

Should Unitarian Universalists Evangelize?

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Evangelism! That's one of those words that makes some of us wince. It carries with it associations that we would just as soon avoid. It smacks of proselytizing, another of those dirty words. Such words may evoke visions of fanatics trying to cram their religion down our throats, insisting that their way is the only way.

John Morgan, author of our reading this morning, tells of a Sunday in which he used the "E" word in a sermon. After the service, during coffee hour, he noticed out of the corner of his eye someone marching toward him, face flushed, eyes angry. "Don't ever use that word here," she said. "What word?" John asked innocently, knowing full well what was coming. "Evangelism! Don't use it again. We have newcomers here today!" John held his tongue, but he wanted to ask how the newcomers had learned about the church if not from someone's evangelism.

I for one support the idea of reclaiming and rehabilitating the concept of evangelism. The root meaning of the word is simply "bringing good news." If we allow those who claim that *their* Good News is the *only* good news to monopolize the word, then we're playing right into their hands. If we have good news, and I think we do, then perhaps we should be sharing it, putting it out into the world. That is evangelism.

I would agree with those who shun the idea of proselytizing, which means actively trying to convert others to your way of belief, your religion. My understanding of evangelism means sharing *your* good news, your dreams and visions, what you have found and experienced, and in so doing, offering someone else one more option from which they can choose. It's an attitude of sharing, as opposed to imposing or forcing something on someone.

Let me repeat John Morgan's explicit definition of evangelism: "sharing our dreams with others in order to transform the world." Sharing our dreams means first, that we have dreams, and second that we have the desire and ability to share them. That means having the conviction that we have a saving message "that commands our loyalty and compels us to share it with others." (Scott Alexander, *Salted with Fire*)

Let me tell you that I have that conviction, and I hope you do too. My conviction that Unitarian Universalism has a saving message comes from my own experience. My experience with Unitarian Universalism saved me from a life with little meaning. It saved me from self-absorption and a sense that I was isolated from the rest of the world. It saved me from wasting my gifts and talents out of feelings of helplessness and a lack of self-esteem. It saved me from hiding my light under a bushel.

It is precisely because of the light that Unitarian Universalism brought to my life – the personal transformation that it helped to make possible – that I felt called to enter ministry. I am called to help cultivate an environment that encourages others in their own journeys of transformation. I am called to help build a community that lives and shares those values that can transform the world.

One of the better expressions I've found of the saving potential of our faith is an affirmation by the Rev. Scott Alexander, based on our Seven Principles, that appears in the book *Salted with Fire*, which he edited. He writes:

In a world with so much hatred and violence,
We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and
dignity of every person.

In a world with so much brutality and fear,
We need a religion that seeks justice, equity and compassion
in human relations.

In a world with so many persons abused and neglected,
We need a religion that calls us to accept one another and
encourage one another to spiritual growth.

In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood,
We need a religion that challenges us to a free and
responsible search for truth and meaning.

In a world with so much tyranny and oppression,
We need a religion that affirms the right of conscience and
the use of . . . democratic process.

In a world with so much inequality and strife,
We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world
community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

In a world with so much environmental degradation,
We need a religion that advocates respect for the
interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

In a world with so much uncertainty and despair,
We need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope and
our hands to serve.

It is my conviction that, not only do *we* need such a religion, but so does the world. And it's up to us to let the world know that such a religion exists. Of course not everyone will respond with enthusiasm. But in my experience, there is a widespread hunger out there in the world for exactly the kinds of things that our Unitarian Universalist faith has to offer. So how do we get the word out? How do we share what we've found here? How do we let our light shine?

The first, and probably most important way is through our normal everyday interactions with family, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Conversations often center around sharing information and opinions about favorite restaurants, or books, or movies, or music. Why not extend that to talk about religion? I know that's not as easy as it sounds. If you see religion as such an intensely personal matter, as many of us do, then it's difficult to just start talking about it in casual conversation. Plus, there's the danger of being seen as pushy, as proselytizing in the very way that helped push many of us away from our former faith traditions.

But you don't have to jump right into preaching a sermon about the wondrous virtues of Unitarian Universalism, or reciting Scott Alexander's affirmation. You might broach the subject by asking someone whether they attend a church. And if so, what it's like, and what they like about it. If they aren't involved, why not? What would a church need to be like to attract their interest?

If it's clear that your companion isn't interested in discussing such matters, you can move on to other things, and nothing's lost. But you may be surprised to uncover a genuine interest in what you have to share about your religion and your religious community. And what a shame it would have been to miss that opportunity. Just out of curiosity, how many of you are here today

because, at some point in the past, someone talked to you about Unitarian Universalism or about this congregation? [Many hands] See, it works!

Let me pose another question. Take a few moments to think of people you know, who aren't already here, that you think might be interested in Unitarian Universalism, and tick them off on your fingers. . . How many of you thought of more than ten? More than five? At least one or two? [Many hands] Clearly there are a lot of potential Unitarian Universalists out there.

Another more passive way of starting conversations is by sporting UU bumper stickers on our cars, or UU buttons and jewelry on our persons. People whose curiosity is piqued will often ask what that's about. There's a golden opportunity that you should be prepared for. Of course the most effective sharing is that from the heart, growing out of your own experience and your own vision. But you also might carry a few wallet cards containing our Principles to hand to people, or you might prepare ahead of time an "elevator speech" for use when someone asks you what Unitarian Universalism is all about.

The idea is to imagine that you get on the elevator at the top floor of your building, and you've got until the elevator reaches the lobby to describe Unitarian Universalism. So you need to be concise and to the point, capturing the essence, and perhaps stimulating enough interest to lead to a more extensive conversation. Recent issues of the *UU World* magazine have included some people's elevator speeches as examples. Let me share just a couple of those. Here's one:

Unitarian Universalism embodies religious freedom. We do not provide the answers to life's greatest questions. Instead we provide a beloved community in which individuals, working together and alone, are encouraged to find answers that are meaningful in the context of their own lives. We draw upon all sources of knowledge – including experience, authority, intuition, reason, and faith – in the search for answers.

Ours is a living, dynamic religion. We are always free to develop and change our beliefs as we acquire new knowledge and insight concerning truth, reality and the meaning of life. (Melvin E. Mackey)

Or if you prefer a real sound-bite response, it might be something like:

A Unitarian Universalist is a free spirit – free to seek his or her own spiritual truth within a warm and supporting community of diverse truth seekers. (Ruth Straus)

You might want to try your hand at creating an elevator speech. You never know when it might come in handy. And if you're willing to share it with me, I'd be delighted.

Another way of letting your Unitarian Universalist light shine is through your actions. Deeds are often more important than words. If you live your religious principles every day, that is a wonderful reflection on your religious faith and your religious community. Especially if, when asked why you act with compassion or generosity, or why you're fighting for justice, or why you're involved in your community, you explain how all that grows out of your religion.

One of the things that first put Unitarian Universalism on my radar screen was its visibility on the front lines of the struggles for peace and justice. That was my first clue that we might share some important fundamental values. That's one reason why it's important for us to be involved, as a congregation, with ecumenical and interfaith efforts in the community. Things

like Interfaith Mission, Habitat for Humanity, the Interfaith and Community Coalition Against Prejudice and Violence, and the Gay-Affirming Interfaith Network.

It is important that our actions in the world be consonant with the values we espouse. And that applies to our life together within these walls as well as outside them. If our life together as a community is characterized by justice, equity and compassion, by acceptance and encouragement – newcomers among us will sense that. They'll want to be a part of that. And our community will continue to grow in size and in spirit. And the world will be a better place for it.

I'd like to close this morning with two real stories, shared by ministerial colleagues of mine, which illustrate how some of the best evangelism for our faith can grow out of the simple acts of living authentically in the world.

The first is from the Rev. Meg Riley, who recounts a chance meeting with an old neighbor of hers who had been a devout Mormon, but who had recently left the church. Meg writes:

I asked her to hear the long version of the story and she said two things that stick with me and haunt me.

First, when I asked her if she missed the church, she replied, "To my astonishment, what I have found is that the overwhelming difference in my life since leaving is an absence of fear and an absence of guilt"

Second, she said that what happened for her was that she asked a new question. She'd always asked herself, when things seemed wrong or closed or stifling about the church, "If I leave, can I live with my entire family being damned to eternal hell?" and suddenly one day in prayer a new question arrived, "What if what they're saying isn't true?" Just allowing herself to consider this new question led her down a new path, which at the moment, is extremely anti-religious and anti-God but which has her looking as radiant as a new bride! She positively gleams!

So I asked her – would there have been anything that someone like me could have ever said to help you ask that second question? She thought for a long time and said, "No, not really, because anything you would have said would have been corrupt. BUT," she said, "your kindness to me and comfort with your own path to salvation is one of the things that started me wondering, What if they're wrong?"

We never know how far our ripples will spread, and what effects they may have. Finally, this story from the Rev. Jonalu Johnstone:

One of our Covenant Groups had been discussing the question of how we communicate our faith to others, here in this fundamentalist world. They concluded that if they were to live their lives in such a way that people wanted to know what their religion was, then that would be the ideal way.

During the discussion, one of the members was missing, in the hospital; before too long, he would die. This Covenant Group was incredible in their ministry to him. A few days after that discussion, two members of the group were sitting at the VA hospital with the ill man. Another patient asked them, "Are you brothers?" "No," they replied. "Isn't he your

father?” “No,” they answered. “What is your relationship, then?” “We go to the same church,” they answered.

“What church is that?” asked the patient, clearly astounded. And they realized that they were demonstrating their faith to the world, simply by showing the love they felt for this man.

Sometimes, we seem to believe that unless we make huge changes in the world, we’re not doing enough. I think we need to notice what’s in front of us, what needs to be done, what our faith draws us to do, and simply do it. . . Live our lives faithfully. Nothing more is required. And nothing less.

So let’s not keep our good news secret. Let’s not hide our light under a bushel. Rather, may we let our light shine through our beaming faces and through our lives of engagement and service. May our separate fires come together to kindle one flame that can help light up the darkness around us.

So may it be.