

WHY I AM A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Aug. 1, 2004  
UUCWI

The card from my elderly Aunt, Dad's baby sister, was cordial but pointed. It was in response to a Christmas letter I had sent out to all the family telling them of my progress as I prepared for UU ministry, years ago.

"I don't know what you see in that Unitarian theology", she wrote. "It hurt your parents a lot when you left the Baptist church. I just don't understand. Merry Christmas. Your loving aunt."

I winced at the part about my parents. I knew it had bothered them a lot when my religious beliefs had become quite liberal.

But it's interesting to me that the most adventurous, most obstreperous family member is often the one who turns to the most conservative path when things go badly. My aunt had always been the feisty one in Dad's family, till she and my uncle had suddenly joined a conservative little church in their town, after my dad the minister stepped in and kept their son out of jail on drug charges.

I knew I had cleared things up with my Mom before her death and I was working to let go of the lingering guilt over my Dad. But here was another family member concerned for my spiritual wellbeing. Would my relatives ever accept the fact that I had become a (gasp) liberal? I understood their concern, but I wished the day would come when my very conservative family would relax and quit worrying about my afterlife.

I felt a little angry, so I neatly tore up her card and roundfiled it, unwilling to hang it with the rest of my holiday greetings and be harangued by it every time I walked by.

Yet the message in the card bothered me a lot, so, when I couldn't quit thinking about it that afternoon, I sat down at the computer, banged out a long explanatory rebuttal about just exactly what I liked about UUism and didn't like about traditional Christianity. It was pretty clear by the time I was done that this was NOT a letter I would ever send, but I decided to keep it around. It made me feel better to read all the reasons why I was a UU and to read the final few words to my well-meaning but bossy Aunt: "So buzz off...", Love, Kit.

I reread that letter recently and I realized that I had put down on paper a lot of solid reasons for myself. Even if I never convinced my relatives, I certainly knew why I had become a UU many years ago.

Some of it had to do with my background. I'd always been bothered by the need to believe so much supernatural stuff in order to assure myself a place in God's heart. It seemed to me to be more important to live a good life here on earth than to worry about a life after death. It seemed more valuable to find a way to be strongly connected to God now than to believe that Jesus Lives.

It seemed more helpful to find ways to serve my fellow human beings on earth than to believe that God had sent Jesus to earth to be martyred so that I could go to heaven.

I did not know there was a place where people shared these beliefs until I found Unitarian Universalism.

I'd always resisted suspending my logic, overriding the findings of science, taking somebody else's word for the ultimate value in the universe. I couldn't figure out why the God of the Hebrew Bible was such a cantankerous old guy, and then in the Christian scriptures God was a loving father, and why on earth a loving father would have his son murdered for a crew of humans which was always goofing up anyhow.

And I'd always questioned the rigidity of traditional doctrine which seemed to rest on belief in a few miracles plus a willingness to overlook the discrepancies between reality and scripture. People didn't act like they believed it, either. Even my dad the Baptist minister who kept us kids out of the local movie theater in deference to the expectations of his congregation, took the whole family to the drive-in theater in Milton Freewater, 14 miles away every month or so. He obviously had his own opinions about how to interpret Paul's admonition to avoid worldly things.

For a long time I pretended, gave lip service to that old-time religion. After a few encounters which convinced me I needed to take a more honest stance, I left the Baptist church I'd joined in Denver and began to explore Unitarian Universalism.

Over the years, as I've learned more and more about UUism and its value in my life, I've come to appreciate the simplicity of a faith that asks me to support 7 principles of ethical human behavior. Which describes itself as having descended from many sources, not just from the Bible. Which takes inspiration from the words of many prophets, not just one. Which acknowledges the value of reason in developing a spiritual life.

Which recognizes that reason alone is not enough. Which calls me to live a life of active service to others and to trust my own experience in following a spiritual path.

As I became more active in a UU congregation, I saw that my fellow congregants shared some similarities.

Some of them were dissatisfied, even angry, with another traditional religious system; some had gotten disgusted with beliefs or strictures in a more mainline faith, some had felt abused by an uncaring doctrine which condemned divorce or homosexuality or other of the host of human behaviors which are anathema to many religious traditions.

Some were scientists, who simply couldn't abandon logic on Sundays. Some were atheists and agnostics, for whom the concept of God seemed unnecessary or illogical.

Some were scholars whose knowledge of literary criticism and historical fact disallowed a literal approach to the Bible. Some had been away from church for a long time and were coming back because they now had kids and wanted them to have a religious education and a church home.

Others were lonely and looking for a place to connect where they could discuss their doubts freely without alienating people.

Some were in love relationships which could not be sanctioned by their own tradition and were looking for a more open religious faith.

Some were attracted by the long history of social justice efforts by UU's. Some looked at the many heroes and heroines of UU history-- Thomas Jefferson, Susan B. Anthony, Dorothea Dix, Adlai Stevenson, Margaret Fuller, Ben Franklin, Albert Schweitzer--they wanted to be a part of a tradition that attracted these prophetic men and women.

But all were seekers, hoping to find a religious home where they were comfortable, where they could find meaning in rituals and observances that celebrated connection with Nature, or God or Goddess, without binding them to dogma.

They were seeking a place where, during coffee hour and at social events, the currents of conversation might be about kids and community activities and politics, but with a twist, an overriding concern for justice, compassion and freedom. They were looking for sermons which were inspiring and about daily living: about ethical behavior, about being a force for peace and justice and concern for the environment, about the critical issues of human existence. And they sought a place where honest disagreement was preferred to creedal recitation.

Why am I a Unitarian Universalist? I am a Unitarian Universalist because in this faith I have found an openness and searching that I have not found in any other religious institution. I am free to ask questions, to find my own answers, even though they may not be the same answers that others have found.

I am a UU because I am free to say what I believe about God, about Jesus, about Buddha, about justice, about freedom, about politics, you name it. I am free to be a Christian. I am free to be an atheist, uninterested in finding evidence that a Creator exists. I am free to speak my mind without worry that I am breaking a doctrinal taboo, if my beliefs differ from those of my listeners. And my listeners are free to disagree with me, if their own truth is different from mine.

I am a UU because I am free to use whatever religious, spiritual and human resources I choose to fashion my own faith. I am free to doubt and question what I hear, free to measure it against my internal plumb line to see if it is true for me.

I am a UU because 7 principles and purposes are simpler and more relevant to me than a complex theology based on supernatural events and their interpretations.

I am a UU because to the best of my knowledge, no Unitarian or Universalist has ever killed someone in the name of religion or condemned someone for having been born black (or any other color), gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered, poor, or non-Christian.

I am a UU because I believe that my most important life task is to create and develop a relationship with the universe, or God or Goddess, as some call it, not just follow the rules.

What is Unitarian Universalism? Let me briefly review our history.

Scholars trace the beginning of Universalist philosophy from ancient times, from 544 ce, when an early church council condemned the Universalist belief that the whole human race will be “saved”. The idea that human beings did not have to adhere to a single set of dogmas in order to escape God’s fiery retribution was heretical to early church founders.

Universalism has always been in the forefront of social justice movements. In fact, in 1791, Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and an American Universalist (contrary to what fundamentalist religion thinks about the founding fathers of America), described Universalism as “a belief in God’s universal love to all (God’s) creatures”. He went on to say that this love establishes the equality of all human kind and requires that governments do the same.

Unitarianism had similar heretical roots. In 1553, Michael Servetus, a physician, scholar, and theologian, who could not accept the doctrine of Trinity and whose writings described his belief in the Unity, not Trinity, of God, was burned at the stake for his heresy and his Unitarian theology was condemned. A couple of centuries later, Thomas Jefferson predicted that within a few years, every American would be a Unitarian, his faith in the reasonableness of Unitarian thought was so strong.

From these radical, questioning roots grew two strong though small American denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism. Many, if not most, of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, from Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush to Ben Franklin, were religious liberals, either Unitarian or Universalist. This country was founded by radicals who believed in freedom and equality.

As former US representative from Maine, Tom Andrews, also a UU, has commented: “America was not founded as a Christian nation, it was founded as a FREE nation.” And freedom, with its attendant responsibility, is the hallmark of Unitarian Universalism today.

The Universalists ordained one of the first women ministers in the United States, Olympia Brown, in 1863. Early Unitarians and Universalists were active in the causes of women’s rights, abolition of slavery, humane treatment of children, reforms to aid the mentally ill and disabled, labor reforms, public education, birth control, and other social justice issues. Our history of social action is a long and noble one.

Unitarian and Universalist convictions have changed the course of human life over the past several centuries, proclaiming a message unlike that of mainline doctrines. Thomas Starr King, for whom one of our UU seminaries is named, joked, in 1850, “Universalists think God is too good to damn them and Unitarians think they are too good to be damned”.

In 1961, the two liberal denominations merged to become the Unitarian Universalist Association, with congregations all over the United States and Canada, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia and New Zealand as well.

Since that time, Unitarian Universalists have struggled with the inevitable conflicts of merging two liberal but somewhat different emphases. Unitarians tended to be more humanistic, more intellectual, more interested in science. Universalists were more interested in mystical and spiritual matters, more committed to Christianity.

As these two strands of religious thought have come together, there have been many sparks between those who prefer their religion rational and those who like it spiritual. In the blending process, both rational-ists and spiritual-ists have come to appreciate other ways of looking at the universe, and modern Unitarian Universalists are the beneficiaries of this developing understanding.

We here today are among those beneficiaries. We Whidbey Island UUs, from widely different backgrounds and traditions, have come together to build a religious community that values free thought, not conformity; that provides religious education which stresses ethics, not dogma; that believes that people can live together peaceably and respectfully, despite different belief systems; and that reaches out into the wider community with our ideals of freedom, justice and environmental concern.

We have an endless potential for growth, both within our own congregation and the wider Whidbey Island community. May we seek to grow together spiritually, to dedicate ourselves to the spiritual growth of our children, and to commit our many and varied resources to the cause of a free faith.

And I know what I will say in my next letter to my worried family member: Dear Auntie, Here's what I see in that Unitarian Universalist theology.....Thanks for asking...

Love, Kit.

## BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our message to the world is a saving message, that we as UUs have life and love to offer to others. May we give it abundantly to each other and to the larger community. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.