

# *What Do We Say After We Say We're UU?*

**Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern**

**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

**December 15, 2002**

I am sure you've heard the jokes about being Unitarian Universalist. You know: "What do you get when you cross a Unitarian Universalist with a Ku Klux Klanner? Someone who burns a question mark on your lawn." Or "What do you get when you cross a Unitarian Universalist with a Jehovah's Witness? Someone who knocks on your door, and when you open it, has nothing to say."

Well, as with all jokes, we laugh because they get at some of the truth. So yes, we UUs do like to question things, we cherish the right to ask questions about the most sacred of subjects. And ours is a hard faith to sum up in the two sentences you have before the door gets slammed in your face. However, finding a way to articulate what we believe is just part of our challenge as being part of this flock of faithful.

In *Born Again Unitarian Universalism*, Forrest Church describes a conversation at a dinner party. Seated between strangers, he lets it slip that he is a Unitarian Universalist.

"You are a what?"

"A Unitarian Universalist."

"Oh, I see," [says the man beside me, though] he obviously doesn't. He is rescued by the woman to our right.

"I've never really understood just what it is you Unitarians believe. You *are* Christians, aren't you?"

"Not exactly. I mean, we were and some of us still are but most of us are not."

"You don't believe in Jesus?"

"Not in an orthodox way, certainly. Many of us value his teachings but few, if any of us, believe that he was resurrected on the third day or that he was God."

"What about immortality?"

"Well, I guess you'd have to say that we're pretty much divided on that one."

"But at least you all believe in God?" interrupts the man across the table ...

"Not exactly. Many of us do, if each in his or her own way. Others of us do not find the concept of God a useful one."

"What do you believe?" our bewildered hostess politely asks.

Little does she know she has asked the \$100 million question. She has asked you to describe *succinctly* and *coherently* what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. That is no small feat.

So let's use Forrest Church's dinner party as our imaginary playground, as we try to do our interviewer's curiosity justice, and answer her question.

The easy way to respond to the question, one we often fall into, is to say what it is we don't believe in: We don't believe in a Trinity or in hell and eternal damnation or in the notion of a select few or in original sin, and so on. However, that fails to answer the question she asked, which is what it is we do believe in. And my temptation, when I get the sense that the person I am talking to thinks we are some kind of fly-by-night operation, or some New Age cult, is to start listing all the famous UUs. I want to say, "Well, you know, we date back to early American history. Many of the Founding Fathers of our country were UUs -- Adams, Jefferson, Rush. The leaders of all major movements for social reform, writers, inventors -- Susan B. Anthony, Herman Melville, Darwin, Dickens, Emerson, Thoreau." Although such an answer is satisfying to me and it does prove we are part of the establishment, it also hardly answers the question.

To describe Unitarian Universalism, I find that you almost have to begin by saying that we are non-creedal -- which I guess is a negative term in and of itself. However, this idea is so central to who we are, and so clearly distinct from how most people think of religion, that it is a good place to start.

So you say, "We are a non-creedal faith," and you think for a moment you've answered their question, until you see the look on their faces and realize you have to explain "non-creedal."

"You see," you begin, "there's no doctrinal test of membership we impose on our members. We recognize that each individual has the ability and the responsibility to define the most important religious truths for him or herself -- using reason, conscience, reflection, and dialogue in community. So we don't demand that we all believe the same things, or even pretend it would be better if we did."

"So your members can believe *whatever* they want?" your interviewer asks. This is where I am very glad to have our Principles and Purposes handy.

"No," you say, "we have seven Principles we agreed to in the 1980s. They aren't everything we believe, but they are the least that we agree to affirm and promote among us. So you cannot be a UU and be a bigot, because one of our principles is that we affirm the worth and dignity of all people. And you cannot be a UU and demand ultimate or absolute authority, because we affirm the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large. So there is great freedom, yes, but not *total* freedom."

"What is your scripture?" you're bound to be asked next, particularly if the person asking is from a tradition that has a sacred text or texts.

"Well, I would say we don't have one sacred text. You might say our scripture is the larger bible of human wisdom. So we might draw inspiration from traditional religious texts, but we might also find inspiration in poetry, in telling the stories of courageous men and women in history, in music or in science. Wherever evidence of goodness, beauty and truth are found, that becomes our living scripture."

Here I would like you to indulge me in an aside. Our kind of radical freedom to decide our truths and to choose from so many sources of wisdom is often read by outsiders as our getting off easy. Nothing could be further from the truth, and it is a misconception we have to counter when we have the chance. For example, one U.S. senator a couple of years back called Unitarian Universalism a "cafeteria brand" of religion. His implication was that we walk through the buffet of religious life and pick all that we find appealing -- the sweet stuff, the stuff that goes down easy -- and we leave behind all the stuff of being religious that goes down hard but is good for you. And he had a point. Religious liberals are, for example, often accused of not taking seriously the human capacity for evil, but leaving that question and its implications off our plate. So, sure we have a responsibility to make sure we get a balanced religious diet.

What I didn't like about the senator's assertion, however, was more the passivity implied in the metaphor. Rather than cafeteria customers, picking from ready-made food, I prefer to think of us as chefs at the banquet of life. Instead of having religious foods laid out for us, we UUs tend to seek far and wide, from many lands and in many disciplines, looking for the food that feeds us. Moreover, after such a quest, or in the midst of it, throughout our lives, our job is to create a balanced, harmonious and satisfying meal from what we have sought and found. All of that is hardly passive, but requires every faculty at our disposal, and a lifetime of practice and creative engagement.

So, should someone ever call ours a "cafeteria brand" of faith, if they themselves come from a traditional, creedal faith, ask if their faith might be compared to a TV dinner -- just pull back the plastic and heat. Then, voila, faith is served, though it is hardly a healthy meal.

But I digress. Back to our dinner. So you have so far mentioned that UUs are non-creedal, you've talked about our scripture. About now you can expect to be asked the salvation question:

"So, how are you saved in your faith tradition?" your dinner partner asks you.

You might reply, "That isn't actually a question we ask very often. The Universalists in our heritage believed we were already saved, created redeemable by a loving God who could do no less. What most of us believe today is that our challenge is to make that same radically inclusive love manifest in our actions in the world, so that those who are told by others they are unlovable or irredeemable have heard, at least from us, that that's a lie."

"So do you go to a heaven?" she tentatively asks.

"I like to respond to this question the way Thoreau did on his deathbed when he was asked what he believed about the afterlife. He said, 'I am taking this one life at a time.' We UUs tend to focus on this life. If we concern ourselves with heaven, it tends to be on how we can create heaven right here on earth."

Inevitably, the question I get after I explain how we are non-creedal and after explaining what our sacred texts are, and answering who it is who is saved in our religion and how, is what we do when we get together. I can understand why folk ask the question -- if we break the rules elsewhere, why not here? Of course, knowing what is running through some people's minds, this is where I am always tempted to say something outrageous, like about how we do a dance to the Sacred Owl, and streak three times around the church. But I don't. I usually just tell them it looks an awful lot like your standard Protestant service. "You know, there are readings, two hymns, an offering, a sermon."

What I really should say, and often do, is: "Come see for yourself." If you want to see what it means to live in a pluralistic religious community, come. See how we can sing in a single service about "Spirit of Life" and "Amazing Grace" and a humanist hymn that talks about following where the spirit leads, where we can hear a personal credo from a mystic, and a sermon from a called minister that *no one* in the congregation is required to agree with. Come and see how well it works, how the homeless get cared for and the kids learn to trust their own moral compasses, what we promise to our new members and what they pledge to us, how the community grows strong. See how true it is that we need not think alike to love alike or that we need not think alike to worship together.

At this point, you might also throw in a couple sentences about what this community has meant to you, or why you come back week after week or year after year. You know, in the Baptist tradition they call this "testifying." So, testify! You may have the community they've been looking for and didn't know existed. I want to avoid the situation I witnessed in a congregation I once served, where a new 90-year-old member said with a mixture of sadness and joy: "Why is it that I never heard of Unitarian Universalists before this?" Let's say enough about who we are that this never happens.

So what do we Unitarian Universalists believe? Well, as individuals, we each have our own distinct credos, like the one Daniel read to us today. These hard-won statements of belief are probably as different as each of us in this room is. However, together we believe a number of things in common. Among them:

- \* We believe in ongoing revelation and so we have no creed, but leave to each of our members the work of finding and testing religious truth.
- \* We draw inspiration from wherever wisdom can be found -- seeking it in science no less than in traditional sacred texts, in poetry no less than in historic fact or in the arts.
- \* We are bound by the shared affirmation of certain basic principles that underlie all we do, such as a commitment to protect the worth and dignity of all people and pursue justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
- \* We believe in a radically inclusive love that leaves no person behind, and that it is our work to make that love manifest in this world. Moreover, it is this work we do that will be the salvation of the world.

This is some of what we believe.

Go forth and share your faith with those who ask about it. Be as articulate as you can be, be proud and forthright. Ask about their faith and model the respect for all beliefs that we preach. Invite them to worship with us. Let us make sure that none who would find a home among us go without us. And may this faith we share be made manifest in a world of more inclusive love.

So may it be. Amen.