

The Unitarian Universalist Gospel
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The Unitarian Universalist
Congregation of South County
April 10, 2005 – Bring a Friend Sunday

It's April 10th, and I'm beginning to believe that what must be the longest, coldest, grayest, snowiest winter ever, is coming to an end. These days I am waking up to birdsongs, and that's a very good sign. It is glorious music, the color of springtime and of joy. As we welcome springtime into our lives, this morning we also welcome many friends and guests to our service; it is a blessing to have you among us today.

I open with a reading by Unitarian Universalist minister David Rankin:

I do not agree with those who say that you must believe only in God or Jesus or Muhammad, or the Book of Mormon or Dr. Sun Myung Moon, in order to be a religious person. You are religious because you are a person. You are religious because you are a conscious and reflective human being. You are religious because you are required, even forced, by your very nature to frame a response to the ultimate questions of life. There is no escape! Religion is a given, an inherited condition of a singular species that needs a structure of meaning.

And a snippet from the writing of Robert Frost:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

We gather here on Sunday mornings as a people of faith. Today we will talk about the roots and the heart and the soul and the mission of that faith.

The title of today's sermon is "The Unitarian Universalist Gospel." Some of you may know that the word "Gospel" simply means the "good news," and we've got plenty of good news to share.

-It is Good News that we encounter the holy in the face of every human being – there are no exceptions.

-It is Good News that we challenge ourselves to stretch and grown to discover one another's essential beauty.

-It is Good News that we proclaim our commitment to Love this planet back to life – and that we act on that commitment.

I promised to speak to you of roots, so - here in two quick minutes is a synopsis of UU History 101, or "everything you wanted to know about Unitarian Universalism and were wondering who to ask." Well, today, that would be me.

As Unitarian Universalists, we *have* taken the road less traveled by – and that has made all the difference.

It is a road that stretches way back in history to the earliest days of Christianity. That's right, interesting fact number one: our roots are in Christianity. During the first 3 centuries of the Common Era, early Unitarian, such as Arius, proclaimed the oneness of God and Universalists, like Origen of Alexandria, offered the assurance of salvation for all. We have been questioners from the beginning, never satisfied to follow an orthodox creed. Our faith has always embraced the intellectual, and in the

great tradition of Socrates, we have held that things rational were also divine.

Freedom of choice in Christianity was lost in the year 325, when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. Ours is a proud and courageous heritage, for what followed were centuries of persecution for any who proclaimed Unitarian or Universalist interpretations of scripture. And courage and fortitude have been required of our faithful throughout history. Many were imprisoned, and some martyred for the crime of professing non-orthodox beliefs. Yet brave dissenters persisted, and in the year 1553, Unitarian scholar, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva.

We have taken the road less traveled by, we are heretics, and we wear that name with honor, for in Greek the word heretic means "one who chooses, or one who questions." The questioning mind and the open heart are hallmarks of the Unitarian Universalist Good News.

Our movement on this continent was founded in the denial of Calvinism. Both our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors identified themselves in opposition to Calvinism and its harsh view of human nature. From its inception in North America, our movement celebrated both the power of love and the power of reason. Calvin's callous and angry God was revisioned into a loving father. Jesus became an example to follow rather than a blood offering to atone for our sins. Unitarian and Universalist congregations spread throughout the continent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Reverend Thomas Starr King is credited with defining the difference between the two movements. He said: "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, and Unitarians believe that people are too

good to be damned by God.” Both denominations were deeply committed to creating a more just society.

In 1961 the two denominations joined to become one liberal religious voice.

Many ask, what we, as Unitarian Universalists believe, what is our Gospel?

One of our ministers, David Rankin, described our beliefs in ten statements. They are:

1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theology, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.
2. We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.
3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.
4. We believe in the never-ending search for Truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.
5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.
6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty and justice-and no idea, ideal or philosophy is superior to a single human life.
7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural products of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.
8. We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.
9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism-so that people might govern themselves.
10. We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.

My colleague Rev. Forrest Church defines religion as “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Faith is our way of making meaning of our lives.

As a people of faith we are called to the Good News of courage.

Simply put: Being human requires courage, for in our hearts there lives an exquisite capacity for valor coupled with the trembling temerity of the child. Indeed, courage is a vital part of the Unitarian Universalist heartbeat. Its pulse is felt in the valor of our forbearers and in the spirit of our contemporary commitment to work for social justice.

Courage, independent thought and a questioning spirit are the very life blood of our faith. They drew me to Unitarian Universalism, the road less traveled by, and they hold me here today.

Our brave heritage lives on when, in conscience, as individuals or as a movement, we take a solitary or unpopular stand, despite all the voices coercing us to get in line and just get with the program.

There’s more good news: As Unitarian Universalists we are religious trailblazers. Look around you. We are the faith movement whose lead other denominations are following. The mouse that roared, as it were. Now, so many years after our initiatives, others are supporting women in the ministry, the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy and same sex marriage. Others are now committing to embracing diversity of every kind. Did you

know that seven of the fourteen plaintiffs in the Massachusetts Equal Marriage Rights case were Unitarian Universalists? Yes, we are the heretics on the road less traveled, trail blazers – and it’s all good news – it’s the Unitarian Universalist Gospel.

As religious liberals, we are each called to discover our personal truth, to live into that truth and to give it voice. But that is only one part of the equation. The Good News is that as a pluralistic faith, we are also called to engage the beliefs and the voices of those with divergent views. We are called to engage in respectful discourse, to listen and to learn. This is a demanding faith journey – this rigorous path of self-reflection coupled with a willingness to truly honor differences, not only in our words, but also in our hearts. This very challenge is our Gospel, our Good News.

Because Unitarian Universalism calls each of us to plumb the depths our hearts and minds and to fashion our own spiritual beliefs, we are a church like no other. Because Unitarian Universalism acknowledges the constraints of individual perception and understanding, we gather in congregations to discern together the wisdom of the human race. As a people of faith, we are drawn to our congregations to grow in spirit – to develop an inner light and to shine that light into the larger world. Many of our congregations embrace this covenant as part of their worship service – a Good News covenant, simple, clear and true, it says:

Love is the Spirit of this church, And service is its prayer. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in Peace, to seek the truth in Love and to help one another.

When I came to South County last April as a candidate for your ministry, many people had questions about my theology, and some wanted to know if I use the “God” word in my life and in worship. In response I offered this reading by Unitarian Universalist minister, Nancy Shaffer. She writes of a truly Unitarian Universalist moment, when time stood still between a minister and her congregation.

“That Which Holds All” by Nancy Shaffer

Because she wanted everyone to feel included in her prayer, she said right at the beginning several names for the Holy: *Spirit*, she said, *Holy One*, *Mystery*, *God*.

But then thinking these weren’t enough ways of addressing that which cannot be fully addressed, she added particularities, saying, *Spirit of Life*, *Spirit of Love*, *Ancient Holy One*, *Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know*,

Gracious God, and also *Spirit of This Earth*, *God of Sarah*, *Gaia*, *Thou*.

And then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming superlatives as well:

Most Creative One, *Greatest Source*, *Closest Hope* ---

even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her probably redundant; but then she couldn’t stop:

One Who Made the Stars, she said, although she knew technically a number of those present didn’t believe the stars had been made by anyone or thing but just luckily happened.

One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion, she said, and no one laughed.

That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning, she said,
and the room was silent.

Then, although she hadn't imagined it this way,
others began to offer names:

Peace, said one.

One My Mother Knew, said another.

Ancestor, said a third.

Wind. Rain. Breath, said one near the back.

*Refuge. **That Which Holds All.***

A child said, *Water*.

Someone said, *Kuan Yin*.

Then: *Womb. Witness. Great Kindness. Great Eagle.*

Eternal Stillness.

And then, there wasn't any need to say the things she'd thought would be
important to say, and everyone sat hushed, until someone said: *Amen*.