

# What's in a Name?

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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’m sorry. You’re a what?”

“A Uni-tar-ian Uni-ver-sal-ist.”

“Yeah, I heard what you said just fine.  
I just don’t have any earthly idea of what it means.”

...if I had a loonie for every time I’ve had this conversation!

I’m guessing the same may be true for you.

Or, perhaps—  
given the mouthful that is our name,  
let alone the difficulty in deciphering it for others—  
maybe you’ve tried, at all costs,  
to avoid having such a conversation with anyone in the first place!

Someone this week suggested I preach  
about why Unitarian Universalists are so reluctant to proselytize,  
to share the good news,  
to tell others about our tradition,  
about our congregation.

Well, at least half the problem is right there in our name.

It requires a deep breath to even get out all ten syllables.

It takes a certain amount of patience, skill, and courage  
to even try to explain what it means—

especially to an innocent bystander.

But it need not be so.

There's hope! And I'm here to help.  
Because I truly believe it's possible  
to speak about this faith with confidence.

And, after all, I want you all to feel  
fully empowered and equipped to become UU evangelists.

So, let's begin with that complicated name of ours.

As Forrest Church puts it:

Some churches adapt a denominational moniker  
according to [governance] ([the] United Church;  
Congregationalist, Presbyterian, [Anglican]);

others by sacramental practice  
(Baptist; Seventh Day Adventist);

still others by nationality (Greek or Russian Orthodox)  
or by founder (Lutheran or Mennonite).

Our denomination was named  
for two specific theological doctrines,  
Unitarianism (a belief in one God [or the unity of God]),  
and Universalism (a belief in salvation for all  
[or, in other words, the belief that no one is going to hell]).

We didn't name ourselves,  
but were named by our opponents,  
in each case Calvinists  
(Trinitarians who believed in eternal damnation)  
who held that as Unitarians and Universalists  
we had demonstrated ourselves to be heretics  
[which really just means those who choose,  
which is certainly an apt description of most UUs today].

As far as I know we are the only denomination

named according to doctrine.

Yet, ironically, we are the most non-doctrinal of denominations.

If you take both words at their theological face value,  
not every Unitarian Universalist is a Unitarian  
and not every Unitarian Universalist is a Universalist.

And nor are we required to be.

Ours is the freest of all faiths,  
each one of us answering not to the authority of power  
or the writ of revelation,  
but rather to the oracle of conscience  
and a wisdom drawn from experience.

So what we are, ironically enough,  
is a non-doctrinal faith named after two doctrines.

Now, back in 1961,  
when the Unitarians and the Universalists—  
then separate denominations in both the US and Canada—  
formally merged, it was a marriage  
that had been a long time in coming.

The two denominations  
had been flirting with one another for decades.

They had created a new hymnal together in 1937.

And the teenagers from the two denominations had merged  
long before their elders did.

But the interest in one another goes back well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In fact, though the historical record is thin,  
it appears that one of the earliest instances  
of the two traditions coming together  
was in the creation of our very own congregation in 1845.

Though our congregation was founded

by Unitarians who had immigrated from Britain, they, apparently, united with the few Universalists who were already living in Toronto at the time.

Ours may be one of the first truly Unitarian Universalist congregations, though our name has never reflected that.

It can be argued that at least part of the attraction between our two antecedent traditions is the shared experience of being labelled theological outsiders.

Being called a Unitarian or a Universalist in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wasn't exactly a compliment.

Fortunately, we have a long history of wearing the epithets of our detractors as big, bright badges of courage.

Even today, there are places where our name conjures awkward images of the extremes of our history and the actions of some of the more eccentric among us.

But, rather than being overly defensive, more often than not, we demonstrate a rather robust sense of humour by laughing along when others make fun of us.

No one is more skilled at getting us to do this than the American radio personality, Garrison Keillor, who has a certain fondness for poking fun at Unitarians.

While he is 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 out one of his readers who is searching for love.

Keillor tells the man:  
“[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 will want to know how you feel about economic justice...

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 third world countries,  
but this, [he adds] is a [very] small price to pay for happiness.”

And, so it is.

The question, though, is how we convey  
the happiness we have found in this faith  
in a meaningful way that makes sense to others.

Along the course of our history,  
there have been many attempts to explain ourselves to others,  
often by holding up our key, distinguishing attributes.

One of the most enduring formulations to describe Unitarianism  
drew on our own “holy trinity” of freedom, reason, and tolerance.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, and even still,  
we were proudly known as the religion  
with a deep commitment to freedom of conscience,  
a broad expectation of critical, rational thinking,  
and a practice of tacit toleration in most things.

On the Universalist side of our family,  
the classic Christian formulation of “faith, hope, and love”  
found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians

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<sup>1</sup> Earl Morse Wilbur.

was adopted long ago to describe this faith  
that believed a loving God  
would never ultimately send people to the fires of hell.<sup>2</sup>

Two Unitarian trinities, then:  
freedom, reason, and tolerance;  
faith, hope, and love.

Each a powerful word, each an enduring aspect  
of who we are and what we still strive to uphold.

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Last weekend, I spent time in reflection  
with a group of leaders from our congregation.

Together, we asked what made our religion,  
and our congregation, unique.

We turned quickly and unanimously to an answer  
that would have satisfied our spiritual ancestors.

We focussed on our non-creedal, covenantal nature:  
that “We do not have to think alike to love alike.”

That we can and do co-exist and thrive here  
with a multitude of beliefs in a commitment that  
*how* we are together is more important  
than *what* we are together.

As one person put it:  
“I don’t come here to find the people I love;  
I come to love the people I find.”

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As Unitarian Universalists, we are widely inspired  
by the world’s great wisdom traditions,  
including the teachings of religion, philosophy, and science.

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<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 13:13.

We aim to be radically inclusive,  
welcoming everyone as they are,  
wherever they find themselves on life's journey.  
And, because we are concerned about peace and justice,  
we are engaged in the sacred task  
of building up a better world.

In shorthand around here, we simply say that our goals  
are to seek, connect, and serve.

In that conversation, we also noted that things  
sometimes unfold at a snail's pace around here.

We jokingly call it “moving at the speed of church”—  
which really means that things typically move at the pace  
that upholds relationships over process,  
that allows different voices to be heard,  
and, to the degree possible,  
for harmony to be found before moving on.

We don't do this perfectly.  
We do, however, try to honour relationships  
more than we do deadlines and getting things done.

We try to live by a covenant that calls us, again and again,  
into right relationship with each other and with all.

We try, in how we live out our days,  
with each other and the wider world,  
to demonstrate in word and deed  
that love truly is our doctrine.

This is a big, bold claim to make about ourselves.  
Especially since we stumble at it so often.

But our faith is concerned with making these words real,  
aiming not for perfection,  
but for the long-haul transformation  
that comes from believing in our bones  
that love is a greater force for good than fear—

or than anything that would divide the human family.

When any of us describe to others this faith, our faith,  
I want for us all to be able to say with absolute confidence  
that we, as a congregation,  
are doing all within our power  
to live lives of integrity, purpose, and joy,  
that we are striving to build up the Beloved Community  
and that we are engaged with things that matter  
beyond our own skins or these four walls.

This is the daunting challenge at the heart of our faith.  
And it is a goal worthy of our devotion.

For this goal—to walk our talk—  
ennobles and transforms our lives  
when we commit our energy to making it real—  
even as we know that this is a path of aspiration and growth.

As we strive as a community and as individuals  
to do this better, we are all works-in-progress.  
But as works-in-progress, we have real work to do.

This means that to be inclusive,  
we gladly reach out with open hearts and minds  
to consider thoughts and ideas and experiences not our own,  
and to welcome in the Other, the stranger,  
as our most honoured guest.

It means that we choose to thrive in our diversity,  
rather than be divided by it;  
that we celebrate the great gifts of intergenerational community,  
where the young and old among us  
teach and touch each other's lives;  
and that we recognize and take pride  
in our stunning array of theologies and life experience,  
as well as the wide range of racial, ethnic, class, sexual, family,  
and educational backgrounds that make us who we are.

But, it also means that we look around  
and ask ourselves hard questions

about who is here, and who isn't,  
and who wouldn't feel welcomed among us.

My prayer is that doing so will cause us to make more room.

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Martin Luther King, Jr. did more than anyone  
to champion the notion of the Beloved Community.

He saw it as a distant but reachable goal for humanity—  
a place of healing and hope,  
where deep reconciliation is possible,  
and where the problems of the world are addressed  
and solved through peaceable means.

I see this as the work at the heart of this congregation,  
to be a place where we are trying to do our part  
to build up that Beloved Community,  
to make it real, to make it tangible,  
in how we live out our relationships with each other,  
and how we live in relationship to the wider world.

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So, when asked about your religion,  
when asked to identify your faith tradition,  
may you find the courage  
to say that we're about building up Beloved Community.

May you speak about freedom, reason, and tolerance.  
About faith, love, and hope.  
About how we seek, connect, and serve.

May you very simply say that ours is a faith  
that strives to help build a better world  
by calling us to increase the sum total  
of love and justice on this earth, starting with ourselves.

But, better than that.  
May you show more than you say.

May your life speak for the faith you hold.

May the love in your heart, made manifest,  
tell people everything they might ever need to know of Unitarian Universalism.

So be it. Amen.