

# *On Being a Born-Again Unitarian Universalist*

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You may have noticed that this is not the sermon title which was announced in the most recent newsletter. Sometimes, for reasons I have never fully understood, sermons refuse to be born, despite the announcement of their imminent arrival. Sometimes, for reasons I have never fully understood, other sermons, other ideas, other concerns shoulder their way onto center stage, and demand attention. For whatever reason, that has been the case this week.

It began in the Introduction to Unitarianism Universalism group which has been meeting for the past few weeks. As is often the case, we were engaged in discussing how Unitarian Universalism is similar too or different from other religious traditions in our society. As I in to this discussion, I found myself remembering conversations I have had recently with church members who have expressed concern about fact that religious fundamentalism is stirring again in this country and around the world. Suddenly I was struck by the thought that despite our distinctive religious stance, Unitarian Universalism swims in the same ocean as most other religious traditions, and what is happening on the religious right is but one manifestation--albeit a sometimes frightening one--of a phenomenon which is occurring across the religious spectrum. In this country, and around the world, there is a renewed search for religious values, for a dimension of meaning and purpose in existence, for a spiritual quality in human life. The resurgence of fundamentalism is one expression of a general dissatisfaction with the materialistic, rationalist, scientism which has spent much of this century presenting us an image of the world as a mindless mechanism. The resurgence of fundamentalism is part of a larger search for something more which, in these uncertain times, might invest our living and our dying with dignity and purpose.

I found myself thinking that while we do not accept the solutions offered by fundamentalists, Unitarian Universalists often share with them a sense of dissatisfaction with the mind-set of the modern world. Most of us do not believe that the sacred, the holy dimension of life is to be found exclusively between the covers of the Bible. Most of us do not believe that a meaningful life can be found only in a return to the world-view of the past. Most of us do not believe that the purpose of our existence is defined by a static, narrow, sectarian loyalty. But the fact is that many Unitarian Universalists are engaged in a search for the sacred, the holy in their own lives. We, too, in our own way, are caught up in the renewed concern for a spiritual dimension to existence, which characterizes the times in which we find ourselves. I have found myself intrigued by the attempt to define, a bit more fully, the Unitarian Universalist expression of this cultural return to religion. In

short, I have been intrigued to describe what it would mean to be a born-again Unitarian Universalists. For good or for ill, that is the sermon which has forced itself upon me and upon you for this week.

Among Evangelicals, those Dr. Jean Houston calls "the hot and holy churches", being born-again refers to that moment when religious faith ceases to be an intellectual construct or a social convention, and becomes instead a visceral certainty, determining how the world will be understood and how life will be lived from that moment on. Frequently, the experience of being born-again is the result of a profoundly shaking emotional encounter in which one is--as it were--wrenched out of the prior existence and injected into a world of novel relationships and understandings. Frequently the experience is described as a total surrender of the self to God, an opening of oneself to Christ, and a subsequent experience of life as meaningful, purposive, beyond the reach of those trivial concerns and worries which previously dominated existence. Frequently the experience is described as that sudden shattering moment when individuals acknowledge that they live not by their own wits but by the grace of God.

It is this kind of sudden conversion which many of us associate with the term "born-again"--a moment of mindless submission to emotion and fervor through which the personality of the individual is reordered in some significant manner. It is not the kind of religious experience which most Unitarian Universalists are likely to embrace or to value. We prefer much tidier enthusiasms; we like to keep our fervor under some degree of rational control. We want to know the terms of the contract before we enter upon it. Indeed, liberal religion on this continent had its beginning, partly, in a strong negative reaction to the fervor, the enthusiasm, the "born-again" religion of the great awakening which swept the American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century, and we are still suspicious of and hostile toward that kind of revivalism which is associated with the experience of being "born-again."

However, this is only the most dramatic, the most public form of the experience referred to by the term "born-again." A great many people use that term to describe a much more private, personal, developmental experience which does not involve the frenzy, the self-abandoning, mindless aspects of the revivalist model. There are people who, in a time of crisis, a time of personal loss or defeat, a time of unbearable confusion and despair, or a time of great joy, may suddenly recognize that life as they have attempted to live it is less than satisfactory and that there is another path open to them. Choosing that other path, they then discover that their lives take on a different character, that their relation to the world and to other people undergoes a subtle but significant change, that they are able to respond more creatively to challenge, to defeat, to hope, to fear.

Those who are part of the Christian tradition might refer to this time of choosing, this moment of change, in terms of "inviting Christ into their lives," the time when they became "born-again Christians." Non-Christians, of course, would be unlikely to use that language, but that does not mean that non-Christians, or post-Christians are immune to or barred from that experience. Indeed, if we are once able to overcome our innate hostility to the language, we might discover that it is not such a great contradiction to speak of

"born-again" Unitarian Universalists, nor are such individuals as rare as we might believe at first glance.

This reality is less obvious than it might be, in part, because of our historical antipathy toward the revivalist model. But even more significant, it is hidden from view because, throughout our denomination, a large proportion of our adherents are relatively recent come-outers--people who have left the religions in which they grew up and are involved in the necessary process of defining themselves in relation to their new freedom. Consequently, for many of our people, their new-found Unitarian Universalism has a decidedly negative tinge to it. Typically, new Unitarian Universalists may not be able to tell you what they believe, but they will have little difficulty expounding on what they no longer believe. Often they are Unitarian Universalists largely for negative reasons--because this religious body validates and accepts their doubts and does not demand that they meet some external standard of religious belief. Here they may redefine, question, or deny the existence of God; here they may proudly reject any metaphysical or theological explanation of existence; here they may redefine, question, or denounce as invalid such traditional religious practices as prayer or meditation; here they may question all assertions and even give vent to anti-clericalism and hostility to all forms of organized religion, including this one if they wish. Here no one will demand they embrace a view of life they cannot embrace in good conscience.

Some people seem never to get beyond this stage in their religious development. For some people, Unitarian Universalism is important because it provides them a breathing space, a decompression chamber, an institution which will help them to get unhooked from the religious assumptions with which they grew up. This is part of the reason that we witness, over and over again, the phenomenon of people who join us and for a few months or years are filled with enthusiasm for the church and its program, and then gradually and without explanation drift away. The church has been useful in the process of unhitching them from the past, and when that has been accomplished, their need for our church is no longer so great. They become our "graduates," people who learned here how to be free from religious assumptions and dogmatic demands which had become painful and crippling, but who no longer feel a need for the church after that task is accomplished. They still feel warmly toward us. If they ever go to church again, it would be to a Unitarian Universalist church. They would hate to see us go out of business, for there may be other people who need us as they once needed us, and some day, driven by some other need, they may come back for a post-graduate course. But for the moment, organized religion no longer has an important role to play in their lives.

Occasionally, the men and women who carry the burden of supporting the ongoing institution feel frustrated that so many people for whom the church was once so important can become indifferent to it and its needs. I seldom allow myself to feel hostility toward such people. The church performed an important task for them, and during that time they contributed to the life of the church, making it a more vital and exciting place. When they need us again, perhaps they will come back. But the future of the church does not rest with such people. The future of the church depends upon those I would call "born-again" Unitarian Universalists. And fortunately, there seem to be enough of such people around

to ensure our survival.

Some Unitarian Universalists, having gone through the experience of being unhooked from old, personally destructive religious forms, discover that the experience of freedom is not the end of the journey. Freedom from dogma, freedom from creeds and traditions, freedom from past ways of thinking and looking at the world is not the answer to any ultimate question. Rather, freedom poses the most terrifying of all questions: Now that you are rid of past loyalties, of past commitments, of past concepts, how will you use your freedom? "Freedom from" always casts us into the dilemma of "freedom for what?" To what will you be loyal? By what will you be defined? By what star will you steer?

It is the recognition that freedom is not enough, that it is not an answer to any existential question, that helps explain another aspect of Unitarian Universalism--our occasional faddishness. Recognizing that freedom is not enough, we sometimes begin to search our experience and the world for that value, that goal, that dream which is important enough that we may commit our lives to it and in that act of devoted service discover the meaning and purpose of our unique existence. In the process, we sometimes engage in a lot of foolishness and idolatry. We are tempted to hook into the latest fad from the psychological sciences. Some of you may remember when Unitarian Universalists all seemed to be involved in sensitivity groups, or Jungian psychology, or Transactional Analysis, or Assertiveness Training, or extended families, or programs which promised to make us perfect parents or happy widows or sensitive singles or terminally married or what have you. Or we hooked into the latest imports from Eastern religion and sat around chanting and humming and buzzing and attempting to force our resistant western limbs into unfamiliar postures. Or we latched onto the latest good cause to march and leaflet, protest and lobby and demonstrate: against prisons and capital punishment, for abortion and human rights and arms limitation, against tobacco and drunk drivers and prayers in schools. Or we hooked into the results of some scientific study and began to swallow vitamins, give up meat, forego the use of aerosol cans, and scold the unfortunates among us who still smoke or won't wear safety belts.

I don't want to suggest that any of these enthusiasms (many of which I share) are wrong or improper but only that none of them is adequate to provide the sense of meaning and purpose we seek. We move from cause to cause, from enthusiasm to enthusiasm, seeking that to which we may give ourselves freely, until our churches sometimes resemble a bazaar of bizarre fads. But every now and then, in the midst of all the running around, all the frantic searching, all the flirtations with one passion after another, some of us are struck with the sudden insight that life doesn't have to be as difficult as we seem determined to make it, that what we are looking for so assiduously and having such difficulty finding is something which used to be called religion, or faith and that it is still available to us. And it is in that moment of recognition that the "born-again" Unitarian Universalist comes into being.

It is not that suddenly individuals return to the religion earlier rejected. Rather, in that moment of insight rejection is transcended and the recognition grows that beneath the shell of hide-bound, worn-out and irrelevant traditions, there may be an understanding of

life which can be defined as religious, an understanding which is available to us precisely because the shell of the past has been broken apart and the old ways discarded. That understanding takes different forms with different people. For me it has been grounded in a recognition that meaning and purpose are not things we add on to life by our own heroic efforts. Nor are they things we find, goals we attain as a consequence of playing well some great cosmic game. Rather, meaning and purpose are inherent, essential parts of existence, with us all the time, and only waiting for us to recognize that fact. In my religious quest it finds expression in a persistent attempt to discover the sacred, the holy, the religious dimension not in the traditional practices and categories, not in the traditional texts and concepts where it has been ghettoized and drained of power, but rather in the world of contemporary experience and interaction. For me, the religious dimension of life is to be found most abundantly, to use the words of Carl Nelson, "in life and the living of it."

That simple recognition has important implications for how we view existence and the interactions and relations which comprise our world. If meaning and purpose are inherent in life, then the patterns of an individual life are something more than simply the erratic whims resulting from idiosyncratic decisions; rather, they are part of a process which brought us into being and through us is working out a design we cannot fully comprehend but which surely involves all existing things. Indeed, the shape of life is altered by the recognition of the importance to the scheme of things of that quality of "something more" which eludes our ability to define it, but which is there, active and vital and real and upon which all reality rests. Gunther Stent, in an article on the new biology, talks about the significance of the *context* in determining how the cell of an embryo will develop; whether it will become a liver, a kidney, a nose, or a strand of hair is determined by the environment. The same cell has many potential paths. The one it finally follows is determined by the context in which it finds itself. Victor Frankl points out that in the center of the eye, where the organ of seeing attaches to the nerves that lead to the brain, there is a blind spot which is crucial to the process of seeing although it is blind, and that underneath consciousness there is an unconscious process of which we cannot possibly be aware which determines to a large degree how the conscious mind will work and what will be admitted to our awareness. All of these are concrete symbols of the fact that we exist, we are sustained and supported by "something more" than is apprehended by our senses, by our understanding of factual reality. The religious understanding of life, the life of faith adds to this recognition the affirmation that this "something more" which infuses all of existence, which brought us into existence as sentient beings, which sustains us throughout our lives, and which, in some sense can be said to be living us, is not whimsical, but is to be trusted.

The born-again Unitarian Universalists are those who have broken the mold of the past, have transcended their rejections, and now reach toward the affirmation of life and the "something more" which underlies all the various forms and rituals, dogmas and assumptions of religion. Born-again Unitarian Universalists recognize that the religious life, in all its complex and varied expressions, seeks primarily to affirm the existence of that "something more" and to help people live more richly in terms of that mysterious reality. They do not want to return to the religion of the past, to the outworn symbols and

practices which sought to express that reality and have become strangely impotent to communicate their interior meaning to this generation. Neither do they want to be trapped in rejection and negation. But they do want to witness to the possibility that the experience with life which those symbols and practices expressed is vital and valid and capable of releasing men and women from the drivenness which results from a conviction that the world is only what appears to us and that consequently our lives must be spent in the effort to create meaning in a meaningless universe. Born again Unitarian Universalists live in warm communion with the world, knowing they have nothing to prove, that their efforts in behalf of truth and mercy and justice are amplified because they occur in a meaningful universe and they are valid in and of themselves, and not because they succeed or because they bring praise or recognition or a fleeting hope that the cloak of oblivion may be held back for a little while.

Part of our involvement in the global search for a religious basis for life is to be found in the recognition that life and the living of it is rich in meanings we may never have words or concepts or categories to express. Part of our involvement in the global search for a religious basis for life is to be found in the recognition that while we are never more than a heart beat from death and the human race never more than a generation from extinction, the human venture takes place in a meaning-bearing universe, and the significance of that venture can never be fully known from our limited, time-bound perspective. For this reason we can never know fully what purpose our lives may advance or the importance of our decision to serve life. In the space which that mystery offers us, we find the possibility of a life of faith and hope which need not be limited by the materialistic, cause and effect world which this century has constructed and defined as reality. In the space which that mystery offers us, we may find existence seems richer and fuller and more glorious, despite the horrors and terrors we sometimes confront; that failures and disappointments and disasters seem more bearable and grief more acceptable. Born-again Unitarian Universalism offers none of the assurance and certitude offered by the fundamentalist revivals around the globe. True to our history and our style, ours is a tentative reaching out to the mystery in which our lives are rooted, a modest affirmation of a nameless "something more" in terms of which we live and move and have our being, an effort to find a stance toward life which opens us up to the world in which we exist, to the possibilities of this moment and the promise of the future. It is a modest attempt to recover the religious dimensions of life, but it may be all we need to live in faith without fanaticism; to love our fellow creatures and this uncertain world which is our home.