

**Taking Our Measure  
Nantucket UU Church**

**Alok Kalia, MD, July 24 2016**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I have now been a Unitarian Universalist for over 18 years. I am doing today what our religion encourages each one of us to do, which is to periodically step back and re-examine our beliefs, our values, our *understanding* of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. **A basic tenet of our religion is that revelation is ongoing; that religions are meant to grow and change and so are human beings.** So today I am taking stock- looking back, looking around, and perhaps most important of all, looking forward.

Twenty years ago, if someone had predicted that one day I would be standing at the pulpit in a Unitarian Universalist Church doing a retrospective, I would have laughed. Twenty years ago, I had no need, and no desire, to delve into matters of the spirit. **I was born a Hindu, but I knew little about my religion and felt no poorer for my ignorance.** I had come to this country at a young age as an immigrant and worked my way up to becoming a respected physician and teacher. I had a good job, a family, a house and two cars. What more could one want?

**But, as they say, life sometimes picks up a two-by-four and hits you upside the head.** That is exactly what happened to me- my younger sister was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and died after a painful illness. She spent most of her last months with me, and as she slipped towards her death, I was often the bearer of bad tidings- this biopsy was positive, that X-ray showed a new lesion. She would ask me why this was happening to her, and I had no answers. **One day she died, but her questions did not, questions that pushed all other thoughts from my mind.** My well-ordered world had fallen apart. I was confused and overcome by a feeling of loneliness. I needed a personal philosophy; I needed to make some meaning out of this world. But most of all I needed support, a community to draw strength from while I thought about the questions and worked on the answers.

**That is when I walked into the Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church in Clear Lake TX, and the congregation became my community.** I felt at home in a way that I had never ever felt before in my life. My new friends gave me the support that I needed as I worked my way towards my personal revelation, *support that was given without conditions, without any expectation that I would find answers that agreed with theirs.* I explored many religions and little by little I found my answers. Over the years, I have built a home that straddles both the religion of my birth- Hinduism- and the religion of my church- Unitarian Universalism. My world-view, my beliefs, I draw from Hinduism, but I frame them in terms of the covenants of Unitarian Universalism. I still consider myself a Hindu, but now I spell my religion HindUU.

**Now, the "Hindu" part of my religion I have a good grip on. But Unitarian Universalism- that is quite another story.** One cannot but wonder how two creeds-

Unitarianism and Universalism- that were rooted in Christianity gave rise to a creedless liberal faith that welcomes all. *For many years after I became a UU, I felt that our roots had no bearing on what we are today.* I felt that we had moved so far from our origins that the terms Unitarianism and Universalism were mere historical oddities, that our past had little to do with our present. **I was wrong.** I have now come to believe that what we have today is the natural evolution of where these two religions started from; *that their fate was sealed at their inception, that the path they have followed was predictable.*

**Let us start with Universalism.** Universalism was a belief that rejected the Calvinistic doctrine of pre-selection, of predestination. Simply put, Calvinism maintains that the *ultimate* fate of every human being, whether that person is going to heaven or to hell, is decided even before that person is born; was in fact decided by God even before He created the world. Some of us are destined to be saved and some to be damned. Nothing we do during our lifetime will make any difference.

**Universalists refused to divide humanity between the saved and the damned.**

Universalists maintained that God's love for us will save us all- without exception. Christianity has always had the concept of a wall, a clear separation, between saints and sinners, between the saved and the damned. **Universalists took down this wall.** But, in retrospect, this was a slippery slope. Once you tear down the wall that separates those destined for heaven from those destined for hell, what do you do with the bricks? Universalism, after all, was a *Christian* denomination with the belief of salvation through Jesus Christ. Should the Universalists use the bricks to build a new wall that surrounds *all* Christians, but *only* Christians, and excludes everyone else, saying in essence: "All of *us* are going to heaven, but the rest of you guys- we don't know about you..."

**No, once you truly begin to believe that in god's eyes we are all the same, you have to throw the bricks away.** There cannot be *any* walls and "Christian" Universalism (with a big "U") has now evolved into a true universalism (with a little "u") that encircles everyone. So when our religion today encourages us to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every human, black or white, gay or straight, woman or man, we really should look all the way back to our Universalist heritage and be thankful!

**What about Unitarianism?** Unitarian thought signifies rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity that conceives of God as existing as God the father, God the Son in the person of Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. From the time this doctrine was formally adopted into Christianity about 300 years after Jesus' death, **there have always been those who had difficulty with this concept, maintaining that it is a human invention, and that God is one.** Like Universalism, Unitarianism was a creed *within* Christianity. In fact, in small pockets in Europe, such as Transylvania, and Poland, and England, Unitarianism has been practiced as a largely Christian tradition for hundreds of years.

**But here, in the United States, Unitarianism broke through the boundaries of Christianity.** Sure, two hundred years ago when Unitarianism first took root in the Northeast, its followers maintained that they were Christian and called their religion *Unitarian Christianity*, as opposed, of course, to Trinitarian Christianity. But this has

been a land of pioneers, a melting pot of people and ideas and beliefs. William Ellery Channing, an early pillar of American Unitarianism, began to preach the use of *reason* while reading the scriptures. This was a novel concept because it encouraged personal interpretation of the word of God. **Ralph Waldo Emerson, who over two centuries has had a significant influence on Unitarian thinking, explored Eastern religions, especially Hinduism, and found that it held the same universal truths.** Theodore Parker, another Unitarian minister, flatly declared in 1841 that **eternal truths are so self evident that the Christian claim to uniqueness could no longer be sustained.** Or as the bumper sticker says- “God is too big to be contained in any one religion”. The seeds that these men planted have kept on growing. When our religion maintains that all of us- Christian or Jewish, Hindu or Muslim or humanist- are observing the same reality, just from different perspectives- we need to look back to our Unitarian roots to understand why.

**But something else also happened during the evolution of Unitarianism and Universalism that was perhaps even more important.** Both these were splinter creeds, and the foundation of each lay in questioning the beliefs held by the majority, whether it was Calvinistic predestination or the concept of the Trinity. Once early Unitarians and Universalists asserted their right to ask such questions, they had to assert the same right for everyone else. **And this, I believe, is the very foundation of our religion as it exists today- the right to question and to respect such questioning.**

**It is clear that the use of reason and openness of mind sets us distinctly apart from many other religions.** All religions have two components- the sectarian and the universal. The sectarian deals with that religion’s unique vision of the path to salvation, whether it is to enter heaven or to achieve nirvana. The universal deals with our earthly needs that transcend ethnicity, and culture, and belief. **We all long for justice and fairness, to love and be loved, to live in peace with others.** And so, in addition to the purely sectarian, all religions have teachings and beliefs that are universal, the epitome of which is the golden rule- do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

**Another way to look at it is that the universal in all religions tries to deal with the present while the sectarian answers questions about the past and the future, questions that precede our birth and prophesize our fate after death.** In most religions, however, the present, the universal, is framed in terms of the sectarian; we are urged to live, and to think, in a certain way because of what happened before birth and what might happen after death. For millions of people, this makes life simpler- there is a reason, an explanation, for everything. *But letting the sectarian cast a shadow on the universal also gives justification for intolerance, even for killing in the name of god.*

**We Unitarian Universalists have made a conscious decision to reject institutional sectarianism.** Questions about life and death, about the past and the future, are important to many of us, but we believe that the people who make up our congregations should be free to answer these questions for themselves. **But as a group, as a religion, we make a commitment to place the *universal* above the *sectarian*, to live truly in the present, to not let reality be overwhelmed by belief.** This does not mean that we reject the

spiritual. We cannot engage productively with the world around us until we are fulfilled inside, and for many us the spiritual is a necessary element of this fulfillment. We do not reject god; many in our congregations, including myself, who have a profound sense of the holy. The difference is, **we are less likely to say “God, throw down a ladder so I can climb up and be with you,” than to say “God, would you please come down the ladder and be with me as I do your work on this earth.”**

**Every major religion has a “great truth” behind which its followers can unite, a central understanding that affects every aspect of the life of the true believer, every action, every major decision.** God’s covenant with Abraham is the great truth for the Jews; Jesus’ sacrifice gives meaning to the life of so many Christians. Hindus live ever aware of the doctrine of Karma, and Muslims of the words of the Koran.

**What is our “great truth”? Do we have a central understanding that we can all unite behind?** I believe that we do. I believe that our great truth is a total commitment to universalism, **a commitment to live our lives with the utter and unshakeable knowledge that there is more that unites all humans than there ever will be that divides them.** Humans have always been territorial in their ways of living and believing. This instinct to form groups was a survival advantage for a hundred thousand years, and it worked well as long as each community had its own space, to live as it wished and to believe as it wished. But as numbers are growing and we are constantly stepping on each other’s toes; our ethnic, and cultural, and religious tentacles are infringing more and more on each other’s territories, on each other’s ways of living and believing. **The harder the armor of belief around these tentacles, the more sparks they generate when they clash, the more fires they light, the more people they kill.**

Universalism says that under our skins we are all the same, anatomically, physiologically, biochemically, even genetically. We breathe the same air, drink the same water, live on the same earth and will share the same future, whatever it might be. *Universalism says that we are all in this together.* **Our great truth, yours and mine, is that we elect to live our lives not by our beliefs, that divide us, but by our knowledge, which unites us. This is our universalism, this is our great truth.**

**So when someone asks you how your religion differs from others, tell them this.** Tell them that every Sunday, in so many churches, people gather to celebrate the sectarian, to preach about the uniqueness of their religion, to define what sets them apart from all others; *but in our churches, we gather to celebrate the universal, to preach about what unites us all as humans, to remind ourselves of what brings us all together.*

Thank you.