



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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Coming Home

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In October, I returned to Texas to officiate the wedding of one of my dearest friends. It was a fun trip & I got the chance to catch up with some whom I had not seen since high school, and meet their spouses. At the rehearsal dinner, I was asked by the wife of a longtime friend to describe the church I am affiliated with. She had never before heard of Unitarian Universalism, and asked question after question with much enthusiasm. It was as if she had long thirsted for a liberal religion such as ours and was at last being offered a sip. After awhile, she said, Wow! This church sounds so great! It must be the fastest-growing religion in the country right now!

Her statement caused me to consider that, as Unitarian Universalists, we do have a great message that much of the nation is thirsty for, and we should be growing at a much faster rate! This past Sunday, in an interview in the Florida paper, the St. Petersburg Times, our President of the UUA, Peter Morales, echoed this, I believe, because I have experienced it for years, that many people today are hungry for liberal religious community for a spiritual home where they grow in depth, form strong bonds of community, raise children with strong values, and join with others to help heal our broken world. Our greatest challenge is to realize our potential and our calling.

Why aren't we growing faster? Do we not realize our potential and our calling, as Morales claims? We know our lack of growth isn't because we don't like meeting new people, or because we are a secret society that we have taken an oath to protect. These are ridiculous statements because they are, of course, far from the truth. We love when new people join us in our congregations! We love meeting like-minded people! Yet, countless times, I have heard new members of one of our congregations joyfully state, I have been a Unitarian Universalist my whole life, I just didn't know it!

The delight in this statement come from arriving at a familiar place; a place where one's whole self has potential to be accepted, where we may bring the depth of our emotions and the joys and sorrows that life offers, as well as our curiosity and our intellect. In other words, a place where we are comfortable surrounded by people who get us, perhaps more than in the other circles we move about in during the workweek, perhaps more than our families of origin. In essence, to make that all-too-common statement of finally discovering that there exists a name for one's deepest beliefs & values (Unitarian Universalism), and that there are loving communities who gather together to live these values & beliefs, to make that statement, must feel like coming home. It must feel like a spiritual, a theological, a social, and even perhaps a political homecoming.

I use the words "must feel" because I did not discover Unitarian Universalism in my adulthood. I was claiming to be Unitarian during my terrible twos, even deciding one day that I would only eat Unitarian food! But, although UUism was not a discovery of my adulthood, I too feel as if I have come home when I am in the company of UU's. This is the place where I may bring my heart as well as my mind and find myself in similar company. This is the place where my questions are met with interest, rather than a quick, memorized answer. This is the place where my life and my family are met with acceptance, rather than condemnation. This is the place where I may join hands with others to take my soul's desire for justice out into the world. I am happy to be home.

My mother was happy to find herself home in Unitarian Universalism, as well. And, in honor of Mother's Day, I'd like to share her story with you today. In the early eighties, she and my father somehow discovered the First UU Church of San Antonio. I don't remember that part of the story, but I do know that they were excited about the social justice bend, as they originally met amidst their mutual involvement in the 70's Chicano Civil Rights Movement, and they appreciated that they were allowed to challenge the aspects of their Catholic upbringings that did not serve them or make much sense to them. Once in awhile, they would begin to miss the ritual and, requiring more heartspace than headspace, would return to Mass.

As I was reaching preschool age, it was evident that their marriage would not last. They dutifully attended a few marriage-counseling sessions with the local priest but, after the truth of my father's infidelity surfaced and he left, my mother, her heart in a million pieces, sought comfort in a solo meeting with their priest. That following Sunday she attended Mass with my brothers & I, hungry for a seat at the Lord's Table- the ritual that had, for nearly a lifetime, assured her that she was close to God, that she could always pull up a chair, so-to-speak, and make herself at home as a member of God's family. As she made her way up to receive the Communion Host, the priest held up one finger and simply shook it no, no. She returned to her seat, spiritually malnourished and feeling abandoned and judged by God. Her sin: a failed marriage.

I asked her recently about this story, and she said, "Very few things have ever hurt me so much." I asked if it would be ok to share such a personal story in a sermon and she urged me to, saying that others should know how this faith saved her, but that she only wishes that the priest could hear it as well: the message of love over judgment, of acceptance over damnation. I asked her how it felt to return to the UU church after this experience & these were her words, "It felt like I was still a child of God, not just alone out there in a big ocean with nothing. I felt accepted and clean and surrounded by wisdom and clear thinking." The Universalist and Unitarian acceptance, freedom, & reason, saved my mother from despair, from believing fully that she was unworthy of Divine Love. Yes, this religion saves.

In general, UU's do not often use the term "saved" in tandem with religion, because we have grown accustomed to hearing it in conjunction with those who use it to denote their worthiness of eternal life while others are to burn in hellfire's misery. I believe that it is high time that we liberal religious folk reclaim such powerful vocabulary and place our more positive, God = Love, spin on it.

Several weeks ago, I co-preached a sermon with Jim, when he used the phrase, "This is a religion that saves lives," several times within his homily. In the couple of weeks that followed, several of you asked what I believed he meant by this, since he had repeated it more than once. I encouraged those who asked to ask him, directly, but shared that I believe that Uuism is life-saving in that we offer hope, love, and acceptance where others offer fear, damnation, & bigotry. This is what it means to be saved as a Unitarian Universalist, this is our brand of salvation.

We do have life-saving potential, but have we become like the life-saving station in the reading? Are we simply a social club that was once built for the purpose of saving lives, or do we continue to actively rescue? But this isn't a sermon on salvation. Jim preached that beautifully a few weeks ago. This is a sermon about evangelism. Evangelism assumes the possibilities of salvation, that we have a saving message that is worthy of sharing. We often confuse the words "proselytize" with "evangelize", fearing that they are one in the same and that engaging in either would put us in league with those religious zealots who pervert the Divine into a hateful creature in need of both parenting classes and anger management; a real jerk.

No, I am instead advocating that we separate our understanding of evangelism (spelled with a lower-case "e"), which simply means, "sharing the good news", from proselytizing, which means to attempt to convert. To share the good news that a faith such as ours exists, to evangelize, need not (and should not) have any interest in persuading or coercing one to leave their faith home. This goes against our commitment to a free and individual search for truth and meaning. I am speaking of sharing, of being as out and as open about our faith home as we are about everything else that is a source of goodness in our lives. There need not be embarrassment about what we have found here. There is a need for Unitarian Universalist evangelists. After all, I would venture to guess that many here today first heard about Uuism through direct, interpersonal communication with someone who had already found their way home.

It may surprise some to hear that our Universalist heritage has its roots deep in evangelism, as itinerant "circuit riders" preached a gospel of salvation in response to hellfire and brimstone threatened by the conservative preachers of the Great Awakening. One such circuit rider, John Murray, came to expect threats of violence when he preached, and yet continued to spread his loving message. He is largely credited as saying, "Go out into the highways and byways. Give the people something of your new vision. You possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."

But Murray began as a reluctant evangelist. After his young wife and child died and he spent time in debtor's prison, this young former Methodist (but newly Universalist) preacher set sail from London for a new start in America. His ship became stuck on a New Jersey sandbar while heading from Philadelphia to New York. There he met Thomas Potter, a farmer who had built a chapel on his property with the notion that God would send a preacher to spread the gospel of universal salvation. Murray protested, saying that he had lost faith and given up preaching, but Potter convinced him to agree to take it as a sign from God if the tide did not change before Sunday. Still marooned come Sunday, Murray took the pulpit to a packed house and became a fearless voice for Universalism all over New England.

A more contemporary evangelist among our ranks, Rev. John C. Morgan, says, "I do believe we have a saving vision that the world needs to hear and see." The best vehicle for evangelism is truly believing in our own vision, and then living that vision among ourselves and in the wider world. We have such a deep and rich heritage. We have a vision to share. Might we not one day say, as the Rev. George Rogers said in 1844, "The friends call it a revival; and so it was; for why may not truth be revived as well as fanaticism?"

It is time for a revival of the courage of truth. We have an answer to the hateful rhetoric in our message of love, and must let that voice be heard. We must name out loud the myriad ways in which this faith has transformed and, yes, saved our lives. There are so many diverse seekers in need of a place, like ours, to come home to. Let us be sure to not only set the table, but send out the invitations, as well!