

## What is Unitarian Universalism?

Today's thoughts are gathered from the book "A Chosen Faith" – Introduction to Unitarian Universalism.

Take a few moments to answer the following question: Why did you come here today? PAUSE. Now, answer this question: Why do you attend church? PAUSE. Did you change your answer?

For Unitarian Universalists, the answer to the first question is the same as answer to the second. We may or may not use religious terminology (depending on who you speak to), but we always strip these terms down to their core, universal, unifying meaning.

In many ways, we are no different from other religious people who manage to strip their religion down to its core. A Unitarian minister asked his Roman Catholic grandmother why she attends church, to which she responded:

"When I go to church, I have to be grateful again, just to be alive. I am there with other people. So I don't think just about my own problems. Many have them, just like me. I pray with them and for them. My thoughts go wider, deeper, higher. Sometimes, it does not even matter if the priest's sermon is not so very good! Hope comes back. Love comes back too. I go home and show my husband, not just by words, that it is no good in life to stay bitter. I get him to help me do something nice for a child or a neighbor. That's why I go back to church every week."

So what makes Unitarian Universalists unique? Perhaps this joke will set the scene:

Q: What's the difference between cats and dogs?

A: Dogs look at people and say, "They feed us. They give us shelter. They take care of our every need. They must be gods." Cats look at people and say, "They feed us. They give us shelter. They take care of our every need. We must be gods."

UUs see both perspectives. After all, is there not a bit of truth in both? And does one contradict the other? Indeed, Unitarians and Universalists were two different denominations that merged in 1961. When asked what the difference between them was, Thomas Starr King replied, "Universalists believe that **God is too good** to damn them to hell forever. Unitarians **believe they are too good** to be damned."

Since then, the UU focus has move on from God and heaven and hell, onto a more fundamental question: Why do humans thirst for religion at all? Forrest Church, a more recent prominent UU minister has an answer: "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. Knowing we are going to die gives a special poignancy to the time we are given to live and love."

At core, religious experience is direct and personal. It may be joyous—a transformative moment of awakening like being present at a child’s birth. Or it may be as painful as the birth itself, or as wrenching as grief. Sometimes it takes something very close to our own death, or the death of someone we love, to break through our usual defenses and remind us what a gift it is to be alive and to be able to love.

Through profound joy and suffering, aloneness and connection, our own religious experience is born. D.H. Laurence, british novelist put it well: Most of us are born again on entering maturity, when we enter into a consciousness of humanity—all the laughing and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow. Then, it appears to me, one gradually formulates one’s religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one’s religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.

Part of all authentic experience is deeply inward—beginning to trust what A UU minister, Channing, calls “the power of God within”.

But often it is dependent upon the agency of others whose insight, courage, or love helps expand our idea of what human life can be. This is why UUs choose to gather in religious communities, where others and a whole tradition, help us to keep heart and conscience and mind receptive.

It is community that calls us to live out our only “commandment” – to live in love. It challenges us with the ethical “paradox” – Give and you shall receive, empty yourself and you shall be filled, loose yourself and be found. Every sacrifice (the word means to “render sacred”) every work of love, or selfless deed is redemptive both for ourselves and for others. We lose ourselves... in the concrete work of justice being done and love being shared, work of healing and wholeness, the saving work.

A visitor once attended a UU retreat, and was asked at the end: did it meet your expectations? She answered: Coming here didn’t meet my expectations, it changed them: my expectations of myself, of others, of helping, of worship. I’m more aware of pain than I was before, but also of grace—in the world, in sharing, in silence, in working and worshipping together.”

Whatever expectations you bring, don’t expect to have them met, but rather changed. I have seen obstinate atheists develop a sense of transcendence, conservative pietists develop a social conscience, cynics begin to pray, and skeptics begin to articulate that they do believe. I have seen people grow unexpectedly in their capacity to love, to feel and respond creatively to both the pain and the grace of human living.

I had initially intended to introduce UU through the seven principles, but they did not reflect the core of the UU faith as well to me than the words I shared with you. That said, I feel obligated to answer the question “what do UUs believe” head on at least in closing. So I share this version of the principles, articulated by Reverend Stephen Kendrick:

*Our congregations freely gather to live out a democratic faith.  
Every human being is holy and is called to the tasks and joys of love.  
We do not limit the truth of God (even to the word "God") but live in  
openness and belief in human freedom and dignity.  
Our creed is kindness [and community]  
We celebrate the gift of life and join in taking on the sufferings of this  
fragile world.  
We are this generation's bearers of an eternal message drawn from  
ancient springs, that truth must grow, enlarge and glow in creative  
freedom.  
Revelation is not sealed. It is lived anew in every heart.*