

“Unitarian Universalism: Everything That’s Wrong With It”

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June 28, 2009

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Bethesda, MD

When I agreed to speak, I didn’t know that the UU General Assembly would be meeting in Salt Lake City at the same time. And with so much of the leadership of Cedar Lane gone out there, it seems like we should do some sort of prank today, like maybe after the service we should fill the Sanctuary with packing peanuts or something so when Roger gets back he opens the door and it all ... As Nancy mentioned, I write a column in *The Washington Post*. My column runs 5 days a week which means I can’t spend very long writing any single column. I have an idea, I write it, it goes in the paper, and then the process starts all over again. Something else you should know is that the last thing that happens after the column is written is that it gets a headline and that I don’t write the headline. Headlines are written by copy editors. I tell you this so you’ll understand how difficult it is for someone like me to provide a headline in January to a sermon I won’t write until June.

I ran into this problem a few years ago, the last time I was asked to be a summer fill-in here at Cedar Lane and then the title I came up with for my sermon was “The Secret of the Universe Revealed.” I wanted something catchy; it was a classic bait and switch, but as my dad, who was a pilot in the Air Force, used to say of landings, “Any sermon you can walk away from is a good one,” so I survived not actually revealing the secret of the universe. Which brings me to the title of today’s sermon, again I wanted something catchy, something memorable, something thought-provoking. What I ended up with was, “Unitarian Universalism: Everything That’s Wrong with It?” I mentioned this title at dinner the other night and my daughter, Beatrice, said “Are you crazy? Those Unitarians are going to run you over with their Priuses.” But of course, we Unitarians are a peace loving people. Besides, I think I can outrun a Prius. It’s the Volvos you have to worry about. But please feel free to stone me in body or spirit as you are able.

I’m convinced that everybody has one good sermon in them and never will that belief be tested more than here today when I offer my second sermon. What is wrong with Unitarian Universalism? Boy, that really seemed like a good idea in January. Now I’m not so sure. But I’m just going to start with the unimportant stuff- elements of our weekly service that I think can be improved upon. People who know me well know that I have two irrational fears. The first irrational fear is the fear that an improperly secured mattress will fly off the top of the car on the Beltway and slam into my windshield. Don’t you see those mattresses on the side of the road and you wonder how they got there?

My second fear is of candles. I’m convinced that inside every candle is a 4-alarm fire waiting to get out. I’m very suspicious of the whole rise of aromatherapy candles the last few years. It seems to be an agenda pushed by the candle-industrial complex. In my book, having a lighted candle around the house is like having an unsecured firearm. Now you may call that a chalice, but I say it’s a candle, and I say to hell with it. In fact, last Sunday, I noticed that at the end of the service the chalice was blown out. But the little candle, I don’t know if you can see it, but behind the chalice, next to the matches actually – that doesn’t seem very smart- is a little candle to light

the taper that lights the chalice- and that wasn't blown out. Somebody finally blew it out, just as I was going to go up there and do it. So it wouldn't be so bad, I wouldn't be so concerned about candles, if our sanctuary was made of steel or asbestos. But it's made of wood, beautiful wood, and I don't even know, is this flash paper or something back here? So my suggestion, one improvement, one thing that's wrong with Unitarian Universalism, is that we should use a flashlight rather than a chalice. I know that we use them in RE for the little kids. My sort of improvement is – I don't know if you can see- but I've cut out a little chalice-shaped stencil on the end so that it's sort of like the Bat Light. You turn it on- this isn't bright enough and it's too light in here right now, but if you ever need a Unitarian, you just turn it on and shine it on the skies over Gotham City and a Unitarian will come.

I love the music in our church. It's exactly for things like today where we have soloists and we get to hear wonderful music. Sometimes the songs are hard to sing, I find. I'm not a very good singer. I'm not a musician, I'm a drummer. But I find *Spirit of Life* hard to sing, actually, although I love the melody and everything. I find it hard to sing because I think it's a little slow for me to sing. I find the slow songs harder to sing than faster songs. So I wonder if *Spirit of Life* couldn't be improved if it was sung faster and I wondered whether we could try to sing it faster, like twice as fast, just to see how it goes. I've never heard that before. You know maybe, I don't know what- prestissimo or something, I don't know the technical term, no? Yeah, let's do it now. All together. Okay, here we go.

*Spirit of Life, faster than usual.*

That was great. Thank you, thank you. It could have been even faster but I think that was a great start. Another thing, doesn't it seem the offertory comes too early in the order of service? Shouldn't it come *after* the sermon, so that the congregation could reward an especially fine effort or punish something lackluster? You know, Roger just didn't hit it out of the park today. He's only getting 3 bucks from me. Or bravo, Heather, Cedar Lane is in my will now. Or maybe I have it backwards. Maybe Roger, Heather, and Susan modulate the delivery of their sermons based on the take.

Of course these are silly observations, which is pretty much what you're going to get, Nancy, when you ask me to deliver the sermon. I'm just grasping at this title I came up with 6 months ago. Let me try not to be serious, necessarily, but to think about this and encourage you to think about this. Unitarian Universalism is a touchy-feely religion, I think. I think it's fair to say that. That's hard on some people. It's hard on shy people, for example. I've decided I'm basically a shy person, though I'm sure it doesn't seem that way, dressed as I am like an evangelical preacher up here. But I think I'm an extroverted introvert. And a religion where you're encouraged to share your inner most feelings is tough for extroverted introverts like myself. There's also the real possibility that I don't have any inner most feelings, which is- I'd rather not contemplate that right now. What are some of the touchy feely elements of our religion? Or, of our faith community? We're not allowed to say "religion" in our religion.

Well, when it comes to what we embrace or welcome or tolerate, I'm reminded of that scene from *The Wild One*, where someone asks Marlon Brando, "What are you rebelling against?" and he answers, "What do you got?" And I wonder if the UU equivalent is "What do you believe

in?” “What do you got?” We are incredibly accepting: believe in God, don’t believe in God, believe in lots of gods, believe that God is in a tree or a stream, it’s all God, I mean it’s all good. But does believing in *anything* raise the possibility that *nothing* really matters? If God is everywhere, does he or she or it or them risk getting a bit watered down? That’s something I was wondering. We also sometimes alter history. I mentioned this in my last sermon: how eager we are to claim for our own famous figures who show various or have shown or showed various Unitarianish tendencies. So that people I’ve never heard of or have heard of, oh you know they were Unitarians. They’re dead. They can’t deny it. It reminds me a bit of the way Mormons keep baptizing dead people. I saw somewhere that Millard Fillmore was a Unitarian. I don’t know if that recommends our religion to people or not.

Last time I sermonized, I joked about trying to find the Unitarian axe murderers, genocidal maniacs, just for some balance. And this time I typed “bad Unitarians” into Google to see what I could find. And I actually found a discussion, several discussions, about this notion. There was a blogger, a blog, “Chalice Blogger,” it’s called, and a blogger, I believe it’s a woman, was talking about an incident in her office. She has a co-worker who’s Mormon and I think she was talking to her about well, “Do you want to go out or see a movie or something?” and the person said, “Well, I have church or I don’t go to movies” or something and she said, “Oh, but I’m a bad Mormon.” And so this blogger wrote, “I’m still bugged by the whole interaction. Part of me wants to say to my friend, ‘Hey you live a really good life and seriously, I think God has bigger things to worry about.’ Another impulse almost wishes that as a UU, I could have some sort of objective standard to tell me how I’m doing in my faith. But then maybe with scales and bank balances, life gives us enough objective standards and it’s good that UUism gives us an arena where it’s okay to hang loose and see what develops in the long run.”

I thought that was fascinating.

I guess someone who didn’t believe in the 7 principles would probably be a bad Unitarian. If I didn’t believe in the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” that would definitely make me a bad Unitarian. But what if I accepted the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” but thought that there were *some* people who were worth a little more, were a little more dignified than other people? And yet, how could I not feel that way? I think some people are wrong in what they believe and what they do. And is it hypocritical for me to say, as a Unitarian, “I believe in your inherent worth and dignity, but I think you’re full of it”? I sometimes wonder if that particular principle is the UU equivalent of that old Southern practice of following any critical observation with “Bless his heart,” or “Bless her heart.” “Betty is the world’s worst cook, bless her heart.” So is that one of the things that is wrong with Unitarian Universalism, that it can make us hypocritical?

I thought of this in relation to Religious Education- not that I think we’re turning UU children into hypocrites. RE is the main reason my family joined Cedar Lane and still one of my favorite things about it. I sometimes wonder, however, whether we go about it the right way. It’s in the nature of almost every child to rebel, especially in his or her teenage years. I believe, as I’m sure most of you do, that RE is a vital part of what happens here. So it’s a shame when some of our kids inevitably rebel against it or we see their enthusiasm wane. It’s like we’ve given them this great thing and they rebel against it just because they’re going to rebel against anything we give

them. I wondered if maybe we shouldn't be using reverse psychology. Should we be setting up a sham church where we force UU kids to go to Vacation Bible School or CCD so that when they get fed up, as most of us probably did when we were younger, we'll have them right where we want them.

I tell you, agreeing to write a sermon is a great way to really learn about religion. Like, I learned that Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion, non-doctrinal. We don't go in for all that rigid doctrine. I also learned that in the grand scheme of religions in America, there aren't that many UUs. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, about .7% of Americans are Unitarians or members of other liberal faiths. I think I saw .3 or .4% as the just UU number. That's roughly the same percentage as Jehovah's Witnesses or Buddhists. So: non-creedal and a fraction of the population. And I wondered if those two things are related.

Social scientists sometimes talk about lean-forward technologies and lean-back technologies. Lean-back technologies are things like television where it doesn't require any interaction from the viewer; you just kind of let it wash over you. And lean-forward technologies are like computers, we have to go forward to engage with them and use our minds. I think Unitarian Universalism is the ultimate lean-forward religion. It requires a certain intelligence. Just look around you here at Cedar Lane. We are smart people. I am constantly impressed by who I meet here. But are we sometimes too smart for our own good? Does UUism apply to dumb people and if not, would doctrine be a way to change that? Not that we should change our doctrine. I mean at its worst, doctrine is a straight jacket, but at its best, it can be a road map. We say we don't have doctrine, but we do have the 7 principles. They are not as rigid as doctrine. They don't tell you what you can eat or who you can marry. But they are a road map to our religion, or excuse me, our faith community. And not just our faith community, but also how we see the world and how we feel we ought to behave in the world. I wonder if we could be more appealing, whether we could inflate our numbers a bit, if more of our conversations were more explicitly based around our non-creedal creed. Drawing metaphors from these principles in a way that would be helpful for people who might think that Unitarian Universalism was a little too squishy for them.

Right under the 7 principles on the UUA website, is something I've never noticed before, 6 bullet points on the sources that Unitarian Universalism draws from. The first one is "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." Further down, towards the bottom, is this one, "humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit." When I read that, I thought "Wow, that's pretty muscular." "Warn against the idolatries of the mind and spirit." "Idolatries," that's as close to the Old Testament as we're going to get in Unitarian Universalism. I'm not exactly sure what it means, but it reminded me of something I experienced here a few months ago.

I was severely affected by Frank Warren, the guy who came from PostSecret, that project where people send anonymous secrets to an address in Germantown, who spoke here. I was affected because I thought he was speaking in tautologies. "We don't keep secrets, secrets keep us," was one of the things he said. "Writing a secret on a postcard and sending it to a stranger is transforming." But I noticed that some of the secrets aren't even secrets. They're aphorisms or

one-liners. Most of the postcards are beautiful, clever, moving. But when I questioned Frank Warren, he admitted that he said he had no way of knowing whether they were true or not. That some portion probably was not true, and that in any case it didn't make any difference. But if they are not literally true, then what's the point? What is transforming about writing a fake secret on a postcard and sending it to a stranger? What is the scientific mechanism that makes these postcards so redemptive? And the embrace of that sort of thing strikes me as an idolatry of the mind. PostSecret isn't Unitarian or anything, although I have noticed that it seems to have been written about in the UU magazine and I think this guy has probably spoken at Unitarian churches like he spoke at ours. We have a tendency to be dismissive sometimes of the incense-scented mumbo jumbo of, say, Catholicism or the fevered tongue-talking transports of Pentecostal Christians, while at the same time being accepting of squishy new-age mumbo jumbo. And I wondered what the difference was between believing that mailing a made-up secret to a guy in Germantown is redemptive versus believing that whispering your sins to an unmarried man across a wooden grate in a confessional is redemptive.

I also was curious as I started to read a little bit more about UUism, whether we focus enough on the second U. I know that Universalists had their own thing going and then at some point they merged with the Unitarians. They must have been in the weaker position because we're not now inside Cedar Lane Universalist Unitarian Church. And I gather that the central tenant of Universalism is or was that everyone goes to heaven. I can understand why this would upset other religions, especially religions that were set up on the old carrot and stick model, which luckily we're not. But then I was reading somewhere else that when UUs speak of heaven, they mean it in a symbolical, metaphorical sort of way, as opposed to an actual place where you can play with your dead pets and eat as much ice cream as you'd like and not get fat. So what's up with that? Is there a heaven or isn't there? Can we occasionally pay more attention to the second U in our faith community?

For most of recorded history, humans would alter themselves to conform to a religion, often quite literally and physically. And the beauty of Unitarian Universalism, its great strength, I think, is that we alter the religion to conform to us.

As I started to work on this sermon, I wondered whether I would emerge shaken a little bit in my beliefs. But then I remembered that since I'm a shallow person, there isn't much worry about shaking any foundations because it's a very thin foundation. But I went to BeliefNet.com. I don't know if you've ever been to this website, BeliefNet.com, and they have something called the Belief-o-Matic, which is very cool where you answer various questions about what you believe, what you think is important, how you think the world was created, what awaits us after death, certain political issues involving things like abortion or women's rights. You click all these buttons and then you click the last button and you wait and it spits out the perfect religion for you. Actually it gives you 16 choices, but it ranks them by likelihood that you would agree from top to bottom and I scored 100% Unitarian Universalist. I don't know what that will get me, but if we don't believe in heaven, it's a real problem. Higher even than secular humanism, which was number two, 94%. So I think despite of anything I've said here this morning, that's probably a pretty accurate representation of how I feel and what the right place for me is: Unitarian Universalism here at Cedar Lane. But it did make me think, it begs thinking about our religion and our faith community and ways that we might improve it.

I also think that we should spread this summer sermonizing stuff around because you learn a lot, as I said, when you're asked to do this. And I'm sure that every one of us in here could probably write his or her own sermon and that would be interesting to hear.