

To Live Deliberately
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As someone new speaking to this congregation I thought it might be useful for you to know who I am, from a religious perspective. And what that religious perspective means to me as a UU minister.

Even as a little girl I sensed a calling to a religious life. The Hogan family across the street from us in Duluth were Catholic and when I had a sleepover with Kathy we would use sleeping bags on their living room floor. Kathy would always fall asleep before I did and I would lie awake, my eyes drawn to the quiet golden light that shone over the face of Jesus, on the narrow wall to the side of the fireplace. Below Jesus was the Lord's Prayer and I would read and read the words, bringing them into my mind and into my mouth:

Our Father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be
Done on Earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive
Those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but
Deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.

I thought it was such a beautiful poem and that it made such good sense. Here's how I interpreted it in my mind:

It was a prayer to God. Or to Jesus. Or maybe it was really to Mary, beautiful Mary....I always thought the Catholics had it right, worshipping a mother instead of always focusing on the greatness of a man! This was the 1960s and my feminism started early!

Live life on earth as you imagine it must be in heaven. Well, that seemed like a good way to try to live life out – in a beautiful and positive way, where everyone was nice to each other.

Make sure that no one goes hungry. Well, that seemed like a good thing to wish for, too. Making sure there was no poverty and hunger.

Don't get upset if people walk on your property hope that other people would also be nice if I were to trespass on their property. I thought of our cabin up north and those No Trespassing signs I would ignore because I wanted some blueberries, or wild strawberries, or just wanted to row over to a particular small island and have a picnic and a swim. What harm was there in that? Forgive me for this as I would certainly forgive you. So, yes, that part in the prayer seemed very important to me and made a lot of sense!

I didn't know what temptation was, but I did understand what evil looked like because I had seen enough scary movies – and I definitely wanted to be delivered from any of those kinds of things – so I thought that was a great thing to request of God.

And then that last part – For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen, was just a great piece of rhythmic poetry and I loved saying it.

This prayer was also sensible to me, because I wanted to become a nun when I grew up and even though my mother was Jewish and we didn't go to church and no one in my family believed in God, I really felt drawn to becoming a nun. Particularly one in France, since I loved their soft grey nun outfits vs the severe black ones I saw around town. That soft grey was so much friendlier looking! And I wanted to be in an Order where they helped the poor and really made a difference in the world – where they didn't just talk about doing things, but where they were really out there doing something about the suffering of others. I wanted that – and to do it in a foreign language just added to its appeal. It seemed like the best way to live out life, being a kind, caring person who helped others.

I tried praying at night, but I just couldn't quite figure out who I was actually praying to, since it seemed to me that it was just like wishing for something on your birthday when you blew out the candles. Oh, I wished that I could grow up to be someone who did good things in the world and who cared about others and who could really try to end suffering --- and then I would picture, not God, but me, blowing out all the candles. I

would then say Amen and climb into bed, hopeful the message had been received.

I was also very open to Jesus sitting on the edge of my bed, like I heard he did so often for people who were in prison who had never believed in him before, and then one night there He was and now they believed. So many of my friends were either Catholic or some kind of Christian that Jesus was with us in our conversations as much as any other topic, it seemed. I felt that if there were really a Jesus and if he really did exist still, that as much as I thought it would actually be pretty scary to have him appear at the foot of my bed, that I wanted to be open to it anyway ----- If it was real, let him appear – I wanted to see him, like my friends said they did.

He never did appear. Not once. Nor did I ever hear the voice of God, although I really, really listened for it for years. I thought it was all such a beautiful concept. I wanted to believe.

But then my oldest brother died of cancer when he was 19 and my best friend told me that God had killed my brother because our family didn't believe in God. At the very moment she said this, I stopped looking for God. Would God really have punished my brother with suffering cancer, because our family didn't believe in Him? That seemed so small-minded and cruel. How could anyone worship and adore somebody like that? How was that loving or kind or someone good to pray to? It made no sense to me and I turned my back on God's possible existence, but my desire for the religious life never waned.

I was raised Unitarian in the way of most Unitarians. That is, we never went to church. My mother had been raised Jewish and my father raised Congregationalist. They weren't joiners, but raised us children with a high ethical core and a strong moral compass, encouraging us to explore every aspect of the world and to find our own place in it. One day, when I was about 31, a friend of mine invited me to go to a UU church. Although I had been to many churches during my lifetime, for some reason I had never been to a UU church.

That first experience was memorable to me. The service was remarkable in that the Bible was not used, but there was, instead, a reading from Mark Twain's "Letters From Earth." There was no pipe organ, but a small chamber orchestra playing some gorgeous classical piece. The hymns had words I could actually say, rather than just focusing on the melody and not paying attention to the usual Jesus and Salvation and God

language I was used to singing in other churches. The sermon was called an Address and it was about things that mattered to me, said in a perfectly sensible way with real language and real meaning. I was transfixed.

After the service, I gathered up every single solitary brochure that was on the stand in the lobby – “What UUs say about Jesus.” “What UUs say about the Bible.” “What UUs believe.” I went home and read and read, just like I had the Lord’s Prayer so long ago, and I committed to memory those seven Purposes and Principles.

This was it. I had finally found my religious home! It all made sense to me with no translations necessary and it was who I was, who I had always been. Fortunately, the church was looking for a part-time RE person, so I applied and was hired and within days I became good friends with the student minister there, who was a seminary student in Chicago but doing her internship in Minneapolis. I was the mother of three young children so there was no way I could just pack up and go to Chicago, or Boston or California to become a UU minister. I felt that once more I was so close to my dream of being in a religious life and that once again it was not going to happen. Then this young minister told me about a UCC (United Church of Christ) seminary on the outskirts of the Twin Cities and how, historically, the Unitarians used to be part of the congregational church and so maybe I could contact the seminary and see if I could study there. I did, they said yes, and my long journey toward becoming a UU minister began. I was finally on the path of my calling.

But it was not a path paved with jewels ----- my best friend and sister-in-law, who was a born-again Christian, upon hearing that I was going to study to become a UU minister, told me that she could no longer be my friend. We had raised our children together and we were inseparable. We had, of course, many theological discussions since she was always trying to guide me toward Jesus and praying for me (seriously, I have so many people praying for me, I’m a shoe-in to heaven at this point!), but nevertheless, we loved each other and were the same person, so this sudden break with her was and is one of the most painful parts of my life.

That was 20 years ago and to this day she cannot be my friend, because I “went public” with my UU thoughts when I became a minister. It was one thing, she told me, to be privately thinking the way I did, but to speak from a pulpit was now a dangerous thing - a threat to Christianity and, therefore, a threat to the world.

When I was a hospital chaplain I was often requested by patients or by nursing staff to be the chaplain they wished to have in their room, or on their unit. My supervisor wrote a review of me once, to put in my file, noting that I was requested more than the other chaplains and that he found this concerning, “because there is no way you are able to console and comfort these patients since you do not believe in God. It’s not possible” he said. And yet it apparently was possible.

“Does a person have to have a belief in God in order to be a decent, kind, caring, compassionate, empathetic person,” I asked? His answer was yes. “For without God,” he maintained, “a human is unable to have a morality, unable to determine an ethical path.” When I countered my supervisor, saying that he must be mistaken about this, since I was actually able to do those things without a belief in God – he leaned over his desk, his face darkened and strained, and he yelled, “SO! YOU THINK YOU ARE GOD?” And then I leaned forward and said, “Yes. We are all the children of God, created in God’s image, isn’t this so? Isn’t this what Christianity says? If I am in God’s image would I not be like God with his love and compassion and moral and ethical compass leading my heart in the right way? Isn’t this what we humans are to strive toward?” He ordered me out and I was put on review.

When I was the consulting minister for the River Falls congregation, I was a part of the local area ministerial association and as such was asked to participate in their annual ecumenical Thanksgiving service. It was to be held in the Catholic church and I was to be the speaker for the service. The day before the service we had our usual ministerial meeting and before the meeting came to a close, the minister leading that day asked us all to stay for a minute because he wanted to talk about something that had come up. The thing that had come up was that some of the ministers had been telling their congregants to boycott the ecumenical service because I would be “taking away their Christianity.” I was stunned! But yes, it was true. This was their fear. Because I didn’t believe in God or believe that Jesus was the son of God, that whatever it was I was going to be speaking about (which they hadn’t asked me to share) would threaten the beliefs of the people listening.

I spoke to their fear that they thought I would say anything that would be disrespectful to the beliefs of those who would be coming to that service. I explained UUism to them and our drawing from world religions and our respect for other ways of being in the world. Then I spoke to the fact that they themselves, as ministers, must be filled with such arrogance, with such a sense of power, to think that it is the minister who gives and who

can take away a person's beliefs, rather than believing, as UUs do, that each person comes to their own way of believing themselves.

The Thanksgiving Day service happened, the place was filled, and many people came up to me afterwards, who were members of those "other" churches, and told me that they hadn't felt threatened at all by what I said and that they actually felt it was a religious service, even without the God language, and that they would never have believed that to be possible, if they hadn't come there themselves. And that maybe having a UU church in town was "okay, I guess."

What I didn't understand then, but saw quickly thereafter, was that UUs in general were suspect and that humanists in particular were seen as something bad. The word "humanist" was often stated and underscored with the words, "cold", "intellectual", "no heart", and the word "spirituality" was seen as the preferable one to use, implying something richer and deeper than anything humanism could create.

Knowing who I am, this definition of humanism seemed so foreign, so far removed from who I was and who I knew other humanists to be. And what, I thought, does the word spirituality actually mean? It's always presented as such an airy-fairy kind of thing – floating and ethereal. So nebulous, so hard to describe or pinpoint – especially without the traditional theological trappings to define it. I've thought a great deal about this word all these years, and I believe it means something that is the direct opposite of floating and ethereal. I think it is what speaks to us and grounds us. Spirituality is the response to something that speaks to your heart, that stirs you to your core, that inspires you to attend to the truth that rests within you. We all have an "aha" experience at some point or another in our lives, whether we are humanist, agnostic, atheist, christian, jew, buddhist or muslim. That "aha" moment is a moment of spiritual awakening and understanding. What we experience as spiritual may be different for each of us, be it religion, or music, or poetry or the sparkling stars in the heavens that shine over our heads in great bursts of light. It is our response to that thing which speaks to our deepest sense of being. It is a spiritual response, it is a human response.

And it is as strong a guiding force for good in the world as any I can think of.

As UUs we must remember to focus on what we have in common, not what among us is different. In this religion we have the chance to strengthen the bonds between people, because we come from a religion

that wants to speak the truth about life and death, about love and hate, about happiness and despair, without turning our faces away from the difficulties that lie before us and turning ourselves heavenward for the answers. In this religion we must look at each human face and be reminded that when one person suffers, we all suffer. When one person goes without food, shelter or water, we all go without. When one person cannot take care of themselves or their families, we are all equally burdened and suffering.

Our question to ourselves is not when will things improve, but how can we, as a religious institution, affect the changes necessary to ensure that the rights of all people are attended to. Our question to ourselves is how can we come together, under one roof, under one sky, under one umbrella of faith – a faith that encourages and challenges us to be the best we can be, as humans, in this world – and do what ever it is we must do to ensure that everyone’s basic needs are being met.

Our issues are humanitarian issues. Our goal is for the betterment of the world. Our hopes and dreams are those which provide the best life for each and every person, regardless of age, and gender, sexual orientation or belief. We have a strong voice and a strong heart to offer the world and our UU faith is the perfect faith within which to get things done – because a group of people, a presence in the community, a place of religion that is recognizable to the masses is the best jumping off point for real change to take place.

Through this religion of my upbringing I am reminded to live deliberately and to help create positive change in the world. What do your religious upbringings inspire you to do?

As Margaret Meade once said, “Never doubt that a small group of people can bring about change, for indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”