

What's the Difference?

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Today is Association Sunday. Today we celebrate the UUA and the Unitarian Universalist tradition of which it is the primary institutional representative. It is that wider tradition to which I will turn this morning. Mostly because I seem to have been asking or being asked the question: “who are we?” What makes us Unitarian Universalists unique? Why are we not some other denomination or civic organization? This is a question that comes us a lot actually. There are lots of ways to frame it, but to put it in basic terms, what is the difference? What difference does Unitarian Universalism make? Say for example that tomorrow Unitarian Universalism became illegal. If you were arrested and tried for being a Unitarian Universalist, would the prosecution have enough evidence to convict you? How is your life different, how have you made the lives of others different because you are or are in some way associated with this church?

My good friend Bill Neely has one of my favorite observations about this. Bill is minister in Cordova Tennessee, but this story takes

place in his home church in Norfolk Virginia. The UU church in Norfolk would often have guest musicians come and play during their worship services; much as we do. One Sunday they invited a jazz quartet to come and play during worship. This band was just incredible, added fantastic energy, and people would go nuts over how wonderful the music was. Feeling the love from this church, the leader of the quartet said, “We love playing here. This is so much better than a jazz club where people are always talking and not listening. Thank you!”

Well the very next Sunday was youth Sunday. As is often the case, they asked the graduating youth of the church to speak during the service and share their beliefs or what the youth group has meant to them. One fellow got up and said well he liked church and the youth group, but it wasn't as good as baseball! Now there were few things in life better than baseball, according to this young man. And he proceeded to talk about baseball for the next ten minutes. At the conclusion of this, my friend Bill thought you know maybe we need to rethink our marketing as Unitarian Universalists. We could come up with bumper stickers that say something like: “Unitarian Universalism; better than a jazz club, but not quite as good as baseball.” I am sure there are some Philly fans out there who quietly agree.

Be that as it may, I am going to talk about the difference we make at three different levels. First there is the personal level, what is the difference to the individual who becomes a Unitarian Universalist. Then

there is the interpersonal or relational level. This difference is the answer to the question how do you treat others differently if you are a Unitarian Universalist? And finally I will talk about the difference we make in the culture, society, and world at large as a religious movement. Do note that there are more than one right answer to all of these, and I am sure some of you will think of things I could have included but did not. Still others will compose sermons of your own, in the form of lengthy and rich e-mails you will send to me, documenting the many things I could have said but forgot to say. I welcome these observations; we can all be right!

We begin with William Ellery Channing, the father of American Unitarianism. You have perhaps heard portions of this essay that starts out “I call that mind free which...” Some of these words from “Spiritual Freedom” are engraved on the front door of the church! In it, Channing makes a crucial point about the notion of freedom. Normally we think of freedom as the absence of restraint. It is the potential to perform or take action. In and of itself it seems to have little content, but it permits almost anything. Channing however takes freedom one step further. He says that freedom actively fosters creativity and innovation in our thinking and living. While Channing focuses on the mind, I would assert that this is true of the heart and soul as well. Each and every Unitarian Universalist is on a personal spiritual journey that no one can take for another. You have homework for your entire life—namely to

grow as a spiritually mature person. Unitarian Universalists have rejected canon and creed. While we might sometimes wish that we had the ease of answering that question “What is it you believe?” by being able to quote the Nicene Creed or the Five Fundamentals of Faith, I think deep down we are glad that our tradition has shed these things. It makes life hard sometimes but we gain so much more.

Ours is a living tradition. This does not mean that you can believe anything you want. Choosing your religious beliefs is not like one day deciding to redecorate your house. We believe what our heart, mind and soul compels us to believe. We are pushed and pulled in ways that we do not always control to believe truths that are fundamental to our very being. To abandon such truths would be a betrayal of our authentic self. One such belief for me is that everyone, without exception, is a Buddha. The trick then is to see this all the time, and live accordingly. While other religions may insist that everyone’s beliefs be the same, Unitarian Universalism encourages each of us to follow our heart instead. If it means being creative and unique, then by all means be creative and unique. The difference that Unitarian Universalism makes at the personal level is that each person is free to be a creative, innovative, and transformative as they can be in their spiritual life.

In my last church there was a guy who personified Channing’s creative faith. His name was Mark. He was a regular in the meditation group. Apparently he had experimented with drugs and mediation with

a teacher in California, and he had some wild stories to share. At least from what I could understand. He would often talk about what he experienced in meditation around energy, and chakras, and some other vaguely eastern mystical practices. To be honest, I usually got lost about thirty seconds in. Mark really like the church, and me, for our non-judgmental approach to his ideas. It was easy because half the time I didn't know what he was talking about. He just rambled. We never let him preach, in a church with a strong tradition of lay preaching, because the service would have gone twice as long and lost half the people there. Mark believed things that Channing could never have imagined.

But Mark was a good guy. He started dating a woman in the church who had MS, and he would take extraordinary care of her. Mark worked as a handyman for part of the year and supplemented his income with online poker. I found out that he would often rent a room out to guys who didn't have a place to stay and would be homeless without his offer. Sometimes they took advantage of him, but he still would rent. Eventually the church hired him as a part time custodian. That was a huge deal for their budget. Mark would make that chancel sparkle. He would repaint and re-carpet areas that needed it for free. I couldn't really tell you what Mark believed, but I do know that whatever it was, he lived it.

This brings us to the second difference; the difference we make at the relational or interpersonal level. Sometimes people ask me how do

you know you are enlightened? How do you know that you have become that spiritually mature person? I will share with you my spiritual litmus test that can help you gauge this. Ask yourself: “How well do I treat the person who bags my groceries?” Do you smile and say hello and thank you? Do you ignore them? Do you yell at them for messing up? Do you tip them when they carry your bags to your car? How well do you treat people who have to be nice to you, be they a waitress, a person on the phone, or anyone else that the situation gives you unilateral power over them?

I use this because for a time I was the guy who bagged the groceries. For a few months after college, that was the only job I had. I was about to travel in Japan, but before I could go I had some time after graduating from college. Living in a small town in Michigan, I had to bag groceries. One day a man came through in a hurry. He was obviously an important fellow, and he and his family were impatient. It seemed no matter how I bagged this guys groceries it was never right. He got a big attitude and literally turned to his wife and said right in front of me, “It is so hard to find useful help!” He stormed off. It was among the more humiliating experiences in my life.

The very next person in line was a little old lady. I don’t know if she saw my encounter with the guy before her. I bagged her stuff, she had quite a lot, and she asked if I would help take them to her car. I did of course. When I loaded her car full, she gave me a dollar and thanked

me profusely for helping her. What is the difference? I asked myself. Surely I did not go from being absolutely incompetent to Mother Theresa in the course of thirty seconds. The answer of course had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with the spiritual maturity of the two people I met that day. How you treat others, be they strangers or family or friends, speaks to your spiritual development.

The difference Unitarian Universalism makes in interpersonal relations is accepting the imperfections of others. Sometimes we call this “tolerance” but I mean something deeper than just putting up with people who annoy you. Refraining from yelling at people who talk during a movie is a pretty low bar to clear. Accepting imperfection in another person is how we come to understand them as a human being. Unitarianism, particularly Humanism, teaches us that we should let go of all thoughts of some transcendent heaven of perfection, and instead learn to love this imperfect world full of imperfect human beings. Unitarian Universalism urges us to love the people it is hard to love sometimes. That is what helps us grow. That is the gift that their imperfection and annoying habits gives to us: the opportunity to practice patience and loving kindness.

Walter Brueggemann picks up this theme in his book Mandate to Difference. His book is addressed to modern churches, and he presents a powerful vision of “radical hospitality”:

“Openness to foreigners and eunuchs, that is, welcome to others who are not like us, is a radical alternative to the ideology of conformity that takes all those not like ourselves to be dangerous and unacceptable deviants. The issue, of course, concerns the otherness of sexuality, but it also concerns the otherness of immigrants and those with alternative social practices. That intolerance of the others among us is even more toxic now that our society in the United States is divided into ‘red’ and ‘blue,’ and I fear we are at the edge of red and blue clergy and red and blue parishes. And here is this poet who says, let no the foreigner or the eunuch imagine that they will be excluded or forgotten.”

The difference the Unitarian Universalist church makes in the world comes from our radical hospitable orientation to the world. We are a place that dares to be different in a dominant culture that demands conformity and “normalcy” through a very narrow definition. Unitarian Universalism makes a difference by, in Brueggemann’s words, welcoming the exiles into our midst. And not just the exiles, but everybody.

Look at our name. The root words are “unity” and “universal.” These two words carry a grand and compelling religious vision for our world. They could be unpacked in exciting ways that I think we have only partially explored. (The notable exception would be Clarence Skinner’s “Unity of Universals”) In Universalism, God’s love embraced everyone. Jesus, and other prophets, exemplified this by eating with lepers and prostitutes. Unitarians could not divide God into parts, but instead insisted on unity. Divisions are overcome by our commonalities. This could be something like our inherent worth and dignity of *every* person. It is part of our tradition to overcome such divisions and welcome all within our midst.

This has not always been acceptable to the pervading culture. Unitarian Universalist affirmations of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people have not won us friends in some quarters. But this is not first, but only the most recent. You can look at what Unitarian Universalists did in the past around ordaining women and giving them the right to vote, the abolitionist movement and later civil rights, and even the American Revolution itself! In all of these cases, from then until now, Unitarian Universalism made a difference in the world by living out our commitment to radical hospitality. What new group, what exile, is out there now awaiting the loving embrace of Unitarian Universalism? What difference can we make in the world today?

These are important questions to constantly be asking ourselves. We should never stop reflecting upon and refining the difference we want to make in the world. Our Board here at First Unitarian Church is always asking themselves what difference do we make? What is the best way to move our church forward into a compelling and exciting future? I am sure they would be interested in your thoughts on these topics. When I get those long e-mails detailing what I forgot to say in this morning sermon, I will no doubt pass them on to the Board.

Let us remember the difference our faith makes in our lives, in the world, and in our relationships. And when we remember, let us do what our ancestors did. Let us work to make our faith real. Let us sacrifice for it. Let us give in support of it. Thus is the real purpose of Association Sunday. The Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations helps to preserve that difference in our world and will continue to do so long after all of us are gone. Please be as generous as your means allow in supporting the work of our faith.

May we seek always to live out our faith and to make that difference tangible for all to see. May our hearts continue to be as wide open as possible to embrace the world with our transforming love. And maybe then, perhaps someday, we can say with a full heart that Unitarian Universalism is in fact better than baseball. Amen Blessed Be.