

We Dare Not Fence the Spirit

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August 22, 2010

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Ours is a non-creedal church not because we have no beliefs but because we will not be restrained in our beliefs...we dare not fence the spirit.

I can't be one hundred percent certain because it was a long time ago but I think those may be the first words of our faith I ever memorized. Not intentionally, but subconsciously and as a kind of touchstone, because here at last were words that helped me, as a young teen-ager make sense of what Unitarian Universalism was really all about.

In Sunday School I'd made Kachina dolls out of empty toilet paper rolls and tiny Menorahs out of modeling clay and birthday cake candles. I'd learned that Susan B. Anthony and Clara Barton grew up in Unitarian and Universalist families. I'd learned, back there in the early 1970s when the Iron Curtain was firmly drawn across Eastern Europe, and Romania was a country elementary school students had never heard of, I'd learned that there really used to be, once upon a time, a country called Transylvania, and one of its kings, King John Sigismund was a Unitarian. In those heydays of Values Clarification I'd lined up on one side of a classroom if I felt more like a daisy and the other side of the classroom if I felt more like a rose. I'd listened to the minister read *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* and other stories in church on the first Sunday of each month, and gathered outside the doors to the children's chapel along with my classmates on the other Sundays, hoping to be chosen as a bell-ringer or candle-lighter or offering-taker. After the bell-ringing, candle-lighting, and offering, I'd seen the older kids act out the parable of the mustard seed, and listened to a member of the Board of Trustees explain what it means to be a member of the Board of Trustees, and participated in annual votes about where we should send our collected offering monies.

I grew up in a large, well-staffed Unitarian Universalist congregation and received what I still believe to be an excellent religious education. In fact, I'm sure that that religious education, along with the religious education I received in my parents' home made me a Unitarian Universalist. But somehow I had reached the end of Sunday School without a true understanding of the core of Unitarian Universalism. And then suddenly—but really not so suddenly at all—those words of Wallace Robbins.

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Now it all made a different kind of sense to me. The Sunday School stories from the Bible and other holy texts, told along side the life stories of famous Unitarians and

Universalists. The chapel services introducing a variety of meditation practices. Hanukkah candles in Sunday school one week, Christmas carols in church the next. The creed recited in my grandparents' church but not in ours. Now I understood that all this didn't mean that the church my parents brought me to, the church I secretly considered leaving at the earliest opportunity, wasn't a real church. Wasn't some kind of wishy-washy place that didn't have itself figured out.

Instead I came to understand just how profoundly my church and our faith *do* have it all figured out. We, children and adults alike, were learning the sacred stories and great ideas, celebrating the holy days and practicing the meditations of the great and minor religious traditions of the world, alongside our Jewish and Christian heritage and our own Unitarian Universalism, because the spirit, the human spirit, the divine spirit within, the spirit of mystery at large in universe, the spirit is done irreparable harm when we attempt to restrain it. Thus ours is an expansive religion with a great and on-going tradition of exploration. We study the words and deeds of earlier generations of philosophers, scientists, poets, and theologians from all faiths. And we do our own pondering, searching, wandering, discussing, praising, dreaming, arguing and wondering, as well.

And through the years, though we've been tempted at times, though it has seemed that perhaps it would do no harm and might even serve us well, through the years, we've steadfastly refused to adopt any creed. The ambiguity, the lack of an easy answer to the question *what do you all believe anyway*, the pain when one theological strand of our faith is feeling overshadowed by another, notwithstanding, we hold firm in our conviction that the greater dangerous lies in the direction of attempting to codify, bind, restrain our beliefs.

William Channing Gannett, for example, proposed his Things Commonly Believed Among Us at a time of great discord within the the Unitarian community. There was the established church back east, centered in Boston, clinging to its historical identity as a Christian faith. And there was the frontier church--anything west of New York--embracing and moving beyond the experimental Transcendentalism of the Concord thinkers and writers, and even dabbling in world religions. The folks back east wanted, as a minimum requirement that Unitarian ministers at least declare themselves Christian. The ministers on the frontier, the Western Conference ministers, said no way. No creed for us. Gannett proposed his statement as a bridge between the two divisions, but even such a tempered statement as "commonly believed" was too creedal.

We dare not fence the spirit. I learned the words by heart—not simply by memory—and had learned the first of just two easy lessons, which together comprise the entire basic and advanced curriculum on Unitarian Universalism. Next week I'll discuss the second. For now I want us to really grasp this first one--because its importance is not a thing of the past.

Two situations highlight for me the need both to remind ourselves of our non-creedal approach to religion and to explore often what it means in our communal life that we are non-creedal.

The first situation is what is sometimes called Creeping Creedalism. To me the most egregious example of Creeping Creedalism is the overuse and misuse of our UUA Statement of Purposes and Principles. Some of you will perhaps have noticed that I seldom speak or write about the Principles. The truth is, if I had my way, we wouldn't even have them printed on our orders of service. I know they are handy. I know when someone asks you about Unitarian Universalism it is simple to start reciting them, "we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations..." and right on down through the somewhat redundant seventh principle "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." But the problem lies right there in the first two words most people utter when referring to the principles "we believe".

In fact the language of the principles says *nothing about belief*--because if it did they would be a creed, and ours is a non-creedal faith, remember? The principles as written and as adopted by the General Assemblies of 1984 and 1985, 1995, state, "We, *the member congregations* of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *covenant* to affirm and promote..." Not a belief to be found. And not a stricture binding any *individual* Unitarian Universalist to be found either. They are statements about behavior, about how our congregation agree to act in the world. They are not statements about what Unitarian Universalist must believe, but we get sloppy and lazy and misuse them and overuse them in ways that do suggest belief. Yes, it is good for us to have a communal understanding of who we are as a religious faith--what sets us apart from other faiths and what holds us together. But a creed--or even creeping creedalism--is not the way to do that. We'll talk some next week about what does hold us together. For now, one of the things that sets us apart, one of the vital things that set us apart and defines us is our fierce affirmation that we dare not fence the spirit--even with our statement of principles.

The second kind of situation that tells me we would do well to actively, regularly engage in an examination of what it means to be non-creedal, can be recognized by two types of statements: those prefaced with the words "Unitarian Universalists never..." and "Unitarian Universalist always..." If you hear those words uttered by another, beware of what comes next. And if you hear yourself uttering those words, stop! I've preached in UU churches only to be told at the end of the service, "Some people were offended because we don't read from the Bible. We don't speak about God. We don't pray." Maybe most of those folks don't read from the Bible and aren't familiar with God language and don't pray themselves. But some of them, some hidden minority, does one, two or all three of those scandalous things. The fact is sweeping, generalized statements about belief or about behavior, almost always leave some Unitarian Universalists outside the circle. Almost every possible religious belief is represented in our congregations and in our denomination. And while many of us like to think we're all Democrats with college degrees and radios tuned to NPR with fridges full of organic

vegan food, in reality we're of every political strip, working in all conceivable fields, with tastes in entertainment running the gamut from roller derby to the ballet, from world music to rap, from PBS to WWF, and we can be seen eating cheeseburgers and grits and veggie burgers and clam chowder and jell-o and bulgar and about a million other dishes. We dare not fence the spirit--the spirit that calls us to listen to Opera and to listen to polka, the spirit that calls us to use the grape snips and to tug off a bunch with enthusiasm, the spirit that call us to embrace the mystery, reverence the mind, question the answers.

As others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith; and, in honest difference, we order our lives together.

In the end, this quite simply, is the reason most of us joined or stayed with a Unitarian Universalist church--that we might share our lives honestly and lovingly with those from whom we differ. This is what blesses our lives in the church, week after week, year after year--that we are welcomed and our spirits are free to wander, explore, return home and set off again, wherever the search for truth may lead. May it continue to be so. Amen.