

## "Religious Identity and Unitarian Universalism"

A lay-led service given on April 27, 2008

With sharings by

**Sarah Brunker, Jason Bostron, Sekou Wilson and Stephen Merino**

Sharing by Sarah Brunker

Good Morning.

Today all of our sharings will be focused on developing a positive Unitarian Universalist identity, which has a very different meaning for each individual. Today I will be sharing my definitions of Unitarian Universalism.

I, and several others of our young adult members, have taken a variety of enriching Religious Exploration classes with Jean Wiant our Director of Lifespan Religious Education and Mark Hayes our Minister, one focus of which has been to develop and articulate our own theologies. We have also studied the history and current demographics of Unitarian Universalism. Our class represented well the diversity of individual religious paths and current views on spirituality. In a recent study shared with us in the Building Your Own Theology Class, we learned that 46.1 % of UUs define themselves as Humanist, 19 % as Earth or Nature Centered, and 9.5 % as Christian, among other classifications as well.

Many UUs, while not identifying with Christianity, may still consider Jesus as a great teacher, amidst other great teachers, such as the Dalai Lama. In George Chryssides's book *The Elements of Unitarianism*, he writes: "Unitarians are sometimes labeled as 'Socinians', a term which refers to Faustus Socinius's teaching that Jesus saved men and women, not by some mysterious atoning transaction which was accomplished on the cross, but rather by his life and example, which people might follow."

Later in this text, Chryssides quotes Andrew Hill's definition of UUism in *The Unitarian Path*, which reads: "The Unitarian path is a liberal religious movement rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions but open to insights from world faiths, reason and science; and with a spectrum extending from liberal Christianity through to liberal Humanism." This definition sounds to me like a short elevator speech, which is a description of your view or definition of Unitarian Universalism, spoken in the time it would take you to travel a few floors in an elevator.

In another RE class here called Articulating Your UU Faith, each participant wrote their own elevator speech. Here is a modified version of my elevator speech from that class:

Unitarian Universalism is historically based on two theological ideas: one deals with the unity of God and the other with the belief that all people are saved. While these are the historic backgrounds for UUism, we have an evolving faith and have now expanded to encompass all world religions as valid sources for truth and meaning. We place a focused emphasis on the individual's responsibility to discover his or her own theology, but we are also bound together in a community that believes we must live our egalitarian values and acknowledge that all beings are interconnected. We express these values through deeds such as social action work, religious education, and honest discussion.

## Sharing by Jason Bostron

What religion am I? I am Unitarian Universalist. But what does that mean? To me, it is a label. It does not define who I am, or encourage who I might be, but it describes how I am. It means that my destination may be the journey itself, but that surely I respect and learn from the many other viewpoints that I run into along the way.

I believe that all people are equal and should be given a chance, and that people deserve the right to live free. That peace should be how we live - there is no conflict that cannot be resolved if the parties involved have an open mind, willing to compromise to find a common solution.

I believe that in community, we can and should help each other - but because we want to, not because we feel obligated - and that we should do so in love. Working as individuals, and together, we can make a positive difference in our community, and in the world.

Are these beliefs so much different than those beliefs of the faith of my childhood? No. As a United Methodist, the views differ on a few main topics - I'm sure who Jesus was and what Jesus' purpose was may be the first to come to mind - but the main ideas: love your neighbors, help those in need, and others all coincide. Don't get hung up on the differences, but see the similarities. We all - that is, many faiths - all share the same core values: in human dignity, worth, and in community.

So let us not focus on the differences between ourselves and our neighbors, but focus on how we may work together. Let's take where each one of us has been and use it to help build a bridge to our future. Although I disagree with some philosophy I have held in the past, it has helped make who I am today. Our individual experiences are valuable, they define who we are - there is no reason to throw some of them away. We can learn from them all.

That is why I respect my past - specifically my religious past - but still move on towards my future.

## Sharing by Sekou Wilson

Upon sharing with others the seven principles or any other summary of Unitarian Universalist beliefs, we are bound to hear one of two responses. One is the assertion that since Unitarian Universalism doesn't require a belief in any specific transcendental power, it is not really a religion. The other is the notion that the values which Unitarian Universalism upholds are also upheld by most other religions, and that the faith is therefore not unique. As Unitarian Universalists, we may disagree with these statements. Yet, I can see how some outside of Unitarian Universalism can develop these impressions. I believe this incomplete understanding of Unitarian Universalism indicates a need for a positive and unique identity. Developing and articulating such an identity may help others to better understand and appreciate Unitarian Universalism.

I believe that one fundamental aspect of Unitarian Universalism which is very significant, but not often highlighted, is its focus on human responsibility. In my opinion, this is the most unique, and potentially the most consequential, aspect of Unitarian Universalist identity. While most religions acknowledge the human potential for both good and evil and the effects of human choices on others, most religions do not emphasize (or in some cases even believe) that the power to change one's self and the world for better or for worse lies within humans themselves. Good and evil, triumph and failure, fortune and tragedy are often attributed to spiritual forces beyond human control.

In the area of human responsibility, Unitarian Universalism holds a view which is quite unique among religions. While humanity is not seen as perfect or all powerful, the critical role which human responsibility can and does play in human experience is emphasized. This view is not a denial of all natural forces which influence the human condition. Rather, it is a reminder that despite challenges, people have the ability to make positive changes if they take on this responsibility.

This view holds great potential because it calls concerned individuals to direct action. It challenges people to not only acknowledge problems, but to actively work to solve these problems. As a faith which focuses on human responsibility, Unitarian Universalism is known for participating heavily in social action and other humanitarian efforts. Beliefs which strongly encourage human action are an important part of Unitarian Universalist identity, and they lend great credibility to the faith.

We as Unitarian Universalists can help develop a positive identity by emphasizing our belief in human responsibility. This includes explaining our position to curious individuals, and discussing the positive actions we take as a result of our beliefs. It also includes encouraging both one another and those outside the faith to participate in activities which serve the greater good. Perhaps this taking action is the best way we can develop a positive identity, since it is what we do that ultimately defines us.

## Sharing by Stephen Merino

When I stopped attending Mormon services in 2006, it was at the end of a long period of life-transforming questioning, doubting, and longing. I was excited and relieved to be doing what I thought was the only honest and sincere thing I could do. Yet, I had a feeling, even a fear, that when I left Mormonism, I was probably leaving religion altogether. As someone who values religion deeply and has even decided to make a career of studying it, I was saddened by the prospect of no religion in my life. Thankfully, a little over a year ago I found this place.

Now, over a year later, I pause to reflect on where I've been and where I'm going. The topic of today's service came out of personal reflection and several conversations I've had with others on a challenge that I believe faces many of us. I speak of the fact that we sometimes describe our faith by what it is *not* instead of by what it *is*. Earlier, Tina and I performed a goofy skit illustrating this tendency. Sometimes when I tell people about this place and my involvement here, I find myself asking or at least thinking something like "Where else would an agnostic, skeptical, post-Mormon intellectual go?" The problem is that this

only implies that I am UU *by default* – maybe because no other place would take me. While that may be true, I don't want to be UU merely by default – because I happen to *not* be anything else.

I often think of an experience I had in this place. I once heard someone, when asked why they come here, say because “it doesn't offend me.” I don't doubt that this is true for many of us, maybe even myself. What a relief it is for many of us to find such a place. But is this really the best reason to be here? Are we always so on guard here in this place of religion that we seek to merely *not be offended*?

I wish to speak today on constructing a positive religious identity as Unitarian Universalists. I recognize and appreciate that such an identity will be different for each of us. What I share today is the process I have begun to go through to do this for myself.

The sociologist in me recognizes that groups always define who they are in part by identifying who they are *not*. Groups set clear boundaries and create what are called *negative reference groups* – groups we look to help us determine what we are *not*. We all do this everyday and this is an important and natural part of social life. But in the religious sphere, what happens when we rely only upon this means of figuring out who we are and what we believe? The Unitarian Universalist in me believes that it may serve as a barrier to personal, congregational, and denominational growth.

I believe that in order to connect my beliefs to action and to use religion as a source of guidance, inspiration, and hope, I need to ground myself in a positive religious identity. Doing so goes beyond defining what I *don't* believe, and into defining what I *do* believe, and, perhaps most importantly, what I'm willing to do to achieve it. I believe that in our faith and in our congregation we have some tools to help us. Religious education classes like Articulating Your UU Faith, Building Your Own Theology, and Owning Your Religious Past are designed to help us explore and define our beliefs and our religious identity. Some of us are stuck in a spiritual rut, still looking back at where we've come from rather than where we're going. Each of us will create a positive religious identity in a different way, but it's something I believe we all should do.

Some of you may say “Yeah, but why a *religious* identity? I'm not a religious person.” Some of you may feel uncomfortable calling yourselves religious or maybe even uneasy calling Unitarian Universalism a religion. I can sympathize with this – by conventional standards I'm probably not religious, either. But to construct a positive *religious* identity is to ground ourselves in this religious tradition of Unitarian Universalism, its rich history, its exciting present, and its yet-to-be-determined future. Let's not let the word *religion* scare us away. UU minister and former UUA president Forrest Church defines religion as “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Humanist professor Anthony Pinn defines it as “that which provides orientation or direction for human life” along with “motivation for living and acting in accordance with this orientation.” Let *us* have a say in what it means. To borrow from Forrest Church and Anthony Pinn, let Unitarian Universalism be our response to life, and our orientation for living fully.

A month ago I attended the spring conference of the Joseph Priestley District of the UUA. The keynote address was given by Rob Keithan, director of the Washington Office for Advocacy of the UUA. Rob's address was called “Who do we think we are?” and focused on the need for a strong, focused, but humble

and grateful religious identity as UUs. Rob insisted that we not shy away from calling ourselves “religious.” First, he pointed out that, well, technically, we are. But Rob said that there’s another, deeper way in which we are a religious people, a way that I had never considered. Our beloved first principle, which emphasizes the worth and dignity of ALL people and which drives our commitment to social justice and love, is a faith statement – something that can’t be proven or tested, but that we accept on faith. You could probably make the same case about the other principles.

I believe that as individuals and as a religious movement we need to construct a positive religious identity because others continue to try to narrowly define religion in a way that is not in keeping with our religious ideals and principles. Some in the Religious Right identify secular humanists, religious liberals, gays and lesbians, the ACLU, and others as “the enemy,” and assert that somehow despite the wisdom of our founders and the language of their founding documents America is a “Christian Nation.” Others, part of a “new atheist” movement, put ALL religion squarely in the crosshairs. Based on worn-out, oversimplistic, and intolerant arguments, these authors have tried to make the case that the world would be better off without religion. I believe that we are poised to offer an alternative voice in the debate over religion. I think that Unitarian Universalists see religion as a tool. A tool that can be used for good or ill. We see in religion the potential to heal, unite, inspire, and motivate. We also see in religion deep and meaningful expressions of history, culture, and art. We see it as an expression of what makes us human. We refuse to give up on religion. A positive religious identity as Unitarian Universalists would position us to provide this sort of viewpoint and challenge those who would more narrowly define religion in order to attack those with whom they disagree.

There are claims, often found in UU jokes and sometimes offered by much more conventionally “religious” individuals, that Unitarian Universalism is an empty faith, so devoid of theology and so concerned with political correctness and inclusiveness that it ultimately says nothing at all. I do not believe that UUism is empty and meaningless. We have made a deliberate decision to have no creed. This allows individuals to embark on their own religious journeys, guided and informed by our common goals and shared principles. Second, our commitment to inclusiveness poses challenges, but ultimately we believe that it is the only way to be fair, just, and loving.

So what should a positive UU identity look like? It will no doubt look different for each of us, but I believe we share much with each other in terms of beliefs and values, and the obvious place to look is the seven principles, a set of powerful beliefs and values that under-gird what we do in our faith and what we seek to accomplish. Let us reflect on these often and commit to more fully live up to them.

My personal religious identity has been heavily influenced by religious humanism and religious naturalism, and more specifically, by a view described by Reverend William R. Murry in his book *Reason and Reverence* as “humanistic religious naturalism.” Combining religious humanism’s confidence in human potential and its emphasis on ethical living with religious naturalism’s view of humans as merely part of a larger, natural world worthy of reverence and human care, Murry describes a religious perspective that “promotes an ethical life in which one thinks and acts from a larger perspective than one’s own egoistic interests, a life that affirms the worth and dignity of each person, a life

filled with wonder and reverence for the extraordinary magnificence of the natural world and human creations.” This is a pretty accurate description of my own religious identity as a Unitarian Universalist.

But what’s your religious identity? Why are you here in this place when you could be somewhere else right now? What beliefs and values motivate you and ground your commitment to working for a better world? Despite your best intentions, do you still sometimes find yourself defining who you are as a UU too much by what you are not and by what you do not believe in?

These are important questions, and I hope that this service will make each of us pause to consider them. Let us be grateful for our faith, Unitarian Universalism, and seek to ground ourselves in a *positive* identity that will further our commitment to social justice, ethical living, and living in love. So may it be.