

# “UU Evangelism?!”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
8 May 2022

There’s an old joke that to the timeless question of “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness and a Unitarian Universalist?” that answers: “Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason.”

I’ll admit that I’ve never really cared for this joke. I mean, I did chuckle the first seventy-eight times I heard it.

But I don’t particularly care for the way it pokes fun at Jehovah’s Witnesses, or, for that matter, for the way it pokes fun at us.

It’s not that I lack a sense of humour. I actually think it’s a healthy thing to be able to laugh at ourselves. It helps to keep us from taking ourselves too seriously, which is something most every religion in the world could benefit from.

Jokes that work well, though, have at least some kernel of truth to them. But this one has just a bit too much truth for my taste.

That’s because it pokes at the reality that, with few notable exceptions, we UUs are very reluctant promoters of our faith—and that, even if we were to knock at the proverbial door, and it were to open, we wouldn’t necessarily feel moved to say much of anything.

*“Oh, so sorry to bother you.”*

*“Don’t mind me, I was just making sure your doorbell works.”*

*“What is that? Why am I here?”*

*Well, it’s not, under any circumstance, to talk about my religion.”*

So, what’s really going on here?

Where does this deep-seated aversion to telling others about Unitarian Universalism come from?

The prevailing theory is that with some 90% of us having roots in other religious traditions or no traditions at all,

we've brought with us some unresolved baggage  
about our earlier experiences of religion.

Sometimes it shows up as anger or embarrassment, as shame or disdain,  
or as misplaced arrogance, complete with a tidy sense of UU superiority.

Of course, many of us have been abused by religion,  
and have the scars to show for it.

Others of us simply drifted away due to disillusionment  
or a process of deconstructing our former faith that, in the end,  
left us with little to hold onto.

The net outcome of all of this, in my experience,  
seems to be that many if not most UUs get a bit anxious  
when others publicly promote their faith,  
and especially when that promotion turns to proselytizing—  
with the unabashed goal of saving souls.

There are understandable reasons why this might make us queasy.

The religious zeal required to knock on door after door,  
facing hostility and rejection, can be off-putting.

In this tradition which teaches us to cherish our doubts,  
we are inclined to be at least somewhat skeptical of such true believers.

*I mean, how can anyone be so convinced that they are right?*

Right?

It also must be said that we live in a seemingly secular age.

A few years ago, for reasons that are hard to explain,  
I was backstage at a taping of *Canada's Got Talent*.

I ended up spending a couple of hours  
in a tiny Green Room with Martin Short  
and the opera singer Measha Brueggergosman.

Let's just say that there was a lot of personality packed into that small space.

At one point in this gathering, I found myself in an awkward conversation  
with a woman, a Toronto socialite, who asked what I do.

There was that temptation every minister faces in such moments—  
the desperate pull to explain that I work as a writer or a tattoo artist,  
anything to avoid being a total buzzkill  
by introducing myself as a member of the clergy.

But, I told the truth, and, as often happens,  
the woman recoiled and let out a little incredulous gasp,  
as if to say, “does anyone really still do that anymore?”

As she shook her head from side to side, she said,  
“You know, my husband and I must know fifty couples in this city,  
and I can’t think of a single one of them that goes to church.”

I had no problem believing her.  
We live in secular times.

Or at least a time where we’ve largely agreed  
to keep our faith to ourselves.

But this is changing.

A few years ago, I heard Paul Bramadat, a UU  
and professor of religion at the University of Victoria,  
describe how Canadian society is moving out of the pact  
that had been tacitly made as part of Trudeau-era Multiculturalism:  
the idea that all are free to practise their religion, whatever it may be,  
but that religion is expected to remain in the private sphere,  
a matter of personal, or even private, concern.

But, as he pointed out,  
that pact is no longer holding in the way that it once did,  
as our country’s growing religious diversity sometimes leads to disputes—  
debates over whether women in Quebec have a right to wear the niqab,  
or around how sex education is taught in Ontario schools,  
or, just in the last month, whether Grade 8 students  
in the Woodstock Catholic School Board can be compelled  
to make anti-abortion posters as part of a contest,  
complete with a cash prize from an outside organisation.

Bramadat’s point, when it comes to discussing religion in Canada,  
is that the era of “don’t ask, don’t tell” is coming to an end.

And the question for us is whether we are ready for it.

Whether we are willing and able to live out our faith more openly.

Whether we are ready to let our values guide our actions,  
and our actions reveal what we truly believe.

\* \* \*

A few weeks ago, while on sabbatical,  
I was in the Ozark Mountains, in the northwest corner of Arkansas.

I was on a solo road trip, with a different destination,  
but I decided to make a detour to the town of Bentonville.

I've been very curious about Crystal Bridges,  
the world-class art museum built there a few years ago  
by the Walton family, of Walmart fame (or infamy).

The museum hosts a stunning collection of art,  
all in a beautiful building designed by Moshe Safdie,  
the Israeli-Canadian-American architect.

Towards the end of my visit,  
I took in a powerful special exhibit that had just opened  
called "The Dirty South," which explores the art and musical traditions  
of southern Black culture over the past century.

Early in the exhibit, I was in a room with a very friendly guard,  
who, in true southern style, couldn't quite keep himself  
from engaging in conversation with almost every person who walked by.

I was a bit distracted by his yammering.  
And I found it a little irritating,  
as I was trying to read the artist statements.

But, when I started listening to what he was actually saying to people,  
I was immediately horrified.

In an exhibit examining the legacy of slavery  
and the resilience of Black culture in the face of ongoing racial injustice,  
the friendly white guard was making light-hearted comments  
about one of the pieces of art—a piece that was, itself,  
a symbol of protest over the appalling conditions  
in which so many Black people lived during the Jim Crow era.

I was flabbergasted.

And just at the point when I wondered  
if I was misunderstanding what was being said,  
I caught the eye of the young Black woman he was speaking to.

There was a quick moment of agreement between us that this was not okay.

And I knew in that moment that the burden was on me  
to do something about what I was witnessing.

I needed to show up as an ally.

I opted against speaking directly to the man.  
To my mind, this was a systemic issue,  
something the museum needed to address more broadly.

I didn't want him reprimanded or fired.  
I instead wanted him and anyone working in the museum  
to be asked to think about the deeper meaning of the art around them.

To be invited to reflect on how their words and actions  
might affect those visiting the museum,  
and especially people going through an exhibit  
focussed on the ongoing work of racial justice.

And more than anything, and at the very least,  
I just wanted him to stop making  
the same harmful joke to others who happened by.

But I had absolutely no idea where to start.  
No idea how to make a meaningful difference in this situation.

That is, until I wandered into the gift shop just as I was leaving.

That's when I spotted Hannah, an employee in the shop.

Hannah was young, and tall, and regal,  
with a swirling head of red hair.

And Hannah was wearing two buttons.

One said: "Ask me about my pronouns."

The other was a “Progress Flag,”  
the recent update on the Rainbow Pride Flag  
that includes a brown stripe and a black stripe  
to be intentionally inclusive of Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour,  
and, at the top, a chevron formed from  
the white, light blue, and light pink colours of the Trans Flag.

When the Progress Flag first emerged a few years ago,  
I found it aesthetically jarring,  
and I quarreled with myself about whether the symbol itself  
wasn’t straining under the pressure of trying to convey too much.

Though I had already moved well past that academic argument,  
I came to appreciate the symbolic power of this flag  
for all it meant in that moment in the museum.

Those buttons gave me the confidence that I could talk to Hannah,  
and that they would know who I should speak to.

So, I said hello to Hannah,  
and I thanked them for wearing their buttons.

I can’t imagine it’s easy to be a beacon of queer visibility in rural Arkansas.

And then I said to them that their button,  
which to me pointed to an awareness of intersectionality—  
an awareness of how different oppressions can be linked—  
made me believe that they could be of help.

I explained the situation.  
Hannah took it all in.  
I asked who I should talk to.  
And Hannah gave me a name.

And then I asked, will this person really understand what I’m getting at?

And Hannah promised me they would.

And they did.

I sat in the foyer of the museum past closing time  
typing out a long email on my phone.

And I received, within an hour, the most thoughtful response I could possibly hope for from the director of museum operations, indicating immediate steps to address my concerns at the highest level, but all with a goal of growth and greater understanding.

I'll say that that afternoon was a moment of putting my own faith into action, in some small way.

Our commitments to racial justice have deep roots in my heart, to the point that I can't let moments like that pass by without comment.

But what I want you to hear in this story is that Hannah was the hero.

Hannah's courage to wear their values literally on their lapel gave me the courage to ask for help when I needed it.

As I drove on that evening, I thought about how the symbol of our flaming chalice came about during World War II as a way for people who were rescuing children from persecution to easily recognize one another as trustworthy.

The first chalices were actually a two-dimensional image worn as lapel pins, an indication to others in the know that they were part of the network of people involved in this great effort to save and serve life.

That's what Hannah's buttons did for me.

They told me I could trust them.

I have no idea if Hannah is a Unitarian Universalist.

They felt to me, though, to have a lot in common with many of the UU young adults I've known through the years.

Either way, Hannah was living their values out loud.

And because they did, something may have been changed for the good that day.

\* \* \*

In this age of anxiety in which we are living,

I dare say we need more of us to be living our values out loud.

I want to be more like Hannah.  
I want us all to be more like Hannah.

Putting it out there.

Not proselytizing, per se.

But living in such a way  
that our actions reveal the values we hold,  
and the faith that we profess.

Be it in what we post online.  
How we move through the world.  
And how we are with strangers, or our nearest and dearest.

This is the path, I believe, to evangelism for Unitarian Universalists.

Evangelism is a wounded word,  
but in its most basic definition, it means to share “good news.”

So, I challenge you to spend time in the coming days  
reflecting on what good news you have to share.

It’s not so much because you may find yourself as a UU knocking on random  
doors.

But because it’s more likely that moments of opportunity  
will come knocking on your own door, if you’re paying attention.

Moments when the values you live by  
may make a real difference to someone else.

Moments when the reason for sharing good news  
becomes truly and abundantly apparent.

Amen.