Sermon: "Unitarian Universalist Practice"
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Nora UU Church
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Readings
from "Our Faith" by William Schultz in the Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide

While the individual is the ultimate source of religious authority, the individual is not the *only* source. If that were the case, Unitarian Universalists could easily fall prey to the condition that afflicted Otto von Bismarck, of whom it has been said that "he believed firmly and deeply in a God who had the remarkable faculty of always agreeing with him." No, our individual predilections need to be tempered by conversation with our tradition and tested within the crucible of our community.

Our history is important to us. Both our Unitarian and our Universalist traditions rejected the notion that "higher" authorities – be they theologians or bishops, rabbis or preachers – could impose their views upon the laity. This is the historical source of our commitment to freedom of belief, congregational polity, and lay empowerment. But our traditions also supply us with a rich legacy of positive affirmations, from Universalism's faith in the benevolence of God to Unitarianism's assurance that human beings have within them the capacity to shape the future.

The result is that today our tradition provides us with a lodestar and a sort of "early warning system" for the recognition of tenets at odds with the norms of our faith. The tradition is not definitive – it will inevitably be modified and even superseded by new "revelation" – but if you hear someone preaching hellfire and damnation or that the future is solely in the hands of God, chances are it's not a Unitarian Universalist!

And the other resource which helps shape our faith is the religious community. When I was in Hong Kong not long ago, I saw a sign in the window of a dentist's office which read, "Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists." To my knowledge, teeth extraction is not (yet) one of the things our congregations provide their members, but a supportive context within which to pursue one's religious pilgrimage certainly is. If what we discover on that pilgrimage is ever to realize its full potential, it must be shared, pondered, and tested with others.

Individual freedom of belief exists, then, in dynamic tension with the insights of our history and the wisdom of our communities. It is this tension which puts the lie to the oft-heard shibboleth that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they like. It is true that we set up no formal religious test for legal membership, that we welcome the devout atheist as readily as the ardent Christian, but it is *not* true that one can subscribe to views at variance with our most basic values. Clearly, one could never advocate racism or genocide, for example, and still in any meaningful sense call oneself a Unitarian

Universalist.

from the writings of Donald C. Babcock

Now we are ready to look at something pretty special:
It's a duck riding the ocean a hundred feet beyond the surf.
No, it isn't a gull.
A gull always has a raucous touch about him.

This is some sort of duck, and he cuddles into the swells.
He isn't cold, and he is thinking things over.
There is a big heaving in the Atlantic,
And he is a part of it.

He looks a bit like a mandarin,
or the Lord Buddha meditating under the Bo tree.
But he hardly has enough above the eyes to be a philosopher.
He has poise, however, which is what philosophers must have.
He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.

Probably, he doesn't *know* how large the ocean is, and neither do you.
But he *realizes* it.
And what does he do? I ask you. He sits down in it.
He reposes in it as if it were infinity –
which it is.

That is religion, and the duck has it.
He has made himself a part of the boundless, by easing himself
into it just where it touches him.

Sermon "Unitarian Universalist Practice"

I was driving in the Twin Cities the other day, when I got behind a car which had a colorful, rather opinionated collection of bumper-stickers. They touched on a wide range of topics, everything from patriotism to the environment, parenthood to religion. I chuckled as I read them, and then found myself wondering about the driver. The range of opinions certainly seemed to have an affinity to the diversity of views within our own religious spectrum. Might she be a Unitarian Universalist? And if she wasn't already, should I invite her to check us out?

She turned onto a different street too soon for me to have a chance to find out, but it made me think about the ways in which our religion manifests itself in our daily lives. Membership in a faith community is both a personal and a public decision, although we don't always consider it that way. But just how public is it? Walking down the street, driving along the expressway, can others tell that something has changed about you after

you become a UU? Is there a particular way that we practice our religion and live our lives that distinguishes us as Unitarian Universalists?

I have had several interfaith moments in the past couple of weeks that caused me to reflect on the seriousness of these questions. As I stood in the yard of a neighbor, a well-dressed mother and daughter stepped out of their car and came forward with smiles on their faces and literature in their hands. I knew they were Jehovah's witnesses before they even began to speak. I attended a Shabbat service with a friend and was reminded of the many ways that Jews are easily recognizable in our culture: the yamicas worn by many of the men, the Hebrew used in everyday blessings, good wishes, and spoken prayer, sometimes even the way beards are worn. I stood in line at the grocery store behind a little girl in Amish dress, and noticed that even her new born baby sister wore the same telltale of bonnet and cotton jumper. And I thought of others. Muslims are known to pray five times of day facing Mecca wherever they are, be it at work, or home, or out running errands. Buddhists, Jainists, and others can follow particular dietary rules, in addition to special forms of hair-style and dress. But what about us? By what are we known?

Some have wryly suggested that we *are* most recognizable by our T-shirt and bumpersticker theologies – just like that driver I followed. Yet, there is nothing about our faith that deliberately encourages bumperstickers as a means of religious expression. As I ask the question of what distinguishes us, I am looking for something deeper - a kind of spiritual practice, a way of being religious as Unitarian Universalists in the world. My colleague, the Rev. Scott Alexander, defines general spiritual practice as "any activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage, and which significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond you." Taking his definition as a baseline, I would define Unitarian Universalist practice as any activity and attitude, regularly and intentionally engaged, which not only deepens our relationship with the miracle of life, but also deepens our ability to understand and live out our Unitarian Universalist principles and faith.

Now, I can already hear some of you raising wise words of caution. If our history defends the freedom of individual conscience and upholds the rejection of all creeds, isn't the idea of a Unitarian Universalist practice a little too uniform? Can there be a practice, equally embraced by the wide theological, political, and social diversity among us? I think that there can be. In fact, I think that there must be, if there is something about us that makes us part of a religious movement, and not just a group of people who enjoy gathering together on Sunday mornings and on a few days in-between. There must be something that connects us, at least in spirit and in intention, on those days that we are not together, but are living as Unitarian Universalists in the midst of our frantic daily lives. Having a shared practice does not mean that we must lose our diversity. Consider the more general spiritual practice of meditation – there are hundreds of ways to meditate, from mantras to yoga, from incense to altars, from silence to nature communing to walking through labyrinths. Similarly, if there really is a Unitarian Universalist practice that we can take up to deepen our spiritual lives, there will be thousands of ways

to do it – as many ways as there are Unitarian Universalists to try it.

So what might it look like, this Unitarian Universalist practice? To be truly Unitarian Universalist, as William Schultz reminds us, it cannot be anything that opposes our core values or affirmations of life and humanity. It must come from our rich and still living and evolving tradition. To honor the Unitarian emphasis on the truth of our freedom, the practice must be accessible to the range of beliefs among us. It cannot privilege one kind of belief or religious style above another. To honor the Universalist acceptance of all humanity in its many diverse expressions, it cannot require a uniform ritual like dress codes and strict dietary laws. (Besides, most of our potlucks compromise an astonishingly harmonious medley of vegetarian and hunter's fare, of sugar eater's and sugar buster's delights, and our Universalist ancestors would be proud!) To honor our understanding that religion is a lifelong process of spiritual growth, it cannot be something that is dated, caught up in the cultural religious fads of the moment, or tied to a particular time in our life like coming of age, or parenthood, or elderhood. The practice must come from our tradition, but there is one more thing that it must do to be worthwhile that is the goal of all worthy religion: it must a make us a part of the boundless, by easing us into it just where it touches us lives.

This morning, allow me to suggest three things that I believe might begin to shape a distinctively Unitarian Universalist practice. Many of us, if not most of us, may already be doing these things, but part of spiritual practice is intentional awareness. These are the three that come to me, after almost thirty years of being a part of this faith, but I also welcome you to consider suggesting some of your own.

First, let me boldly suggest that Unitarian Universalists are about the practice of salvation, although not the kind that you might immediately think of when you first hear the word. There is a somewhat tired old joke that describes the journey of a man up to heaven after he has died. He comes to a fork in the road. One sign points right, and says "To heaven." The other points left, and says "To a discussion about heaven." Being a Unitarian Universalist, the man heaves a sigh of relief and heads to the left.

As I have heard the joke through the years, the punchline is interpreted as playing on the fact that many of us are ambivalent enough about heaven's existence not to have faith enough to go there. But I don't believe that our real and lively discussions about heaven, current or historical, reveal a lack of faith at all. Instead they imply a different emphasis on the meaning of salvation. Out of the Unitarian emphasis on good character and the Universalist conviction that God would never create an eternal, inescapable Hell, salvation for us has never been a personal reward in another lifetime. Salvation has rather been a call to heal the brokenness of our earthly world, and to experience the wholeness that we can create together now. Might there be a reward somewhere out there, after these brief mortal days? Maybe. But if so, reaching it will not be dependent upon a narrow set of beliefs, but rather the good deeds of this lifetime, which will continue to speak for us long after our bodies are gone.

Our practice of salvation reveals that Unitarian Universalists are in truth more about action than discussion, despite our discursive reputation. It means that despite our relatively small numbers, we comprise a sizeable portion of the population who regularly volunteer in their community and for larger issues of the common good. It means that many of us are known by name by our local congress-people and representatives. It means that we *do* hold regular discussions about how best to live our values with integrity and to foster respect in an often shallow and indifferent world.

But how might we practice salvation more intentionally, day by day? We practice salvation when we try to be the kind of people that neighbors, friends and family know they can rely on in their hour of need. We practice salvation in these post-Election days when we strive to become the bridge-builders across delicate and difficult issues which too often divide us and our communities through fear and misunderstanding. We practice salvation when we create communities where people can be honestly and fully who they are, without fear of prejudice or oppression. We practice salvation when we dare to name difficult truths which have the power to heal. In short, we practice salvation whenever and wherever our actions reflect a vision of humanity that is larger than our own selves and a vision of kindness and compassion that redeems our failings. It is the kind of salvation that, in our best Universalist selves, welcomes all in.

Second, I believe that Unitarian Universalists are about the practice of self-revelation. By self-revelation, I do not mean the practice of navel-gazing, nor the spiritual tendency of some seekers to wander off into the wilderness away from the realities and real people of the world. By self-revelation, I mean the commitment to do the challenging work which is the responsible side of our Unitarian tradition of freedom: to articulate for ourselves what we do believe and value in direct relation to our God, and not what we think we should believe or value based on someone else's authority. I remember very clearly my own Coming of Age trip to Boston, when our group stopped on the Boston Commons for ice cream. Unbeknownst to us at the time, there was another religious group there of a more traditionally evangelical bent. Individual conversations began to spring up in a lively manner throughout the square. Mostly, they remained respectful and polite, but I remember noticing that you could easily tell who was who, without even seeing their faces. The other group spoke in "it" statements, such as "it is written; it is said; it was revealed; it is taught." The Unitarian Universalists spoke in "I" statements, such as "I think; I have experienced; I still wonder; I believe." It was more revealing about who we were, and are, than any visible chalices we might have worn.

Our practice of self-revelation reveals more than just our sources of truth, it reveals the nature of our commitment to the religious pilgrimage and journey. For how can we enhance our own spiritual lives, if we do not truly know where we already stand? How can we promote greater respect and understanding among people of all faiths, if we do not first know who we are within that broad and colorful spectrum? To deepen this practice means more than taking a Building Your Own Theology course one time and one

time only, although that can be a wonderful beginning. It means engaging in ongoing reflection with others, whether at congregational coffee hours, or around the family dinner table, or in serious dialogue over the years with trusted friends. It means the discipline of placing our most treasured thoughts and beliefs into concrete words, whether in a journal or a credo or a personal faith statement, and be willing to return to it and revise it from time to time. It means educating ourselves about the thoughts and ideas of others, and listening to the experiences of our lives for new insights and revelations. For when we truly listen, we are reminded of the Unitarian affirmation that the revelation of life's mystery always continues and can never be sealed by any prophet or event of history once and for all.

Third, I believe that Unitarian Universalists are about the practice of reverence – reverence for humanity, reverence for the earth and creatures, and reverence for life itself. In our tradition, reverence need not only be saved for God, but for the sacred that can be found in all creation. This is perhaps best illustrated by a story that I recently heard, about a young boy who intentionally set out from home on a walk to go and meet God. He knew it would be a long trip, so he packed up some supplies: root-beer and twinkies. He walked and walked, but eventually got tired. He sat down on a nearby bench and began to rummage through his sack. There was an elderly man sitting on the bench beside him, who seemed rather glum. The young boy offered him some root-beer. The man accepted it with a smile and thanked him. They sat together in a companionable silence. When the boy decided that he was hungry, he dug out the twinkies and again offered some to the gentleman beside him. The man gave him an even bigger smile. At last the boy decided that it was too late to continue his long journey, and decided to go home. He started his way back, then stopped, turned around and ran back to offer the man a hug. He received the biggest smile he had ever seen in return. When he finally arrived home, his mother asked him where he'd been. The boy answered, "I went and met God, and you know, he's older than I thought." For his part, when the elderly man returned home later that day, his son asked him how his day had went. The man replied, "I met God today, and you know, he's a lot younger than I had ever realized."

To practice reverence is to meet God or the sacred, however we name it, not on some remote mountain, but in the course of our daily lives, among ourselves. It is to be open to being pleasantly surprised as to where we can discover it and to never write off any part of creation as wholly profane or unworthy. It is to recognize that reverence is a two way street, and that sometimes we must give of ourselves in order to be met in return. We practice reverence when we tend to a garden patch, give space to a child to grow, learn from someone we once thought had nothing to offer us, honor the needs of our partners and friends, or take a few moments each day to express our gratitude for the goodness in our lives. We practice reverence whenever we say "yes" to life, even when we do not fully understand it.

In some ways, a yamica or a bonnet, or specific rules or prayers, would perhaps be easier to take up as visible signs of our faith. But since when have we

ever chosen the easy way? Yet, our practices can be equally revealing to those who pay attention. In the course of your days, when you meet up with others, from whatever walks of life, who practice a this-worldly, inclusive salvation, who speak of clear personal faith in a way that respects the truth of others, and who exhibit a love and reverence for life, chances are they are Unitarian Universalist – or should be. I have met them through these tell-tale signs in airports and on nature hikes, at advocacy meetings and neighborhood cleanups. I have met them at protests and interfaith services, at recycling centers and diversity fairs. Yet, in the end, maybe it is not as important that we recognize ourselves as the in-group of a club, as that we give others a chance to clearly see what we value. Donald Babcock watched that duck afloat on the vast ocean, and saw that he had religion, that he was at home with his place in the mystery. Maybe a Unitarian Universalist practice would help us to find our home more deeply, so that others would meet us, watch us and know that we have found a religion which can transform, a faith which is worthy to call our own.