

With Power and Purpose: Part 1—“Who Are We, Anyway?”

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With power and purpose. That is what we strive to have as a church, as individuals, and as a liberal religious movement; power and purpose. It is so important, in fact, that I thought that trying to tackle the entire subject in one sermon would not do it justice. And this *is* important. I believe that it is always good to ask, and periodically re-ask, the question, “Who are we, anyway?” Are we the sort of people we had hoped to become? Is our church serving us and our community in the way we hoped? Are we as a nation and a culture representing our truest and most beloved values? Who are we, anyway?

Regardless of the context in which one might ask the question, “Who are we?” it is always a religious question. It speaks to the fundamental nature of our being. Who am I? What meaning does my existence have? That primary existential question is asked perhaps most eloquently by Hamlet. “To be or not to be, that is the question.” That is the question! Hamlet is exploring why do we live? Why not just kill yourself when life gets hard? While that is not exactly the way I wish to

frame the question today, notice what Hamlet is doing. He is taking a step back and looking at the big picture of his life. That is what “Who are we” makes us do. It is an important exercise that ensures that we are not wasting our time. It is an exercise that gives us perspective, and helps us to understand our life’s meaning.

Obviously I cannot do the spiritual work for you. I cannot tell you why you exist. I leave that to the boys at Monty Python. See “The Meaning of Life” for their take on it. Instead I want to ask this question of us as a congregation—why do we exist? Who are we anyway? What is this enterprise all about that we label with this very cumbersome title of “Unitarian Universalism?” How does it come to life among us in this time and place in history? So I invite you to walk with me and take a Hamlet-like perspective on our congregation.

In recent years there has been a lot of this exploration in Unitarian Universalism; lot of people asking the “who are we?” question. Probably the more comprehensive attempt was by the Commission on Appraisal a couple of years ago. The Commission on Appraisal looks at particular issues in Unitarian Universalism, researches them, and then reports every three years or so. Their last report was a grail-like quest to find “The Core of Unitarian Universalism” as they put it. I will not bore you with their processes and the sub-headings of their report. But after years of study, and a very nice book published by the UUA, the answer was, “We don’t know what the core of Unitarian Universalism is!” “We

think there is one. We might even know it if we saw it, but we can't figure out what it is." A bit anti-climactic I thought. When I read this report, I couldn't help think of Stephen Hawking's theory, which I believe there is some evidence for, that there is at the center of the Milky Way a very, very large black hole. That this unimaginably large spinning wheel of matter and energy that is our galaxy is held together in its center by a big nothing. Perhaps we UUs are, as some of our critics have claimed, without a center. There is no there there. The baby has gone out with the bathwater. The Unitarian Universalist Church is the half-way house between the Methodist Church and the golf course. Unitarians believe in only two things: congregational polity and Roberts Rules of Order.

Well some may concede our center to nihilism, but I am not ready to do so yet. Granted I am not taking on the immense task of explaining all Unitarian Universalism to everyone. I am just trying to explain how I see it here, to you. Yet even this can be daunting. It has become rather popular for individuals to try and come up with their own explanation of Unitarian Universalism in a highly succinct way. This is not our essence or core necessarily, just an easy way to help people, and themselves, understand our religion. This is the so called "elevator speech." The idea is that suppose you were to get onto an elevator on the fifth floor of a building. Just as you do, someone next to you asks you to explain Unitarian Universalism to them. You have the time it takes to get to the

lobby of the building, without hitting the alarm button, to explain Unitarian Universalism to this person.

Perhaps the best elevator speech ever was given by the esteemed Rabbi Hillel—an elevator speech on Judaism of course. The story goes that a man wished to convert to Judaism. So he went to the local Rabbi and said, “I wish to become a Jew. But I will do so only if you can explain what Judaism is while I am standing on one foot.” The Rabbi, disgusted with such an absurd proposition, smacks the man across the face and leaves. You cannot explain a religious tradition as rich and nuanced and ancient as Judaism is in such a brief time. The man leaves this rather belligerent Rabbi and seeks out Rabbi Hillel. Rabbi Hillel is supposed to be very wise and very kind. Probably still nursing his sore cheek, this potential convert goes to see Hillel. Again he says, “I will convert to Judaism if you can explain it to me while I am standing on one foot.” Rabbi Hillel thinks for a moment. Then calmly replies, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. The rest is commentary, go and learn it.”

That is the gold standard of elevator speeches. It has it all. Ethics, tradition, service, and practice are all crammed tightly and efficiently into two sentences. The core is the golden rule. But the core alone is not enough. Go and learn the rest. Our faith is active, you have to participate, no one will spoon feed you spiritual truth. Spiritual truth is something you live, which is why there is so much commentary.

In seminary they teach us how *not* to give elevator speeches. They are more like the first Rabbi—learn the nuance, the commentary, the full depth and breadth of our tradition. Leave it to the marketing people at the UUA to make the bumper stickers. So I have no advantage over anyone, and perhaps additional disadvantages, in trying to say what Unitarian Universalism is while standing on one foot. I believe there is a core, an essence, to our tradition. We love the nuance and commentary so much that it is hard to reduce it back down to the bare essentials but they are there. Who are we? We are the values we hold most dear. Whether you are a country or a church or an individual like Hamlet, you are what your values are. You are the values that you live out and make real both with words and deeds. In his Inauguration speech I noticed that Barack Obama spoke from this To Be or not To Be perspective. He does not tell us about the terrorists or the evil doers. He talks not about them, but about us, who we are as a nation and a people. What are our values that make us unique; that go all the way back to George Washington?

I see four such values for us Unitarian Universalists in Wilmington Delaware. Four values that make us who we are—in other words Unitarian Universalism on one foot. They are “Exploration, Interconnection, Transformation, and Service.” While it may be tempting to quit now, and tell you all to go and learn what all these things mean, my guess is that these four values require commentary.

We are the church of exploration. Perhaps the most interesting and notable fact about Unitarian Universalist congregations is that as individuals we do not share a single set of beliefs that is imposed by an official religious authority. Granted, perhaps, there is a Unitarian Universalist church out there in which all of the members are vegetarian for example, but that is incidental to the fact of their being Unitarian Universalist. All of us are free, and freedom is a necessary component of exploration. We are free to believe what our conscious dictates. We do not believe anything we want. We are not without limits and boundaries on belief. Perhaps the best, and most historically significant boundary for us, is reason. Reason holds an important place in Unitarian Universalism. It is not, however, the only important aspect of our church; just one of them. Reason on its own is insufficient for religion. That was Emerson's point. Channing had heralded reason as the primary way to understand God and the Christian faith, hence his rejection of the doctrines of the Trinity and Original Sin. Emerson said, that is all fine, but there is more to us as spiritual beings than reason. We have souls, if only in a metaphorical sense, that yearn for some transcendence, some groundedness, some interaction with the Holy, however one defines the Holy. That desire for transcendence gave rise to, and a name to, Emerson's contribution to our tradition: Transcendentalism. Reason yes, is a big part of who we are and what we value, but our spiritual explorations include art, joy, nature, poetry,

music, holding hands with someone you love, being in awe of the universe for no inherently rational reason, seeking and finding hope despite the odds, making your deepest dreams come true. These things make up our faith as well, says Emerson. I would add, by way of historical comment, that we also include some of the yucky parts of life. Depression, addiction, shame, pain, humiliation, anger, frustration. These things that plague the human soul have buried deep within them spiritual gifts and insights. Unitarian Universalism values the exploration of even these negative elements of life because we believe that enlightenment can be found there as well. That too is part of our spiritual journey.

We are the church of interconnection. When we speak of interconnection we of course cannot separate our church from the rest of the world. To value interconnection is to understand oneself to be part and parcel of the rest of the community in which we reside. However, I will save that point for later in this series. Oscar Wilde once said that there are two kinds of people in the world; those who divide the world in half and those who don't. For too long liberalism meant individualism. Some of our religious ancestors, most notably the aforementioned Emerson, were staunch individualists; by today's standards to an extreme degree. "Why should I give my dollar to the poor?" Emerson asks aloud in one of his essays. Certainly individualism, the rights of individuals to freely think and love and be respected as human beings, is

a central value to our tradition as it is to American Democracy. This is because both Unitarian Universalism and American Democracy both take shape during the Enlightenment, and in some cases, are created by the same individuals.

In and of itself this is not a bad thing. But individualism can be taken too far. It is one end of a continuum. At the other might be collectivism or communism. Come to think of it, UUs have dabbled in that too! But there is a happy medium; a middle way, if you will. There is a harmonious balance in which we understand that we are interconnected to each other while at the same time respecting each person's uniqueness. This is what Bernard Loomer was trying to describe with his metaphor of the Web. We are neither the Borg or isolated cogs in a wheel. We value the perspective that lies in the middle of that continuum, even while we recognize that this pluralistic view of the world is difficult to maintain. But one of the ways in which Unitarian Universalism is unique is that as Francis David once said, "We need not think alike to love alike." As individuals we might disagree on theology or something else, but we know that there is a deeper connection, our covenant, that holds us together in relationship.

We are the church of transformation. In some ways this goes without saying. Everyone is the church of transformation because every person, every church, every denomination goes through changes. The

difference, however, is whether or not that transformation is intentional or accidental.

I first came to the Unitarian Universalist church in a period in my life when I was spiritual hungry. Actually I was desperate! The liberal Christian upbringing I had been given seemed to have disintegrated for me. I felt like I had nothing left, nothing to rely upon. In many ways this was like a part of myself had died. My ready made answers to the “To be or not to be” question had left me, and I had no replacements in sight. I was not suicidal, but I could see very little in life that was meaningful to me. German existentialists call this experience “angst” and Sartre referred to it as nausea. I needed some spiritual Peptobismol! I found it in a small house converted into a church on Washtenaw Avenue in Ann Arbor Michigan. There I found a group of people who thought like I did and did not seem to have the baggage that I was carrying with me. It was such a blessing to put it down, the first time I came to a UU church. I was transformed from that day to this one.

I have since come to love and appreciate the liberal Christian perspective I was raised with. One thing Unitarian Universalism still retains from its liberal Christian heritage is this value of transformation. The crucifixion is of course the ultimate demonstration of transformation! It teaches us that hope is never completely gone because we are never fully in control of our lives. I am not saying that we are controlled by fate or destiny or karma or a divine puppet master.

I am simply saying that as human beings we are not omnipotent, we do not possess full control over the events in our life. Granted we may sometime act like we do, but we don't!

This is Super Bowl Sunday, and I am thinking of that old cliché that quarterbacks always proclaim—we are not going to take what the defense gives us, we are going to impose our will upon them. But in life, as in football, it doesn't work that easily. There are times when we do defy the odds and the human spirit overcomes incredible things. And then there are the times when bad things happen to us and there is nothing you can do about it. If we were omnipotent we would never have a relative that died. But we would also never change. We would never have to overcome long odds and learn something about ourselves. This is not to say that bad things are really good things. But when bad things happen to us, our only option then is to change, to learn, to cope, and to be transformed, hopefully for the better. Transformation is something to be valued not feared or avoided.

Finally, we are the church of service. I will devote the third part of this sermon series to how we as a church relate to the community. But service is more than the end result. We give to special causes first and foremost to help people in need. We also do it because of what it does to us. Giving, for example, means that we make a commitment and limit our own financial freedom, because our values are that important to who

we are. It is a spiritual discipline, really. That is why we do the offering during worship, to help you with your spiritual practice!

Service is really about making our faith, our sometimes abstract long-winded elevator speeches, real and applicable in this world. If you don't have a good elevator speech about how to describe Unitarian Universalism to strangers, don't worry about it. It's a good thing to have but it's not the end of the world. The real testimony to what you believe, the way you make those values real, is by living them out every single day of your life. It may be that you do that periodically in grand gestures like working on a Habitat for Humanity House or preparing meals for Emmanuel Dining Room. But I would also include the small stuff. Are you rude to the guy who bags your groceries? Do you treat that person with respect or do you ignore them? How well do you tip? Do you smile and say hello or look down and avoid people? I call these spiritual litmus tests. Small things count. Any time you risk opening yourself up and letting in another person, even if it is just to look them in the eye and smile, thereby brightening their day a bit, then you are doing service. That is your faith in action. It is your spiritual values applied and made real in the world. That is a far better testimony to who we are than trying to describe the difference between UU Christians and UU Humanists. Unitarian Universalism is a pragmatic faith that seeks to make a difference for the common good of everyone.

These are our values. These are the things we have chosen to be. I am sure others might have chosen to highlight different values, but that is the beauty of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. It is commentary upon commentary; go and learn it. May we always choose to live our highest values and close the gap between what we profess to be and who we actually are. Amen Blessed Be.