

What Is Unitarian Universalism?
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Seeking answers in uncertain days . . .
with adventurous spirits and minds . . .
together we journey in love.

Every August, I try to do a sermon that introduces our
faith.

A sermon that says, "This is who we are."
This is what we are about.

This is a sermon for newcomers, yes -
if you are new with us, and you are wondering,
"Ok, these people seem good but what kind of religion
is this, exactly?"

This is a sermon for you who have been here for a
while, too,
to help you remember what is the core of us;
and you can use what you learn here
next time someone asks you,
"What is kind of church is that?"

We are a church, we are a faith,
of adventure.
Of daring and justice and love.
Without certainty, we live in wonder,

we journey toward understanding,
we value discovery and each other.

We are a faith of adventure and love.
That's the short version.

Today I want to talk about who we are
without saying anything about any other faith.
I'm not going to define us by saying what we are not.
Hold me to that, OK?

It's easy to say what we are not; I want to say what
we are.

So the only thing I'll say by comparison
is that we are different from other traditions -
we ask different questions and come to different
answers.

But we are also similar -
for all religion emerges from human longing and in the
context of human living.

And humans are different, but we are also all family,
all connected.

Enough of comparison. Let's talk about Unitarian
Universalism.

The other thing I'm not going to do is a history lesson.
I love our history, it's great stuff.
But I'll save that for another day.

Just trust me when I say that we have a long, proud
history,
that everything I'll say today is the natural evolution of
our past,
and that we are not some new-fangled thing,
but a living tradition that goes back to the early church
2000 years ago.
But today, the present tense.

What are we?
Who are we?
What do we believe and how should we then live?

We are a religious tradition.
We are a faith movement.
Religion is an orienting principle, a way of ordering
your life and your commitments.
Religion tells you something about your place in the
universe,
and it gives you a ground to live on -
something you can count on,
something you can have faith in.

We are religious —
and here are our answers - our way of ordering your
life.

This is our home -
these stars. The wide universe is the ocean I travel.

This earth is our blue boat home.

I love this picture -
you see all these stars.

It's so amazing, right?

To know that our sun is just one little dot like this,
and there are trillions of trillions of them,
and, now, we know, even more trillions of planets
going around those trillions of stars,
and trillions of galaxies.

I mean, wow!

Right, wow!

This is our home, this universe,
and our religious response to this realization is first,
"Wow!" Wonder. Awe.

And we feel two things at once, right?

We feel so small - all those stars, their light shining
from distant pasts.

And we feel so large - because we are connected to all
this; we are part of this.

We are made of these stars.

And what a feeling this is.

It can be disorienting, but the feeling of real spirituality
usually is disorienting.

And so we feel wonder as in wow
and we feel wonder as in hmmm.

But now, cast your eyes a little closer to home.
Look out over your neighbors, your friends, your
family.
Read the news of the world.
Walk down the city street and the country lane.
Sit under the tree, and strike up a conversation with
another person.

And, if we take the time to notice,
if we don't rush from one thing to the next,
guess what?
Notice what we might feel.

Wonder and awe!
We feel so small - these other people, there are so
many of them -
and each one is different, unique, special.
I can imagine what you might be thinking and feeling,
but I don't really know, do I?
Each person is their own person, and that's kind of
amazing.
And yet we feel something else too - that same sense
of connection.
That sense that even though we are different,
we are still human beings.
There is a kinship between us.

If we take the time to notice,

if we work hard to shed all those distractions and
diversions and ideologies,
those ideologies of nation and race and gender and
class,
and we really feel it,
we find this amazing truth:
each person is our kin, our cousin, and each person is
their own unique person.

Just like the stars -
we feel wonder -
wow and hmmm.

We are not isolated beings.
As an anonymous reading in our hymnal puts it,
we are not isolated beings,
but connected,
in mystery and miracle,
to the universe and to each other.

So start here.
With this feeling.
This feeling of wow and hmmm.
At the stars above us and the earth below us,
at each human life, at our own life.
Wow and hmmm.

Start with this feeling.
Don't forget it.

And from this place, we dare to question.
We wonder and investigate.
We are people who ask "why?" and who say "tell me more."

We ask questions and we seek to learn.
Given that we have this feeling of wow and hmmm,
what have human beings, who are our kin, figured out
about this universe,
this adventure of being human?
What are the stories and the answers, the questions
and the paths,
that other people have found useful?
Can we learn from those ideas?

And this is core to who we are.
There is a reason that Unitarian Universalists
attract a lot of librarians!
I suspect that we have more librarians per capita than
any other faith.
We attract librarians and scientists,
and we attract people who love librarians and scientists
-
people who like to read and discover and find out stuff.
We want to know more.

Given this feeling of wow and hmmm,
what do Christians think about it?

How about Jews? And Buddhists? And Sikh's? And
Taoists?

And the Navajo? And the West African Yoruba?

What are their ancient stories?

What can we learn from them?

What did that novelist write about it?

How about the poets, what do they have to say?

The cosmologist and the biologist, what can they teach
us?

How about the anthropologist? The botanist?

So much to learn!

And the more we learn about religion and art and
science,

instead of answering our questions,

or making our wonder go away,

it only deepens our sense of majesty.

Wow! Hmmm!

So we stand there, we sit here, we open our minds and
our hearts

to all this questing, all these great spiritual adventures,
all this wisdom.

And then we say, wow. Hmmm.

OK, of all these diverse human understandings of the
universe,

of the feeling of transcendence,

all these diverse human understandings of the holy and
the sacred,
is it the case that one is right and the rest are wrong?
Should we choose one and go with it?

And we think about that, and we feel it, and we say,
no.
Nope, not going to choose one and throw out the rest.
Not going to do it.
The reason we say that is because we have this wow
feeling.
And the universe, the holy, the feeling of amazement
is so big, so much,
that we don't think any human idea can hold all of it.
We don't think that any theory, any story, and
discipline,
and single sacred book or prophetic teacher
has all the answers.

*The one thing that none of these provide
To me
Is the certitude that they are The One
They lend me wisdom, sing to my heart
Cause me to question, help me find answers
Make me more me
And at the end of the day, every day,
I am Unitarian Universalist.*

Life isn't a game you win by getting to the finish line.

Life is a journey, an adventure, and, with heart and
mind and voice and hand,
our quest goes on.
There's always more to learn!
Isn't that great news!?

Now, we take all these voices, all this wisdom, all these
stories,
and we add one very important voice.
One absolutely essential, unique, powerful testimony.
Our own.
Your voice.
Your story.
You are a spiritual being.
A teacher, a prophet, a person of meaning and
conscience.
You have your own ideas about what it all means.
We hold these ideas of our own experience to be vital
and important.
But not concrete.
It's a pathway.
From our own feeling of wonder, our own wow and
hmmmm,
we derive our ideas, our best wisdom.
We think that everyone deserves the right to think for
themselves about these more important questions.
Your voice matters.
No one gets to silence it.

It's a vital voice.
But it isn't the only one.
We are not solipsists.
We are not isolated beings.

We need to test our ideas with the wisdom of life,
and with the wisdom of our friends.
Drifting here with our ship's companions.
Kindred Pilgrim Souls.

Each other.
We believe in community, in the wisdom and strength
and vulnerability
of our fellow travelers. Our journey is richer together.
How many of you have had an experience like Shiraz
described,
where you grew as a spiritual and human person
because of your encounter with other people here?
From a chalice lighting or a small group discussion or a
sermon or a chat over coffee?

There is so much to learn from each other.
We are all having these wow and hmmm moments,
each of us.
And the invitation of our faith,
more than the invitation,
the calling, is to pay attention to them.
Don't rush to the next moment.
Feel the deep power of being in all,

feel that sense of wow and hmmm,
cast your questions into the deep,
and don't jump to an answer.
Live in the ambiguity.
Live in the unknown.
Dare to question.

This is our faith.
This is our religion.

We believe that life, the universe, the holy,
is amazing and wondrous
and that we are all connected to it.
And all the stories and metaphors and ideas about
what it all means -
there is something to learn from each of them.
Our journey never ends.
The universe, life, the holy,
we believe it is one thing.
There is a unity behind all diversity.
This is why we are Unitarians.
We believe in the unity of things.
Many windows, one light.
And we are on an adventure to find out more,
because feeling that wow, hmmm feeling,
and finding out more, and learning and living in that
feeling -
this is the best and most important work of our lives.

Not making money, not getting famous, not being
respectable,
not being comfortable.
None of those things.
Living and learning in this amazing universe,
in harmony with our best, ever-evolving sense of
divinity and meaning -
this is what our life is for.

And we are Universalists because of the belief
that we are all connected to the universe and each
other.
That we are kin.
That each person's story matters.
Ours, yes, and the person next to you and across town
and 'round the world.
They all matter.

And that means something.
It doesn't just mean that we can learn from other.
It means that we are called to love each other.
For we are kin.
We are one.
It means that we are called to love each other, not in
an abstract way,
but in a concrete way.
As someone once said, Justice is what love looks like in
public;
so we are called to make justice in this world.

This is the other thing about Unitarian Universalism.
It is not just about wow and hmmm.
It is not just about look at the stars and feel amazed.
It is not just about look into each others eyes and feel kinship.
It is also, look at the suffering in the world.
Your own, and each others.
Look at your responsibility for your kin, for the earth.
It is about the fire of justice.
It is about building a better world.
This world is amazing, but it ain't perfect.
And since we are kin, we are bound together.
Since we are all connected to life and the stars and the earth,
we are our sibling's keeper;
we are neighbors and called to love each other;
we are obligated to roll up our sleeves and do our part.
We are illuminated by the fire of commitment.

That's it.

If you are wondering, or trying to explain to someone else,

what is Unitarian Universalism,
that's the basics.

Wow. Hmmm. What can I do to make the world better?

We are a faith of wonder, of adventure, of questions,
and of service and love.

The things we believe are important:
that life is one, that we are kin, that each person
matters -
but they're not specific.
They're pretty open.
But they matter.
They matter a lot.

In the end, though, the test of whether you've been a
good Unitarian Universalist
isn't about what you think.
It isn't even about what you feel.
Though those things matter,
it is about how you live.
With open heart and mind.
With the fire of justice.
With compassion and love beyond belief.
With hope and courage.
With the fire of commitment.
Let's sing it.