

## **More Than the Sum of Our Parts: Our UU Heritage**

Kris Cervantes, 10 August 2014

The theme for our next four Sundays is “Our Unitarian Universalist Heritage.” This is a time of year when folks are church-shopping, when churches traditionally get visitors who, after a long summer of being prostrated by heat exhaustion, are perhaps looking for a cool, refreshing drink to replenish their spiritual wells. Or maybe they just want to come in and share our air-conditioning, and that's okay, too. The point is - and I have a point, I promise - this is a good time of year to talk about what being a Unitarian Universalist means.

There are lots of people who have no idea what Unitarian Universalism is. If they did, I assume it wouldn't so often be referred to as Universal Unitarianism, or Universitarianism, or Unity, or any of the other things I've heard it called. The Reverend Kenn Hurto, our thoughtful and rather intense southern district executive, says we should avoid calling it “UU” and all, always, refer to it by its full name: Unitarian Universalism. He says, “People have died for this faith, for those words. Don't cheapen it.” And maybe he has a point. Still, it's a mouthful, and I don't mean any disrespect when I shorten it to “UU”. Like most other ideas of this faith movement of ours, what to call it is open to debate.

Despite the fact that people don't know about us, especially here in the south, Unitarians and Universalists have been around for hundreds of years - thousands, even, if you go back to the early days of Christianity, where our roots lie. We're heretics from way back. The first Unitarians were heretics who argued with the idea of the trinity - Unitarianism versus trinitarianism - and later came the Universalists, who held the heretical belief that god would not damn anyone to an eternity of hell, and therefore we are all going to heaven.

A history of heresy leads us to the present day, when Unitarian Universalists may or may not believe in a divinity called God, in heaven or hell, in a creed which begins “I believe in God the Father, Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Starting during the time of Transcendentalism, Unitarianism began to attract those who valued reason and religious inquiry over dogma. Writers and philosophers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker valued the individual quest for truth and meaning over religious creed; Universalist ideas of salvation for all and a loving god moved in parallel, and drew in others who valued reason and spiritual inquiry.

These ideas laid the foundation for the joining of the Unitarian and Universalist churches

in 1961. By that time, both Unitarians and Universalists were heavily invested in comparative religious exploration, humanism, and social justice. Although the merger wasn't easy - many worthwhile things are tough - it was successful, and today we have the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations. Like our earliest American forebears, we are still essentially Congregationalists, meaning that each congregation can determine its own best way forward. The Salem Covenant of 1629, in fact, reads, "We Covenant with the Lord and with one another; and do bynd ourselves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed Truth." Just as the Puritans allowed each congregation to enter mine its own bylaws, rules, regulations and way forward, the UUA exists as a bureaucratic and supportive entity to provide resources for Unitarian Universalist congregations, not as an authoritative "mother church" figure.

Whew. That was a lot of dry history. Thanks for sticking with me through that five-minute review.

How many of you have a Unitarian Universalist elevator speech? An elevator speech, for those who have never heard the phrase before, is a short little talk that takes about the time you'd have in an elevator with someone, to tell them about your church.

Not all faiths require an elevator speech. It depends on context, like so much else does; here in the south, UUs need an elevator speech. In New England, I'm reliably told, not so much. No Southern Baptist ever needed an elevator speech in Waco, Texas. In fact, I doubt any Christian denomination needs an elevator speech in Waco, Texas, which is probably lucky, because if asked how Methodism is different from Lutheranism, I doubt most Methodists or Lutherans could give a good elevator speech. Maybe I'm not giving them enough credit. For all I know, all the former and current Methodists sitting out there are just itching to tell me that, according to "[differencebetween.net](http://differencebetween.net)":

"The Lutheran church lays a lot more emphasis on detailed, thorough and long-lasting ceremonies. There are congregations that are mandatory to be a part of. The ritual of giving confessions is also a part of the Lutheran church. The Methodist church deviates from these traditional practices and instead concentrates on doing good in order to please God."

By the way, "[differencebetween.net](http://differencebetween.net)" is a real website, and obviously where I'll be spending all my time for the foreseeable future, because it's awesome that it even exists.

So, obviously an elevator speech is a useful thing to have up your sleeve when it comes to being a Unitarian Universalist in Waco, Texas. Here's mine.

“Oh, you want to know what Unitarian Universalism is? Okay. We’re a faith movement that focuses on shared values, such as compassion, inquiry, and celebration, rather than focusing on a shared set of beliefs. There are Unitarian Universalists who are Christian, atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, pagan, humanist, and ‘other.’ Every UU I’ve ever met has been involved in social justice activities. We want to find our own spiritual paths, and leave the world a little better than it was when we came into it along the way.”

Except I don't usually have it written down in front of me, so there is often some mumbling and tangents in there. One of my vows is that I will have it down, with no mumbling or tangents, as your minister.

The problem I have is, people don't say “What’s Unitarian Universalism?” They say, “What do you believe?” Which is a much more difficult question to answer, especially in a church which prizes plurality, diversity, and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning as defined by the individual. And when I shift the conversation and give my elevator speech, some folks still tend to look at me and ask “But what do YOU believe?” Or the even more terrifying, “But do you believe in God?” And oh boy, can you hear the capital G on God when they ask it.

I will be totally honest with you guys. I am nervous about the idea of being your minister and having people ask me point-blank - because hello, Waco, Texas, they will - “Do you believe in God?” Because I'm an agnostic. I'm fine with saying that here, to you all, who are self-selected to be okay with my agnosticism, just like I'm self-selected to be okay with your whatever-you-are, even if that changes on a yearly basis. That’s fine by me. Because what Unitarian Universalism has taught me is that belief in a higher power doesn't make a person bad or good. Acting in a bad or good way - that makes you bad or good. I can say all that to people - and I do! - but it makes my elevator speech one that is more suited to the Empire State Building than the Alico.

It's just a tough concept to get across to people, especially when they are still stuck on “But do you believe in God?” And we live in a context where belief in god is often equated with moral goodness. And they've never heard of your church.

So, here's where *People* magazine comes in. Because when a lot of the folks you run across have never heard of the Universal Unity Church where you go, and they have that look in

their eye - you know the one - the one that says, "That's a cult, isn't it?" Well, when you need to convince folks that not only is your faith not a cult, but that it's been around for a while, then it's really really helpful to be able to say, "UU has been around for a long time. Charles Darwin was a Unitarian. John Adams was a Unitarian, and his son John Quincy Adams, when he sent dabbling in being President like his dad, co-founded All-Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. Oh, and Abigail Adams - her, too. Clara Barton was a Universalist. e.e. cummings was raised Unitarian and retained his individual spiritual quest throughout his life. Charles Dickens, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Julia Ward Howe, Linus Pauling, Pete Seeger, I could go on. Did you know Christopher Reeve was a Unitarian Universalist? Yeah, guys, we have Superman. And if you need something with even more nerd cred, how about Tim Berners-Lee, the guy who actually invented the World Wide Web (no matter what Al Gore says).

I love knowing that our roots are deep, and that our history is broad. I love being able to rattle off a list of famous names as long as my arm when people look skeptical about Unitarian Universalism. But it's important to remember that we as a faith movement are more than our history and our religion is one that honors the individual, but works best when all of us focus more on what we share than on what sets us apart.

In fact, what Unitarian Universalism has taught me best is that *\*everything\** works better when human beings focus on what we share, rather than on what sets us apart.

Sometimes when I turn on the radio or television, or read the news online, I feel like I'm living in a world that is a sick, twisted joke based on the inverse of the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average. Instead I see a world where all the women are screwed, all the men are terrified, and all the children are in danger.

What I don't see is a world where people have learned to focus on what they hold in common, and moreover, what sacred things they hold in common. Maybe that's part of what we can offer people, since it's a lesson we are all learning, over and over again, as we struggle to be our best selves both in here and out there. I *\*know\** there are others fighting that same fight, informed by their own values, many of which we share. Some of them are in churches this morning, some were in mosques or synagogues on Friday, and some are at home right this minute, blissfully sleeping away the morning because church isn't for them - and that's okay.

Our mission statement says we are "...an inclusive spiritual community that reaches out

and inspires people to live meaningful, joyful lives of service toward the creation of a more just and loving world.” Step one of reaching out is helping people understand that we are \*here\*, that we are not a cult, that every week we are both exploring our individual paths and working together in fellowship to create that more just and loving world.

I charge each one of us to open that conversation by having our elevator speeches ready to roll when people say, “Unitarian Universalist? What’s \*that\*?” Because no matter how awesome we are, we work better in community than alone, and we can change the world better with others than we can on our own.

So be it, amen.