

Ten Ways to Tell Others About Unitarian Universalism

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"When the Unitarian movement began, the marks of true religion were commonly thought to be belief in the creeds, membership in the church, and participation in its rites and sacraments. To the Unitarian of today, the marks of true religion are spiritual freedom, enlightened reason, broad and tolerant sympathy, upright character, and unselfish service."

-- Earl Morse Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage*

I believe that the essence, the heart and soul, of Unitarian Universalism is spiritual freedom. Two words: spiritual freedom. [William Ellery] Channing rang the changes on "I call that mind free" [See responsive reading no. 592 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.] -- the fullest expression of "the free mind principle." Channing connected "mind" and "spirit." Those famous lines were drawn from his sermon entitled "Spiritual Freedom." Sometimes I call it "creative freedom," by which I mean the divine, creative spirit which is embedded in every person, and should be reflected in every life.

Do you know how most people find their way into a church for the first time? They are personally invited by friends or acquaintances, invited by those who take pride and joy in their faith and their faith community. This sermon is dedicated to the proposition that each of us needs to know, and wants to know, how to tell others about Unitarian Universalism.

But wherever I go, I hear the same lament: "We are devoted enthusiasts of our free faith. But why, oh why aren't there more who know about it, and understand what we're about, here? If we could just figure out how to tell others about Unitarian Universalism..."

Not an easy assignment, but it ain't all *that* difficult. Only we do need to work on it. I know, the glory of our free faith is that it's not a canned religion, something that has been cooked up by formula, something where "one size fits all." But don't let that be an excuse for not working up your own way to tell our story. You need to think ahead, just as you would for a job interview: "Let's see, how will I answer that big, obvious question I'm sure to be asked?" It is not my job to tell you what to think, or what to say. But I will tell you what I think and say.

One: Unitarian Universalism is an open invitation to enter into a shared quest for the truth that makes us free. Brief enough? I think so. Can we unpack that sentence? Our invitation is open to all; we would embrace all persons without discrimination. Our quests are deeply personal, but also shared within the religious community. The community does not thwart our individuality, it supports it. The end in view is liberating truth, the truth that makes you free. Lies will not make you free, and freedom is not a license to lie, but an imperative to speak the truth as best we can know it. In short, ours is a shared quest for the truth that makes us free.

Two: I cited the great historian of Unitarianism, Earl Morse Wilbur, as our Opening Words. Looking back over the 400-year struggle of Unitarians to plant and nourish their free faith, Wilbur identified five distinctive marks: freedom, reason, tolerance, character and service.

Consider freedom: We believe in spiritual freedom (the inward freedom of the human spirit) -- a positive freedom *to*, beyond a negative freedom, freedom *from* constraint.

Consider reason: We believe in the test of reasonableness; not a narrow rationalism that excludes the witness of the heart, but the intellectual and moral imperative to "be reasonable."

Consider tolerance: We believe in respectful tolerance of differences (not compulsion, not conformity, but the acceptance, the welcome acceptance, of differences). Bio-diversity enriches.

Consider character: We believe in character as the final test of one's religion. Jesus said it best: "By their fruits you shall know them." The old Unitarian phrase, "salvation by character," may sound old-fashioned, but have you noticed that the ideas of "character" and "character education" making a comeback recently?

So freedom, reason, tolerance, character, and finally, service. Finally, consider service: We believe in service to the needs of all persons, indeed of all beings, within the great "covenant of being." To serve is to minister; for us, membership is a ministry, a commitment to service. With James (the brother of Jesus) we say: "Faith without works is dead." With Micah (the Israelite prophet) we ask: "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Three: Oh, yes! What about God? Others will want to know what we say about God, and they are likely to be surprised that we have such an open-minded, or perhaps relaxed, attitude toward this question of questions.

Bertrand Russell tells of the time he went to jail for his pacifism during the First World War. (No small moral commitment, that -- commanding respect even if we disagree with his pacifism.) On the prison form, where it asked for his religious denomination, Russell wrote "Agnostic." The warden looked over the form and remarked, "I don't know what

religion that is, but it doesn't matter since we all worship the same God." In his memoirs Russell commented, "That remark kept me happy for about a week."

Unitarian Universalists today hold various concepts of God, or no concept, or most often, perhaps, a developing concept, something central to their most personal spiritual quests. The God I believe in is found in and through the human spirit.

Now, we are famous discussers; that's virtually a definition of a UU church: an unending discussion group. If we ever stopped discussing what Whitehead called the central question of religion, "What do you mean by 'God'?", we'd probably go out of business.

The Transylvanian Unitarians emblazon the slogan on their churches: "*Egy ast Isten*" -- literally, "One is God." For that's where the name "Unitarian" came from, affirmation of God's unity, not the orthodox Christian Trinity.

Four: You've explained the Unitarian name. What about the name "Universalist"? Where does that come from? Just as "unitarianism" names the Christian heresy of God's unity rather than trinity, "universalism" names the heresy of universal salvation, rather than God's predestination of some souls to Heaven and most souls to Hell. The Universalists proclaimed God as "the almighty force of love," irresistibly reconciling all souls, saving all souls. Here early Unitarians and Universalists agreed: They were willing to hold God up to a moral standard. They spoke of "the benevolence of God" as God's first attribute.

But are Unitarian Universalists today concerned with "salvation"? In a word, yes. Only attend to the root meaning, the real meaning, of the word: The Latin *salus*, as in salutary, means healthful. The end of religion, to us, is the spiritual health, the well-being, of the person in community. We believe in universal salvation in this sense: that spiritual wholeness is available to all, and must be our common commitment.

Five: And what of Humanism? Are Unitarian Universalists humanists? Again, to answer in a single word, yes. The word means different things to different people. Humanism with a capital H usually refers to a philosophy articulated in the Humanist Manifesto: commitment to timeless and universal human values, based on a naturalistic rather than a supernaturalistic understanding of reality. Walt Wiedner, in our reading, spoke forthrightly for Humanism in this sense.

In the broadest sense, though, all UUs are humanists, for all of us see the fulfillment of our humanity as the touchstone of an authentic faith. UUA President John Buehrens refers to "biblical humanism," and I too identify with this outlook. It's not an oxymoron. The central biblical values of justice and love are also the central values of our humanity: That is the biblical humanism that I affirm, and this is a central meaning of the God I affirm.

Six: Oh yes! Speaking of the Bible, tell us what you believe about Jesus. We are a people inspired by the religion *of* Jesus, as distinct from the religion *about* Jesus. Jesus himself

seems not to have been a Trinitarian, but the Unitarian -- which is to say, a believing, if unorthodox, Jew. Challenged by the orthodox Jews of his day, he said: "The great commandment is to love God with all you've got -- heart, mind, soul, all of it. And I'll add a second commandment that comes down to the same thing," he said, or words to that effect: "Love your neighbor at least as much as you love yourself; only remember that sometimes you may be called upon to love your neighbor *more* than yourself -- in other words, going the second mile."

Seven: Ours is also a prophetic faith. If Jesus was "a latter-day prophet," the earlier prophets of ancient Israel set the theme that remains fundamental to our sense of prophetic faith: Theirs was a vision of a universal community of justice, mercy, peace, righteousness, faithfulness, love. On these values the kingdom of God -- or, as I call it, the community of God -- alone can be founded, sustained and renewed. James Luther Adams spoke of God as "the community-forming power." Now there's a definition of God for you: the community-forming power.

Eight: There are no authoritative statements of what Unitarian Universalists believe, for we are a non-creedal religion. And yet we are united in the affirmation of the principles that stand at the head of the constitution of the Unitarian Universalist Association. You will find the first part of the statement, the "principles" themselves, on the back of our order of service -- starting with "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and ending with "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

The second part (you can find it in the front of our hymnals) names five sources from which our "living tradition" draws its strength and inspiration. We have no one sacred book, but many sacred sources. In fact, a sixth source was added *since* the publication of this hymnal in 1993. It reads: "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." Thus we include within our covenant "Earth-centered traditions," especially Native American and pagan forms of spirituality.

Nine: We believe, indeed, in an inclusive covenant. In recent years, the biblical word "covenant" has become increasingly prominent in our vocabulary. The reason, I think, is that we are seeking, more than ever before, to make our commitments serious and explicit. Just so, the Principles statement suggests that our association of self-governing congregations is constituted by a covenant. It begins: "We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote."

People ask, "If you don't have a creed, words that everyone believes (or supposedly believes), what holds you together?" The answer, again, can be given in a word: covenant. The words we sometimes say together, beginning, "Love is the doctrine of this church," conclude, "Thus do we covenant with one another." That means not only that we think "love" is a nice idea; it means we are committed to one another to uphold this standard of behavior toward one another. Our life together, our fellowship, is constituted by our covenant, our commitment to dwell together in faithfulness to the values that make and keep human life human.

Ten: At last! And this one is the shortest of all, maybe the most astonishing of all. I got it from Vera Tilson, the indomitable choir director in my former church in Arlington, Va. Our religion, she said, is regular attendance. Naturally, a choir director *would* think of that one! Vera was serious; she was telling how *she* came to join our church. Only through regular attendance at the worship, the socials and celebrations, the meetings and work parties of the community do we ever catch on to what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. You finally get it, if you get it at all, by osmosis more than by explanation, however fine my previous nine explanations have been. It's rather as Robert Frost said of education: It's a matter of "hanging around until you catch on."

So the next time somebody says, "Tell me about your church. What is Unitarianism, or, uh, Unitarian Universalism?," and you're too tired to talk about it, just say: "Come visit us sometime. Better yet, how about coming with me next Sunday?"

And then, when they do come, and they say (as they most likely will), "I listened, but I don't get it," you say, "Ah, that's why you must come back again and again. You'll find it's catching. That's what Unitarian Universalism means: regular attendance. It means listening to others, and responding from your own heart and mind and conscience, until you have decided for yourself what it is."