

Seeking Not Answers

Pastor Kris Cervantes, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waco

May 3, 2015

A brief bibliography before I begin; one of the sources for today's reflection is Unitarian Universalist writer Bruce Clear. If you are interested in checking out his work, you can find quite a bit on the UUA.org website.

Unitarian Universalists sometimes get accused of either "not believing in anything" or "believing in everything." It's sort of a fair accusation, actually. Here at UUWaco we have a strong humanist flavor, but we also have proud Christians, pagans, Buddhists. We have had members who attended services at the Reform Jewish congregation on Fridays, then came to the Fellowship on Sundays. Many of us have at least tried our hand at meditation, midsummer and solstice celebrations and rituals – the list goes on. On the other hand there are lots of us who are staunch agnostics. Or, y'know. Wobbly-wobbly agnostics. Plus there are plenty here who are atheists, who don't believe in any supernatural – meaning above-natural – systems or ideas. More than a few of us consider ourselves as "Unitarian Universalist... plus. Something." The Garrison Keillor joke quoted by Bruce Clear is, "A lot of folks say that Unitarians have no beliefs. That is not true. Unitarians have very strong beliefs. It's just that what those beliefs are depends on what book they last read."

Garrison definitely knows some UUs. The accusation, though, that we believe too much or too little actually misses the point.

Unitarian Universalism is not *about* what you believe.

I spent a lot of my childhood and youth defining myself to people – friends, acquaintances, schoolmates who questioned me about being a weird Unitarian kid – and I did that, often, in terms of telling them what I'm not. A lot of the Unitarian Universalists I know did that, and do that. I still catch myself doing it, but nowadays, I am really trying to break the habit of telling people what I'm not.

Part of the reason we UUs do that is in a genuine attempt to communicate, as members of a religious minority in this country and particularly our southern culture. If all the people around you are one thing, sometimes the easiest way to define yourself to those people – who presumably understand the one thing they all *are* – is that you are *not* that thing.

But then you have to keep defining yourself in terms of what you aren't. In third grade, a typical conversation went like this:

Q: What church do you go to?

A: The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Q: What's that?

A: Well, it's, uh... you don't have to believe anything. (This was incorrect. That's a different sermon, though.) I'm not a Christian...

Q: Well then, are you a devil-worshipper?

I am not making that up. That is an faithful reenactment of a conversation held during recess at a summer camp for G/T kids in Waco in 1980-something.

As an adult, I have not yet been asked point-blank, "So are you a devil-worshipper?" but I do kinda wonder if it's lurking behind the quizzical expressions of those interrogating me.

These days, when someone says, “What’s that?” I say “It’s a church where we focus more on shared values than a shared belief system.” (You guys. Don’t even get me started on the word *church*, okay? I’m reclaiming it. I’m going to take the word *church*’s cultural capital and ride it hard until we have 150 members stuffed in here and we’re changing the world every week in this town.) ;-)

The next question I get asked is often, “Is it Christian?” I recently learned the perfect and perfectly true answer to that question, attributed to a former member, Cathy Gordon, who has passed away. The perfect answer to “Is it Christian?” is “Yes – and more!”

There’s another uncomfortable question where people ask me “Are YOU Christian?” and I usually say I identify more as an agnostic humanist with Buddhist leanings. That confuses folks enough that I can redirect the conversation back to shared values. Again: My own personal beliefs don’t matter here. One person’s individual beliefs don’t define Unitarian Universalism. (That’s true of Christianity and Judaism and Islam, too, but they get around it by having creeds and dogma, so most congregations in the Big Three Abrahamic religions *believe* they all believe the same thing.)

The point is, Unitarian Universalists don’t have to define ourselves by what we do or don’t believe. We can, instead, define ourselves by our shared values – what we want to stand for in the world. Here at UUWaco we define our core values as compassion, inclusion, spiritual growth, inquiry, and celebration. Those are some darn fine values, and they go well with “Unitarian Universalism... Plus.” Christianity. Atheism. Buddhism. Paganism. Unitarian Universalism plus just general awesomeness.

One thing a lot of Unitarian Universalists identify with here in Central Texas is humanism.

This month our theme is Witnesses of Wonders, and it honors the humanists among us, and humanism as a source of wisdom to the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. The official wording, created by UUs at a General Assembly lo, these many decades ago, says: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the spirit.” I seriously want to give a handful of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups to whoever came up with that wording, I love it that much. I’m totally calling dibs on “Idolatries of the Spirit” for my band name.

Humanism is not only a source for Unitarian Universalism, Unitarian Universalism is a source for humanism. Of course the ideas behind humanism go back millennia – Socrates and Aristotle were among the first in recorded Western history to promote the idea that reason and logic could be much more powerful agents of change for good than superstition. Ancient Chinese philosophers also promoted humanist ideas and ideals, perhaps as far back as the 11th century BCE. The Islamic Golden Age and European Renaissance sounded the same note, as did many Enlightenment age thinkers here in the U.S. and in Europe.

In America in the early 20th century, humanist ideas again began percolating. I’d like to read a small section of a Bruce Clear essay entitled “The Humanist in Me,” because he lays out the history and connection so well.

In the opening years of this century, John Dietrich, a Unitarian minister in Spokane, Washington and later in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was preaching a non-theistic religion he called “humanism.” In Des Moines, Iowa, a Unitarian minister named Curtis Reese was preaching a non-theistic religion he called the “religion of democracy.” When these two met at a conference in 1917, they discovered the similarities of their messages and Reese eagerly adopted Dietrich’s label, “humanism.”

Throughout the 1920s, the humanist view attracted many followers in the denomination. Eventually, the Humanist Fellowship was formed, largely by Unitarians at the University of Chicago. This group later reorganized as the American Humanist Association. In 1933, a statement outlining the philosophy of humanism was published under the title, "A Humanist Manifesto." Of the 84 people who originally signed the document, over half were Unitarian ministers.

Clear goes on to say that humanism and Unitarian Universalism are very similar, in that they are both non-dogmatic and open to new information to shape the way they experience the world.

In fact, the two are so similar, there have been times when I've read the definitions given of humanism, and wondered by we even use two different names. In "What is Humanism," by Fred Edwords on the American Humanist Association website, he says, "Secular Humanists often refer to Unitarian Universalists as 'humanists not yet out of the church habit.' But Unitarian Universalists sometimes counter that a Secular Humanist is simply an 'unchurched Unitarian.'" Going back to Bruce Clear, he believes the difference is subtle, but important. Here's what he had to say:

It is common for Unitarians to summarize their values into these three words: **freedom, reason, and tolerance**. These are all words inherited from the humanist tradition: **freedom, reason, and tolerance**. The subtle difference in emphasis I see, though, is that in Unitarian [Universal]ism, the value of *freedom* takes precedence, and in humanism, the value of *reason* takes precedence. This does not mean at all that Unitarians reject reason or that humanists reject freedom; rather, as I say, it is merely, and subtly, a difference of emphasis.

I think that's a really useful way to see the difference. You can also think of it as a Venn diagram of sorts – there are UUs in one circle, and humanists in the other circle, and there's definitely some overlap. However, UUs also have overlap with lots of other belief systems, some of which might overlap with humanism (Buddism, I think, or at least Buddhist practices such as meditation and mindfulness, could successfully overlap with humanism), and some of which just don't – and that's okay. That emphasis on *freedom* for Unitarian Universalism, to me, often means that we are free to choose a belief system that works for us as individuals – or to choose no belief system at all.

Your beliefs are your own. They may be shared with lots of people in this faith community – especially if you're a humanist, because we do have that strong flavor – but they may not. Your beliefs may be singular to just you. Although your beliefs – of course! – matter to *you*, in terms of our shared community, in the best way possible, they *don't* really matter. What matters to the others here – what they hopefully share – are your values and your desire to take action.

If you came through our doors seeking answers to your questions about *belief*, you may be out of luck. I'm not saying we won't explore those questions – that's part of what spiritual growth is about – but no matter how much exploration we do, your beliefs will still be *your* beliefs – maybe shared and maybe not.

But if you want ideas on how to live in the world, how to make it healthier, cleaner, and happier? Yes. Come seeking those ideas. Come ready to share *your* ideas. Come ready to speak and to listen, come ready to gather up others in a celebration of inclusion and compassion, come ready for spiritual growth and for inquiry.

As a humanists, and like the other humanists I know, I reject the idea of an afterlife. If we're right, that means this is our one chance to get everything done. Believe in whatever you want. But value this, this life, this "wonder of time, this marvel of space." As Robert Weston said, "This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know; out of your heart, cry wonder. Sing that we live."

If you're shopping for answers, our shelves may be empty. But if you're here for friendship, for companions in your seeking, for coworkers on the road to a better world? You're in the right place.

So may it be.