

Holy Conversations
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When I am traveling and people ask what I do for a living and I tell them I am a minister, the first thing so many of them tell me next is that their church is in the woods or at the on ocean or on a surf board or on the beach. Now mind you, I like these things as much as anyone else and though they offer me great fulfillment. But they are not my church and this is not because I am a minister. It is because church means religion and religion means people and people mean messy negotiation and work and love and meaning making that involves the joy and compromise too of all that working with a group of others entails.

Perhaps this is the difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is often personal. Religion, which means to bind, is where the personal meets the other and begins the dance of relationship.

I do not often talk from the pulpit about what I think it might mean to be Unitarian Universalist and I don't do this because as UUs have some reservations about organized religion in its most traditional forms. We are strong individuals who gather primarily for the joy of community and the stimulation, music, poetry and good treats of Sunday mornings, and also who gather to live into the good and loving work we do as a congregation in each other's lives and in the world.

What we don't typically come here to do is to consider what religion means broadly and what Unitarian Universalism or UUism means specifically. These kinds of discussions we think of as part of as those we left behind when we left our religions leanings of our childhoods. I grew up Catholic so I get it.

And yet, I think in doing this, we throw out the baby with the bathwater as they say because what UUism offers us historical and theologically, is beautiful, rich and relevant for our work today. So, I'm going to delve into this terrain.

As I do, let me clarify right up front that I am never suggesting that our individuality comes behind our UUism or said another way, that as I suggest we walk down the same road together, I am never suggesting we do so dressed the same, or talking the same, or stepping in time, or even listening to the same music. There is room for all of us and all of our glorious difference here. In fact, it is the very basis of our history and of this faith. That is what I love about UUism. We can consider what it means to be UU without having to leave a piece of who we are outside the room.

I am asking you to join me on this journey into this Unitarian Universalist terrain for the next 10 minutes or so, remembering that we will have a Talk About afterwards so hold onto your feedback, as I know you will have it, and we'll take some time together for it at noon.

My colleague Doug Zelinski who is the Congregational Redevelopment Lead for the New England Region for the Unitarian Universalist Association is one of the most brilliant people I have ever known and this is not because he is book smart, though he is.

It is because he has walked being Unitarian Universalist so honestly and with such deep longing and purpose and considered so many positions and modified many of them too with such authenticity and love and with fierce commitment to our great tradition.

And Doug is a good human being and a Unitarian Universalist who believes, as do I, that Unitarian Universalism is a life saving faith. Not because it has the power to redeem us from sins that are past or that will come in the future, not because it prepares us for a life after we die, not because it keeps us from hell but because it prepares us to live this life, and to forgive ourselves and others as we work for a more just world; because it shows us the way to honor our humanity right where we are today, and because it promises that there is no hell that we have not created and therefore cannot resolve as human beings. That is pretty life saving.

So here we have this life saving faith and we don't really know what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. When someone asks us what it means to be UU we quote what it is not- we don't have creeds or one sacred text, we don't all believe in the same thing, there is no single belief in god or not god.

We can talk about the principles and they are certainly guiding but we cannot talk about how they change our daily lives. Most of us don't even know what they are without reading them from a text. No blame. Even I can't remember them!

We do know how to come together with our good minds and hearts and build social justice programs, and we are doing this very well at this time, with great success! And I would like to offer that if we knew the purpose of religion and how being Unitarian Universalist right here and now reflects that purpose uniquely, that everything we do would be infused with a purpose that would carry us forward like a great sail filled with a brilliant gale.

The purpose of religion is about more than deepening our own spirituality, increasing our intimacy with one another, doing social justice projects and meeting here each Sunday. These needs could be and are fulfilled by a myriad of other organizations and groups like books clubs, sports groups, writing groups, sailing and science and dance and music and art and theater workshops and clubs and groups right? So what makes religion different?

Doug Zelinski suggests that the purpose of religion is to shape the world into our vision of love. Now that is a mouthful and I know there is resistance to it among us. Right? Our vision of love? That sounds like a belief system! Who are we to tell

people what love should be or shouldn't be? I hear you and had these reactions too when I heard this. But for now, just stay with me for a bit because you know that I am not a fundamentalist and have not tricked you up to this point into believing otherwise.

So, let's explore this notion for just a minute. The purpose of every religion is to shape the world into our vision of love. And every one of them does this, and so, I would add, do we, and we have always done this and we still do it and were we to do this consciously, the purposefulness that would be at our disposal would be extraordinary.

The way Unitarians and Universalists have been engaged in this since our inception in the 1500s, though some say that Jesus was the first Unitarian as he too did not believe in the trinity which was not developed until the 2nd century, the way we have sought to shape the world according to our vision of love has been through projects like:

- Protecting the rights of people to hold different theological beliefs without being harmed because of them, championed by Francis David in the 1500s in Transylvania
- Support of public education
- The shaping of the principles of democracy
- Abolition
- Women's and children's rights
- Humane treatment of the mentally ill
- Civil Rights
- Animal Rights
- LGBTQ rights
- Immigration Rights

And these are naming only a few of the many causes we have championed as Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists.

And each time we have, we set forth a vision of the world that we felt was a worthy vision, a right interpretation of what constituted humane treatment of others, animals, the earth and we stood proud to say so. We offered a shape of the world according to our vision of love.

And we are doing it still, not only as a denomination but here on our island through our 7th Principle Project/Green Sanctuary movement that is engaged in food rescue, voter registration, clothing drives, composting, gardening where 50% of the proceeds go the food pantry, support for Syrian refugee families, partnering with island immigrants to offer support on drivers' licenses and much more.

And if we can name this as the purpose of religion, to shape the world according to our vision of love, and own it as the purpose of our religion, and take this love on as ours to define here and now, I believe we will harness a capacity that we do not yet have because it allows us to ask the question: How are we as a congregation going to make love more visible here among us and in this world?

And here's the thing. The projects we create around that vision of love are one thing, but in deciding what that love looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like and what its shape is- doing that work together will change us because the first place that love will show up is right here among us. The first people that love changes is us.

We are UU, because we are a covenanted faith which means we live by promises, not creeds or beliefs, that bind us through our history and to ancestors and to each other and give us a way to talk to one another when we break our promises too. So when we stay at the table rather than running, and listen rather than fight, we are at the heart of spiritual development, we are living fully into our liberal, covenanted faith.

We promise each other that we will keep listening and talking until we can discern what love is asking of us now, what the call of love is needing from us.

As Unitarian Universalists we decided a long, long time ago that when we let bishops and creeds and hierarchies go so we could be left to each other, bound by a covenant that reminded us to listen, to not always put our needs first, to step back, to consider, to temper passion with wisdom- then we would be able to hear the call of love and to learn to love each other. You know my friends, I really think this is a miracle. I really do. It is all that we have. No heaven, no hell, no devil, no god. All that we have is this promise to show up and listen until we are changed by each other and can hear the call of love.

And because we are a liberal and free faith, free because we all get to decide how to go about shaping the world in our image of love and our liberal past and present reminds us that our love has to be inclusive, diverse, multiple, liberating, that this love must change us in the loving and must lift us up in the giving of it too, and because we are a liberal and a free faith- we get to chose what love means to us here and now and what that love should look like here and now.

We can decide the best ways for us to offer that love to each other and the world. There is no creed that will tell us this. No bishop will pronounce it. No overseer will judge it. It is meeting together freely, through listening, considering, opening our hearts to all voices at the table and those not yet heard or recognized too, that we come to discern what matters to us. This is the beauty and the gift we have been given. This is our right that so many before us risked their lives to protect. This is what it means to be UU. To stand with each other as a free and liberal people and decide together what it means to love and what shape that love will take now.

How will we love this island with the incredible strength and freedom and beauty of our tradition? Who will be included in this love? What gifts do you have that are needed here? What loves, what laughter, what talents, what stillness, what voice do you bring here that can help us all fulfill our mission of loving each other and the world?

You are needed. Each child and each youth and each middle aged person and each elder is needed to create this shape of love for us here and now. How will we love this world as Nantucket Unitarian Universalists? It can only be sculpted through us all.

I became a Unitarian Universalist because they took me for who I was and they asked me to be more. Can we believe whatever we want? No, we cannot believe in hate or exclusion or that some deserve more than others or that when some are suffering others can be well. Our beliefs have to have room for others to thrive together, to have to room to grow together, to define love together, to shape that love into a message that is relevant for the world around us and the world beyond us.

Our beliefs ask us to be in covenant with each other even when we break our promises to each other, our beliefs ask us to love each other here and now, our beliefs ask us, not what we are doing to be saved in another life time but what we are doing to save each other and ourselves right here and now. Our beliefs do not include a heaven that is not here on earth or a hell in which we will be tormented. We believe that we are all worthy of a heaven that we build for each other to occupy and that if there is a god, god is love and would never create a hell, would not be interested in more suffering.

Our beliefs lead us out of our beliefs and into our hearts and our actions to love each other and the world. That is what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. That is what keeps me showing up each day with my heart wide open.

What a gift it is to be UU right here and now together. Thank you for who you are. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for coming to this place and asking questions and wondering and pushing back and opening your hearts and giving and giving some more. Each of you is so precious and I love you all. Amen.