

Not Just Anything  
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December 8, 2019

Being a member of a congregation is one thing, being a member of a faith is another. Ours is no easy faith to capture. Except for a few acronyms, we have almost no ‘group speak’— no words you have to be an insider to understand or more accurately words for which everyone assumes they hold the same definition. Phrases like “living in Christ” “Serving God”, or “being saved” don’t pass our lips very often and even then they are carefully defined. There are as many beliefs about God, an afterlife, salvation, and hope for the future as there are people in any gathering of Unitarian Universalists. We are a faith named after two theologies but not necessarily adherents to either one. At least we are not required to be. Nor are we shamed for what we do believe even if others see things differently. On the other hand, we are not a group as so often is said, that “believes anything we want to believe” or worse that “we don’t believe in anything.”

Richard Grigg tells of an episode of “The Simpsons” where they are all at the annual church picnic. “Rev. Lovejoy is manning the ice cream booth. Lisa Simpson, by far the most gifted and probing of the Simpson clan (and the youngest I might add), approaches the stand, only to notice that the different flavors have been given the names of different religious denominations. In her usual thoughtful manner she pauses, and then says, “I’ll try the Unitarian.” Lovejoy hands Lisa a bowl. She looks at it and says, “But there’s nothing in here.” Lovejoy’s response: “That’s the point.” Our Unitarian Universalist bowl, our chalice, Grigg says, “is empty in the sense that it does not come pre-filled with congealed ideologies and elaborate doctrinal prohibitions.”

However we have many different strands of faith woven into our denomination.

We hold the heritage of men and women in the early days of Christianity who were free to wonder who Jesus really was and what his teachings meant. After the Council of Nicea this was considered heresy and many were killed for simply having an open mind about these questions. We uphold and practice the conviction, which many others died for, that a person has a right to their own religious beliefs and cannot be coerced by anyone else to profess or believe differently. We can trace our roots back to the Protestant movement in Europe when Martin Luther and then John Calvin insisted that salvation is not conferred by a Bishop but is a matter between the individual and God.

The Puritans brought this radical notion with them to New England when they arrived. Over time, they became Congregationalists modeling the democracy that America would become.

Some of the Congregationalists became Unitarian Christians who followed the teachings of Jesus but couldn’t accept his divinity. Once the door was opened for a reasoned approach to religion, Unitarianism became more and more expansive in its thinking. This is the core of liberal thinking that more and more can be included in our list of what is real, what is true and what is worthy of our attention.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the notion that science offers just as much revelation to us as any sacred text entwined into our faith. As well as the corollary to this: the idea that sacred texts should be considered in the context of science, historical context and literary form as well.

At its heart, liberal religion says that people at their core are basically good, that who we are is worthy and that the best of what we think and feel and intuit is revelation. William Ellery Channing, a prominent Unitarian minister in Boston in 1830 preached a sermon in which he said, “I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, while consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself.”

As the Unitarians moved further and further away from an inerrant view of the Bible, the Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Lydia Maria Child, and many others offered a deeply individual and spiritual view of religion--one that didn't require the organization of churches but the courage of individuals to trust themselves and their connection to the universe. They and others brought strands of Eastern religion, Hinduism and Buddhism into our faith.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century religious and secular humanist thought grew with the publication of the Humanist Manifesto and we learned that a belief in God was not necessary in order to be ethical, fulfilled or to care deeply about humankind.

Stepping back again to the beginnings of our country, Universalists starting with John Murray shared the radical notion that God is love and that salvation is available to everyone – sinner and saint alike. Over time they found that their thinking took them further and further away from orthodox Christian dogma as they increasingly saw salvation as greater well-being and compassion in this life. You have probably heard the famous saying attributed to Thomas Starr King, that “Universalists think that God is too good to damn them forever and the Unitarians think that they are too good to be damned.” In 1960, these two movements joined forces to form the denomination of which we are a part today. It was after this joining that all of the various strands of our faith really were acknowledged and embraced fully.

To say we are no longer Christian, no longer spiritual, no longer Salvationists is simply not true. We have explicitly Christian churches among our number, we have Christians in nearly every church, we have deeply spiritual people; we also have atheists and agnostics. We have all flavors of theists and every possible idea of who God might be represented in our congregations, maybe more than any other denomination. We have Buddhists in increasing numbers, some who also attend a Hindu temple. We have some pagans and many who hold an eclectic mix of these.

In our worship it is as minister David Bryce said, “that is not a matter of being all things to all people, it is a matter of finding the deep place within, deeper than any religion, dogma or creed, and speaking from that place within ourselves and to that place within others.”

We have a lot in common that defines our faith. We see salvation as something that happens here and now on this earth through our own efforts and deepening wisdom in our care for each other and this planet.

We belong to a faith that values behavior and character more than whether you think you will survive death in some form. We value how we treat each other and our neighbors more than how we characterize God. We belong to a faith that calls us to action in response to the suffering of others or the degradation of our planet. We belong to a faith that has included many, many people who have catalyzed social reform in this country. Who fought against slavery, sexual discrimination, and economic injustice. We are not waiting for the messiah. We are people who create our lives and our heaven for ourselves and others wherever we are.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not believe anything we want. We believe what our reason, intuition and experience tell us we *must* believe. We are bound by this each of us and this is the heart of what makes us different from the other churches. We gather together to help each other discern what is true and to act to create a world where reason and love prevail on this Earth. We do not believe just anything, but that which is life-giving. Not just who are our neighbors, but that which honors the dignity and worth of every person. Not just anything, but that which makes us say ‘no’ to bigotry, injustice, and rampant self-interest. Not just anything, but that which fosters spiritual growth and deepens understanding. Not just anything, but those beliefs that bind us in world community including all forms of life on this planet.

That said, we have are pluralistic in our religion inviting all to bring their particular perspective so that we might learn together and become more whole. Grigg’s view that our diversity is our strength offering a unique opportunity to grow is echoed by Nancy Kline who studied the conditions that allow us to be most clear and most creative in our thinking. She writes: “Diversity enhances thinking because it is true.

The world is diverse. But because diversity, the difference between groups, is still the excuse for discrimination, disempowerment and even genocide, we have been taught to hate or to deny our differences rather than to welcome them. Our differences are real and good. And to think well about almost any topic, we need to be in as real, and therefore as diverse, a setting as possible. ...homogeneity, when you think about it, is a form of denial. It is a form of pretence. To say, by your group composition, that the world is all the same is a lie. Our differences are real and good.”

Brigg calls this “identity-in-difference.” Our chalice is full of many beliefs...all of yours as a matter of fact. This is who we are, and what we have to offer. No easy answers, just the spirit of exploration of social and environmental justice, the arts, humanism, nature, and the Source of all life.

## **Closing Words**

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Be ours a religion which, like  
    sunshine, goes everywhere;  
its temple, all space;  
its shrine, the good heart;  
its creed, all truth;  
its ritual, works of love;  
its profession of faith, divine living.

--Theodore Parker