

**Living in the Big Beautiful Tent**  
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**May 10, 2015**

When I was growing up,  
every year around Memorial Day  
our Unitarian Universalist congregation  
would host "Bring a Friend Sunday."  
During my teenage years,  
a large part of the appeal  
was that this day celebrated the last day of church  
before we let out for the summer.  
There was no worship service, per se --  
except, perhaps, in the Emersonian sense:  
The entire morning  
consisted of an outdoor potluck picnic.  
It was a joyful kind of day,  
with plenty of good food  
and an open invitation to enjoy the company.

And so, on "Bring a Friend Sunday,"  
I brought friends.  
We would sit in the grass,  
and sometimes my friends would ask,  
"So what do you believe at this church?"  
And I would laugh with pride and say,  
"At *my* church, you can believe whatever you want!"  
"Whatever you want?" they would ask.  
"Yes!" I'd say. "Whatever you want."

But then sometimes my friends,  
in an attempt to define our church's boundaries,  
would start listing history's villains, asking,  
"Would you let *them* into your church?"  
And that would flummox my poor teenage brain.

In those days, my religion was something I needed to defend, living in a conservative society.  
And so I couldn't bear to admit,  
to explore the possibility,  
that maybe -- *just maybe*,  
my church *wasn't* a church  
where you could believe whatever you wanted;  
that Unitarian Universalism was a religion,  
like all the others,  
that had boundaries around what was acceptable;  
and that our faith had expectations of its members.

This month, you are exploring the question of  
what it means to be a people of tradition --  
what is our Unitarian Universalist tradition?  
Who are *we*?  
That is what I want to talk about this morning.

Unitarian Universalism  
is a religion with "big tent theology."  
You can approach this faith  
from any direction  
-- any faith history --  
and find a place to enter  
where you -- and your curiosity --  
are welcome.  
Some of us were born inside this Big Tent,  
but many of you found your way here from somewhere  
else.  
In this Big Tent, all four sides are rolled up,  
with a gracious canopy offering shade to the traveler.  
Once the traveler has entered,  
they will find a place to rest,  
water to refresh them,  
food to nourish them,  
and good company to welcome them home.

With the four sides rolled up,  
the traveler can still look out,  
see the landscape they journeyed across to arrive here,  
and also see the places from which other travelers came -  
wandering through deserts and deep forests,  
across prairies and around wide oceans.  
Perhaps there were mountain pinnacles,  
and maybe they came through a valley of shadow.  
Inside *this* tent, they can still see it all.

And our Big Tent Theology  
encourages that kind of exploration.  
We love playing with possibility  
on our individual journeys  
as we seek truth and meaning,  
drawing from personal experience  
and the wisdom of world religions.  
But that sure sounds a lot like,  
"You can believe whatever you want."

So I would ask: how far out  
does the canopy of our tent extend?  
Are there *any* solid edges,  
staking out the boundaries of our faith?  
When we delve into our history,  
some lines begin to emerge.  
If we look back to our Universalist roots,  
we see a group of people  
whose hearts rebelled  
against the dominant Calvinist narrative of  
the salvation of the few and the damnation of the many.  
The Universalists couldn't accept  
that a loving God would condemn God's children to hell.  
And so they went out  
into the highways and byways,  
preaching not hell, but hope, and courage.

God's love, they said, was for everyone.  
All souls would enter the gates of heaven.  
Ever since then,  
through all the evolutions of our theology,  
we focus not on the afterlife,  
but on *this* life --  
not on the next world,  
but on *this* world.

As Peter Mayer wrote,  
"I remember feeling sad that miracles don't happen still,  
But now I can't keep track, 'cause everything's a miracle."  
So the challenging thing becomes not looking for  
miracles,  
but finding where there isn't one."  
While we see the world's problems, our message is one  
of hope,  
because we believe that, together, we can heal the world,  
cherishing life in all its forms.

And so one side of our tent is defined:

**We are life-affirming.**

We may have different ideas about what that looks like,  
but ultimately, we are united in focusing on life over  
death,  
in choosing to remain open to the sacred,  
to see the possibility that everything's a miracle,  
that everything is holy now.  
With this boundary guiding us to affirm life,  
we can turn to our Unitarian heritage.

You might be familiar with that irascible genius of the  
1500s,  
Michael Servetus.  
He went toe-to-toe with John Calvin  
in a theological showdown

of provocative letter-writing and false identities.  
As one of our proto-Unitarian ancestors,  
he grappled with the Bible,  
publishing his conclusions under titles such as  
*On the Errors of the Trinity*.  
Needless to say, this didn't make him popular  
as the Inquisition swept across Europe.  
But even when it cost him his life,  
Michael Servetus would not recant his beliefs.  
He had arrived at them through struggle and scholarship,  
and his theological integrity wouldn't allow such a  
betrayal.

Across the span of the past 500 years,  
we see that our Unitarian history is full  
of intellectuals whose curiosity drove them  
to seek truth and meaning,  
even -- and perhaps *especially* --  
when their explorations  
flew in the face of social acceptability.  
We see examples of this throughout our history,  
from the Transcendentalists  
who sought the Divine outside church walls  
to the humanists  
who dared to proclaim that God was not necessary  
for a person to live a life of meaning and relationship.

And so the second side of our tent is defined:

**We are truth-seekers.**

The truths we arrive at will be different,  
and even our own truth may evolve over time.  
Indeed, we hope it will.  
We are not a religion that provides the answers.  
And so, as life-affirming truth-seekers,  
our members carry a vast diversity  
of beliefs and practices, suspicions and resistances.

Looking at our two theological histories,  
this has always been the case to a certain extent --  
The Universalists used to argue  
over whether God might still make  
the *really* bad people go to hell,  
at least for a while, until they learned their lesson --  
like some kind of cosmic time-out  
before they were eventually allowed into heaven.  
Others argued emphatically  
that hell didn't exist,  
and all went straight to heaven.  
And the Unitarians had to deal with their own evolution  
straight out of the Christian fold,  
influenced so strongly  
by the Transcendentalists and the humanists.

So both traditions had their theological struggles,  
and the creation of the Unitarian Universalist Association  
was not perfectly smooth.

It was a serious negotiation  
to figure out how two denominations,  
with much in common  
but still with significant differences,  
could find a way forward as a single entity.  
The solution is one we still struggle to live into,  
but upon which the cohesion of our faith depends.  
It is foundational and imperative  
that we promise -- we *covenant* --  
to affirm and promote  
acceptance of one another.

In order for us to worship together under one roof,  
to open our hearts and serve the world together  
as members of a single faith,  
it is imperative that we truly accept  
that the person next to us  
may not believe the same truths we do,

may not understand the world the same way --  
may not even see Unitarian Universalism the same way.

The third side of our tent  
is also one of our greatest challenges --

**We are accepting of differences.**

Sometimes this acceptance begins as tolerance,  
and that's okay,  
as long as we keep seeking and affirming our way  
toward true acceptance.

In order for our faith to work,  
in order for Unitarian Universalism's Big Tent to stay up,  
we need to not feel threatened  
by those who don't agree with us,  
and with whom we have trouble  
finding common ground.

This is why we celebrate Flower Communion.

As Matthew shared,  
it's a tradition that goes back to 1923,  
when Norbert Capek needed a ritual  
that would bind the people together  
in all their diversity.

Just as no two flowers are alike,  
so are no two people alike.

In the words of Mary Oliver,  
"I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular."

This annual service becomes a symbol of community.

By exchanging flowers,  
we show our willingness to walk together  
as we affirm life and seek truth,  
disregarding all that might divide us.

Each person takes home a flower brought by someone  
else,

thus symbolizing our shared celebration of community,

which is essential to a free people of a free religion.

It's essential because as we practice our faith,  
as we seek and affirm and accept,  
our tent will begin to fill with so many people,  
and we will greet so many diverse travelers,  
offer such hospitality,  
that we may start to feel the need  
to expand our tent out  
to incorporate the fourth wall.  
With so many people  
all gathered together,  
heart to heart,  
we will begin to understand  
that not all people have the same opportunities.  
Through chance of birth  
or chance of life,  
we see, when we live a life of faith,  
that there is great imbalance in the world.

And so our fourth wall becomes evident:

**We become a justice-seeking people.**

Our heritage has examples of this  
in every part of our history --  
from the Radical Reformation  
to the founding of our nation;  
from abolitionism  
to the Civil Rights Movement;  
from Women's Rights  
to LGBT rights.

Across all of these movements,  
the leaders at the helm  
professed that their justice commitments  
were driven by the power of their faith.  
It is only from a foundation of powerful faith

that Julia Ward Howe could write in the aftermath of the Civil War,

"Again have the sacred questions of international justice been committed to the fatal mediation of military weapons....

[But] despite the assumptions of physical force, the mother has a sacred and commanding word to say to the sons who owe their life to her suffering.

That word shall now be heard, and answered to as never before.

Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise all women who have hearts,

whether your baptism be that of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies...."

Our faith, when grounded in an expansive theology, demands that we be a justice-seeking people.

Unitarian Universalism

is not a religion for the faint of heart.

It offers a challenge --

to think, to seek, to question.

We can never rest in the arms of certainty.

But we can look to the framework of our Big Tent.

We can ask ourselves:

- Are we affirming life?
- Are we seeking truth?
- Are we accepting differences?
- Are we making justice?

In short, are we being Unitarian Universalists?

I didn't have the words

to say all that when I was in high school.

On that sunny summer day,

when I'd invited my friends to church with me,

I didn't know how to talk about our Big Tent Theology,  
or what boundaries limited our freedom  
to "believe whatever we want."

But if I could go back,  
and perhaps take a seat on the grass  
with my teenage self and her friends at the picnic,  
I might say to them:  
No, Unitarian Universalists *can't* believe whatever we  
want.  
We offer the freedom  
-- and the responsibility --  
for each person to take up their own quest,  
searching for truth and meaning,  
figuring out how to affirm life in the here-and-now.  
Sometimes it's hard,  
but we strive to accept one another.  
And we believe that when we come together,  
we have the power to help heal the world,  
bringing about peace and justice  
through the transforming power of love.  
We won't give you the answers,  
but we'll provide company on the journey.  
So come in.  
Just as this picnic feeds your body,  
so can our faith feed your soul.  
Maybe you'd like to join us.

In Unitarian Universalism,  
you will find a religion steeped in tradition  
with powerful histories  
of those who affirm life  
and those who seek truth,  
with those who teach us to accept differences  
and those who are tireless in their vision of justice.  
Among us, you can live a life grounded

within these four walls,  
these rolled-up canvas sides,  
still viewing the wider landscape for inspiration.  
For here you need not hide, nor pretend,  
nor be anything other than who you are  
and who you are called to be.

Together, we make this a holy place.  
When we live with deep assurance  
of the flame that burns within,  
then our promise finds fulfillment  
and our future can begin.  
So may it be.  
Amen.