

# How to tell the story of our faith

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I know, I know.

I know what you're thinking.

I've got it easier than anyone else in the room  
since I'm a professional Unitarian Universalist.

Well, you're probably right.

I likely do find it easier than most  
to tell the story of what it means to be a UU—  
what with all the training, education, and experience I've had.

And, yet, I'll admit, even still, it's really not all that easy to do.

As many of you know, ours can be a complicated faith to convey.

A decade or so ago,  
UUs everywhere were challenged to perfect our “elevator speeches” –  
the short, but impactful spiels we'd give, if given half a chance,  
to the unsuspecting person on an elevator who asked, naively,  
“What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?”

I suspect it's the question that has stopped every one of us  
in our tracks at some point.

Though I hold academic degrees in religion,  
have been ordained to the ministry,  
and written a fair bit on the subject,  
it's a question that I still dread—  
especially if time is too short  
to deliver as fulsome a response as I would like—

the kind that meticulously meanders through  
our 500 fascinating years of history and theology, taking care  
to name every great prophet and martyr of liberal religion along the way. . .

Now, through some trial and error, I've come to understand  
most people just aren't up for a long-winded, if thorough, explanation.

Instead, they prefer, if anything, the bullet points, highlights, and headlines—  
the “elevator speech” that can be rattled off  
before reaching the ground floor  
and everyone spills out into the lobby.

What people really want is to hear the essence of who we are.

So, when the question is put to you, just what do you say?  
Just what does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?

Too often and for too long, we've told the story  
of who we are with a long litany of negations:

“We're the ones who don't read the Bible literally –  
if we happen to read it at all.”

“We're the ones who don't believe in heaven or hell,  
or, for a good many of us, God.”

“We believe in deeds, not creeds.”

“We're spiritual, but not religious.”

“We're the religion for people who don't like religion.”

While all of this might be true, to some extent,  
at least for some of us,  
I think we sell ourselves short by going down this path.

What would happen, I wonder, if we were to describe ourselves  
not by what we are against, but by what we are for?

Now, to be fair, I understand why we do this.  
I've done it myself, and I'll likely do it again.

We do it because we're not operating in a neutral environment anymore.

Gone are the days when people were favourably inclined to casual conversations about religion.

In our highly secular society today, there's a certain amount of hostility, or at least defensiveness, whenever talk of religion comes up.

Sure, people are usually polite on the surface.

But nobody these days is keen on having someone else's belief potentially shoved down their throats.

For good reason, many people have developed a preemptive allergic reaction against proselytizing.

Talk of religion causes blood pressure spikes for lots of people, including a good many of us here in this room.

Which makes it all the more rich that many of us have found revealing to family and friends we spend most Sunday mornings sitting with a congregation, singing hymns and listening to sermons, can bring on the cold shoulder from our more progressive peers faster than admitting we have a lingering soft spot in our heart for the government of Mike Harris!

Here in the big city, it turns out, attending a service of worship is a highly counter-cultural thing to do.

People increasingly think of it as a strange way to spend one's time.

And, unfortunately, for many of them, the religious images they do happen to conjure up are of fundamentalist preachers with fingers wagging in judgment, and lots of rules and regulations steeped in centuries of guilt.

Trying to explain how we're different from all that doesn't necessarily help.

It often just ends up that people confuse us with the United Church, or with the Unity Church, or the Unification Church, better known as the Moonies.

To make matters worse, if and when people know of us at all, they typically know us for our eccentricities.

These are usually best captured by our being the butt of countless jokes.

No one does a better job of poking fun at us than the American radio personality, Garrison Keillor.

While he's adamant about not being Unitarian himself, he has a pretty good read on us, or at least some of our stereotypes.

In one of his radio sketches, posing as an advice columnist doling out guidance to the lovelorn, he tries to help one of his readers who is searching for love.

Keillor tells the guy:

[You've just] been hanging out in the wrong places.  
Try a new location like a Unitarian church.  
There's not a redneck in the bunch.

Unitarian women are sexy but incredibly thoughtful  
and they are sensitive but also passionate about ethics.  
They won't try [anything] on the first date;  
[and, besides,] they will want to know  
how you feel about economic justice first.

They are not voluptuous, because they are often fasting  
in protest of something or other,  
and when not fasting,  
they eat things made of tofu and exotic mushrooms.

[To be welcomed in,]  
you'll need to learn to folk dance and sit through lectures  
on foreign policy given by speakers from [developing] countries,  
but this, [he adds] is a [very] small price to pay for happiness.

And, so it is.

The good news is that we're usually able to laugh at ourselves.

Someone mentioned to me last week on the way out the door  
that one of the things that sets us apart  
is that there's a fair bit of laughter here on a typical Sunday morning.

May it always be so.

May we always have a generous capacity to laugh at ourselves.

But may our laughter not keep us from also taking ourselves seriously.

Sometimes we make it sound as though ours is a faith where anything goes—  
where people can believe whatever they want.

And while we do rightly pride ourselves  
on a deep tolerance for human difference  
and a genuine diversity of belief about many things,  
there is a high calling at the heart of this great faith that summons us,  
in the words Janice used earlier, “to the better angels of our nature.”

At our core is a steady commitment to bettering ourselves and the world  
around us by working to increase the sum total of love and justice in the world.

This isn't something meant to happen in a passive way—  
to those other people, over there.

It's meant to start with our very selves.

It's an invitation into a transformative way of life.

An invitation, in Gandhi's words,  
to be the change we seek in the world around us.

There's a story told by Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams that gets at this.  
That gets out just how very personal this work can be.

[Back in the 50s, he said] in the First Unitarian Church of Chicago  
we started a program some of us called “aggressive love”  
to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral [of a congregation].

We had two members of the Board objecting.

Unitarianism has no creed, they said,  
and we were making [racial] desegregation a creed.

It was a gentle but firm disagreement  
and a couple of us kept pressing.

“Well, what do you say is the purpose of this church?” we asked,  
and we kept it up until 1:30 in the morning.

We were all worn out, when finally [Adams says] this man made  
one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion.

“OK, Jim. The purpose of this church . . .  
well, the purpose of this church  
is to get hold of people like me and change them!”<sup>1</sup>

And, so it is.

I think, then, that we should be more honest in our advertising,  
more forthcoming when we tell people the story  
of what it means to be a Unitarian.

Perhaps we should be up front and warn people  
that there’s a very real risk that they could be changed  
by being in the company of Unitarians.

Now, to be fair, it doesn’t usually happen all at once.

As I often say, this is a faith that works on us over the long-haul.

If we let it, it expands our heart’s capacity for humility and understanding,  
deepening our compassion for others and our reverence for life.

If these things aren’t happening for you,  
or haven’t happened in a long time,  
I hope you’ll hear me when I say—

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<sup>1</sup> As told by Reverend George K. Beach, in a 1999 Minns Lecture.

with all the love that I can muster—  
that you may not be trying hard enough.

This is a faith that calls us to stretch and grow and change.

And, so it also seems reasonable to tell people, from the beginning,  
that this is likely the hardest faith they'll ever come to love.

In contrast to the do-what-you-want faith we sometimes make it out to be,  
our tradition requires that you examine your beliefs on a regular basis.

It demands that you look closely at the workings of your own heart  
to see if love is carrying the day.

It asks us to take stock of our behaviour to gauge  
whether we walk our talk, whether ours is a life of integrity,  
in how we live, and move, and have our being in the world.

This doesn't mean that any of us is perfect, or even trying to be.  
Far from it.

What it means is that we are working steadily, with what we have,  
to be a force for change in the world,  
letting that force work through us,  
through our hands and our feet,  
in what we say and what we do,  
to help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice,  
with the relentless power of love.

Now, this path does not appeal to everyone.

It's harder than it looks.  
It involves stumbles and roadblocks.  
The way is littered, at times, with disappointment and failure.

And, yet.

Such is the way that leads on to the real work of this world:  
toward meaning and purpose,  
toward healing and reconciliation,  
toward justice and toward peace.

Such an experience is not easily shared in the short span of an elevator ride.

Maybe ours is not a faith made for elevator speeches, after all.

For there is no magic formula to describe who we are  
or what the path we trod has to offer.

Instead, what we can point to is the power of our own experience.

We can testify to the transformations, big and small,  
that have taken hold in our lives because we have committed to travel this path.

So let us take the risk of living our faith out loud.

Let us boldly tell the stories of how our hearts have grown larger,  
for that, my friends, is the story of our faith.

Amen.