

Unitarian Universalism -- Staying Alive!

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Introduction

During the Spring 2006 semester, the 2005 article, “Why ‘Unitarian Universalism’ is Dying,” by Davidson Loehr became a topic of discussion on a Starr King School for the Ministry e-mail list. The Rev. David Sammons, Visiting Professor of Unitarian Universalist Heritage and Ministry, and minister at the Mount Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church, proposed that Starr King students develop a response to this article. Three Starr King students—Jeanelyse Doran Adams, Earl Koteen, and Julia McKay—took up this challenge under the Rev. Sammons’ guidance.

As our perspectives grew and deepened through reflection and discussion over several weeks, we found that our focus moved from Dr. Loehr’s article to a sincere desire to explore our individual Unitarian Universalist faiths. During this time, each student drafted written responses on a variety of topics generated from the discussion. We came to see that two questions are critical to the future of Unitarian Universalism:

- What is the center of our faith?
- What is our covenant (i.e., what is our promise to one another, what brings and holds us together)?

Summary of Our Responses

Each of the three participants reflected and wrote on these questions. All three of us found value in the Unitarian Universalist principles and acknowledged the importance of our covenants. However, being Unitarian Universalists, we naturally had our own perspectives, which are attached. These statements culminate each individual’s explorations. They are intentionally succinct to model core theologies for our faith.

We all have slightly different ways of describing what is at the center of our faith, but share the belief that relatedness is central to living our faith in community. For all of us, the Unitarian Universalist principles serve as ethical guidelines for that living faith.

Conclusion

We are grateful to Dr. Loehr for stimulating this reflection. While we do not agree with him that Unitarian Universalism is dying, we acknowledge that Unitarian Universalist Association membership, along with all the mainline Protestant denominations, has been stagnant while fundamentalism and evangelicalism grow rapidly around us. Having looked at what holds us together, we may next wish to examine how we can best spread our own good news.

Exploring the Center of Unitarian Universalism

by Jeanelyse Doran Adams

Both the grace and the challenge within Unitarian Universalism is that the center of our faith and our tradition resides in the hearts, minds, and conscience of people. I believe we are held in relationship through a covenant with Life itself.

Relationship and commitment is the center from which our Unitarian Universalist faith flows. We always have the capacity to be in relationship with ourselves, other people, the natural world, and with God. God infuses all these relationships. I am choosing to use the word “God.” I could as easily substitute the word Tao, Mystery, Life, Allah, Source, Universal Presence, Divine or Higher Power. I do not experience God as a being, but rather the cosmic substance that informs or animates all of life.

Through the gift of life, we are bound to God in Covenant. Our Puritan forbearers understood this connection and the responsibility to community that flowed from it. They came to America with the understanding that they were in Covenant with God as a people in order to create justice, harmony, and peace.

James Luther Adams wrote, “The biblical idea of covenant is what I call a covenant of being. That is, the Old Testament asserts that the people’s covenant is a covenant with the essential character and intention of reality. It is not merely a covenant between human beings; it is a covenant between human beings in the face of reality. The fundamental demands and possibilities of reality are not created by humans, but exist in its very nature. The understanding of reality is appropriate only when it is seen in terms of an ethical covenant. The covenant is with the creative, sustaining, commanding, judging, transforming Power.”

The Tao Te Ching states it this way: “The Tao never does anything, yet through it all things are done. If powerful men and women could center themselves in it the whole world would be transformed by itself, in its natural rhythms.”

This is where I find the hope and promise of (and in) Unitarian Universalism for shaping a community of faith dedicated to the commonwealth or beloved community. Because Unitarian Universalism does not prescribe a single belief system: we are free and called to search together for sources of inspiration to build a just society. We can draw on the vision and wisdom of the worlds’ faith traditions and from the secular world for strength, courage, and hope.

Like the prophet Jesus who proclaimed the greatest commandment is love, James Luther Adams claims, “One maintains responsibility for the collective, not, finally, because it is the law, but because of love.” Our Seven Principles guide us to love and responsibility within the reality of our world. The Principles create the guideposts for social and ethical foundations. They help us to develop reciprocal and just relationships with all people and with the cosmos of which we are apart.

Yes, the grace and the challenge within Unitarian Universalism is that the center of our faith and our tradition resides in the hearts, minds, and conscience of people. So the mission of our ministries, our congregations and our associations must be to support, empower and inspire each other to a renewal of covenant. Real change and transformation will have to come from us, personally and collectively through fellowship and leadership. The change we seek must be based in engagement with the reality of the world and our lives, deep reflection, and in our promises to each other.

I concur with James Luther Adams when he says: “The fundamental mandate is the renewal of covenant within the churches, the reaching down to the covenant of being itself where mutuality and sacrifice alone free us from the universal monstrosities, the reaching out to the promise-making and promise-keeping that constitute the substance of response to the covenant of being, the substance of faith and hope.

The Center of My Faith & What It Means to be Unitarian Universalist

by Earl W. Koteen

The Center of My Faith

The center of my faith is my “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder,” the first source of UUism’s living tradition. To live that faith in community, I look to the seven Unitarian Universalist principles, which are a covenant among the member congregations of the UUA. The Unitarian Universalist principles are spiritual and ethic guidelines, not commandments, for acting on

my direct experience and for living my faith in community.

It seems that the three principles in the middle are central guides to how we are in community.

These are:

- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

To live from the center of my religion is to engage in respectful dialogue that contributes to spiritual growth. As a Unitarian Universalist, I encourage other Unitarian Universalists to build their own theologies. I benefit by sharing the journey with fellow seekers who sometimes hold radically different beliefs about the landscape.

What Is Our Covenant?

As members of an association of independent congregations, Unitarian Universalists, in principle, are “signing on” to the Unitarian Universalist principles once they join a congregation. Each congregation decides for itself what are the responsibilities of membership.

This has long been a somewhat controversial matter within some congregations. Do we set minimum pledge levels? What are our expectations for membership in terms of contributions of time, talent, and moral support? We want members to contribute while recognizing that financial or medical exigencies may cause some members to be more recipients than contributors of support and resources.

To be an active Unitarian Universalist, I believe you must sign the book, send money, and contribute time and talent to the community unless circumstances, e.g., debilitating illness, bankruptcy, prevent you from doing so. Wise Unitarian Universalist leaders encourage Unitarian Universalists to make contributions that utilize their talents and their hearts, rather than exhausting themselves trying to be all things to all people.

Some congregations adopt vision statements and behavioral covenants. Abiding by the behavior covenant is an expectation for being an active Unitarian Universalist. Intentionally living the vision within the limits of one’s capacity is being an exemplary Unitarian Universalist.

A Theological Center of Unitarian Universalism and The Theological Relevance of the Seven Principles

by Julia McKay

I want to begin by quoting some ideas from an article written by psychologist, Dr. David Berenson, who states that Fundamentalism is a way of denying the full impact of evil—a way of denying a sense of complicity or powerlessness that accompanies isolation and separation from God, or even God’s total annihilation. Refreshingly, he names fundamentalisms other than the Christian Right’s brand that seem to line up with some of Loehr’s concerns about Unitarian Universalism.

- Humanist fundamentalism – promises a better world if we just interact rationally and democratically
- Political fundamentalism – everything will be better after the revolution, or when my particular cause is victorious
- Scientific fundamentalism – mechanistic reductionism, everything will be better when we isolate the cause
- Psychotherapeutic fundamentalism – unlimited growth (“I will always be evolving”) or conversely, fundamental change is impossible (accepting “what is”)

As a response to these fundamentalisms, Berenson maps out a fairly complex eight-step process that outlines the historical evolution of humanity’s relationship with God. This process culminates in the “most evolved” form of God as “relatedness” itself. He states: “To be completely relating in the here and now brings forth a sense of the Beyond, and being aware of the reality of the Beyond brings one into more intimate relation with others.” We could talk about this citation for days.

This relatedness, this embodiment, this “living the truth of who I am” in any given moment has the goal of bringing me in greater contact with the world around me. Not transcendence, but connection. And, connection intimates covenant. And, covenant can be defined as carrying out the Divine pleasure or desire (will) in human interactions. “God’s” kin-dom happens in community, in relationality. Ironically, I noticed the marked absence of commentary on the importance of community in Loehr’s search for a religious center. As a matter of fact, he claims that the religious journey must be done alone.

But, if “Relatedness” truly is the highest expression of the Divine, it follows that the ways in which each community functions become the center of faith. In actuality, a functional relationality is what Unitarian Universalists have expressed in the seven principles. It is not hard to see that, the greatest key to unlocking healthy relationality may be in our principles. In the third principle, “acceptance of one another,” and even more crucially, acceptance of ourselves, becomes a cornerstone for healthy relationship. In the final analysis though, it becomes important to recognize that the seven principles

are values and ethical guidelines that can lead us toward the core of faith, but cannot be the Center of Faith themselves.

Somehow the question still begs: “How do we experience the Sacred?” The necessity of knowing an ultimately sustaining source that we can turn our lives over to when we feel powerless seems to be paramount to the human experience. Author, Alice Walker expresses our hope that “there is Life in us that is equal to all the suffering pain and sorrow that we endure.” The absence of this knowing is what Loehr may ultimately be concerned about.

The answer seems to at least be witnessed to in the six traditions. Unitarian Universalists express their experience of the Sacred as published in the six sources or traditions. And, while this list is certainly not exhaustive, it is honoring of the influence of multiple traditions on our faith practice. Furthermore, these sources have established precedence for an even more expanded plurality as we choose it.

It follows then that in order to have and effectively maintain this pluralistic faith basis, the center of faith must become the community itself. And, if we look carefully Unitarian Universalists have the makings of God as “relatedness.” The six traditions point to our pluralistic awareness of the Sacred, while the seven principles guide a covenant of interacting to bring this Reality into being.

I enjoy the fact that Unitarian Universalists are not centered in one channel of belief. A claim that God is found in only one place will always have reason to be shunned and resisted. This is the hope of Unitarian Universalism to me. We are one of the only organized religious bodies that does not claim to possess God in any particular package; we are a faith that is challenged to see Light in all things. And, I believe that if we are looking for Light in all things we just might find it. This type of faith takes the greatest responsibility of all and includes vast amounts of humility gathered in the reality of the human Self. And if “salvation is by character” as our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors have taught us, ultimately, this kind of thinking may actually be what saves us.