



Neighborhood Unitarian  
Universalist Church

## Patriotism by Principle(s)

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I would like to begin today by telling you a few jokes aimed at our UU culture:

*A sign at a UU church read: "Bible Study after service today. Bring your own bible and a pair of scissors."*

*A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted.*

*After the sermon a UU asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?"*

*"I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage.*

*"Oh, good -- then you'll fit right in!"*

*How many UU's does it take to change a light bulb? 300*

*\* 12 to sit on the Board, which appoints the Nominating and Personnel Committee.*

*\* 5 to sit on the Nominating and Personnel Committee, which appoints the House Committee.*

*\* 8 to sit on the House Committee, which appoints the Light Bulb changing committee.*

*\* 4 to sit on the Light Bulb Changing Committee which chooses who will screw in the Light Bulb.*

*Those four then give their own opinion of "screwing in methods" while the one actually does the installation.*

*After completion it takes 100 individuals to complain about the method of installation, another 177 to debate the ecological impact of using the light bulb at all, and at least one to insist that back in her day, the lit chalice was quite enough, thankyouverymuch!*

*Arguing with a Unitarian Universalist is like mud wrestling a pig. Pretty soon you realize the pig likes it.*

*And finally, UU's walk hand-in-hand, which is why we don't always see eye-to-eye.*

As is the case with humor, these jokes are funny because there exists a kernel of truth in them. Although they may exaggerate some realities of UU culture a tad, the common thread in these jokes is the notion that Unitarian Universalists share the common value of individual thought, of freedom to express our varied opinions and still remain in community. We encourage and support one another in our religious exploration, which means that it is ok to use a critical approach. For example, we might not actually take a pair of scissors to a sacred text, but we may also not hold the entire text as sacred. In any given row in this sanctuary, we may find more diverse theologies than there are people in that very row!

The jokes accuse Unitarian Universalists of loving to disagree, but in my experience, we actually do not love to argue. We are not merely a cranky group of curmudgeons who get together on Sundays because misery loves company. As our chalice lighting spoke, we come here, from our various lives and the experiences of our week, in part because of the joy of being in a religious community of fellow seekers. And, we come to this congregation, in part, to be with this community of friends. Each Sunday (even sometimes on three-day weekends!) we roll out of the warm bed, exhausted from the events of the past six days, in part, for the joy of seeing people we come to care about us and to be cared about alike.

No, we do not love to disagree because we love to argue, but we love to disagree because we love that we have the freedom to do so. When we disagree we are reminded that ours is a faith that values diversity of belief and we have reason to be proud of the many voices that Unitarian Universalism houses.

That we do disagree is held as one of our highest ideals, which ironically makes for some pretty heavy arguments at times, especially when our passionate opinions are backed by differing interpretations of other shared values! For example, I have heard fervent debate between UU's on topics such as ethical eating. Both will agree that we are a part of an interconnected web and that good stewardship of our planet is important, yet one will say that eating meat is cruel and destroys the environment, and the other that it can be done responsibly and that it also tastes good, so why not? In cases

such as these, judgment is sometimes cast and friendships broken but, ideally, love causes deep listening and understanding to occur. But, of course, this is not always the case.

The ideal is Beloved Community together with difference, the reality is not always so. Have you ever become upset with another UU for failing to live up to your ideals, your interpretation of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist? I know I have. How about your church? Maybe you were disappointed with the course this congregation or a previous one took in responding to the surrounding communities concerns, or a decision that was made on the congregational or perhaps the denominational level? Can you recall a time when this has happened? What about your family, friends, and co-workers? Have they always lived up to the ideals you maintain for them? And yourself? Have you always been the you that you hope to be, the you that has potential to be?

We hold our church, our faith, each other, and ourselves to high standards that are impossible to meet 100% of the time. I believe that we are discontented out of our love. I am not talking about an abusive type of judgment- like calling someone fat in hopes of inspiring a healthy lifestyle. Because we care about and believe in the promise, the dream, the hope of what may be- that's why we take interest in the perceived failings of our church, our faith, each other, and ourselves. That is why we invest of ourselves in what we believe would be their improvement. It's like the traditional prayer I have in my cubicle, □Lord, we ain't what we ought to be, and we ain't what we want to be, and we ain't what we're gonna be, but thank God we ain't what we were!

The same goes for our nation. As with religious labels that imply righteousness, the self-righteous secular designation of "patriot" has been tossed around in recent memory to define a particular way of loving one's country, to the exclusion of those, typically liberals, who express their love through critical analysis and dissent. Just as there is no one way to be a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or Unitarian Universalist, for that matter, there is no one way to be patriotic. Devotion to one's spouse or other loved ones does not mean blindness to their faults and devotion to one's country need not mean that either.

As religious liberals, it is safe to say that most among our UU ranks identify as social and political liberals, as well. We have watched as conservative religious and political extremists have twisted "patriotism" into narrower and narrower criteria- to the point of reducing one's love of country to their choice of accessories! (Remember the American flag lapel pin scandal of the last Presidential election?) The message has been sent that true patriots support our nation's wars as well as her troops, that ours is a "Christian nation", that multiculturalism- different foods, customs, music, and languages- as well as same sex marriage will be the breakdown of democracy, and that those who do not share these and other beliefs must not care for this nation or it's people.

Is patriotism the sole property of these extremists, or is there room for a liberal brand of patriotism, guided by and working toward our shared American ideals of freedom, liberty, and justice for all? The late Howard Zinn wrote an article in 2006 that called for us to, "renounce nationalism and all its symbols: its flags, its pledges of allegiance, its anthems, its insistence in song that God must single out America to be blessed." He made no room for patriotism for liberal thinkers and instead focused on nationalism, "the idea that our nation is different from, morally superior to, the other imperial powers of world history is one of the great evils of our time."

I believe there is room for all of us under patriotism' umbrella. Patriotism need not mean either xenophobic nationalism or blind obedience. We often hear the quote, "My country, right or wrong" used by those who claim that a collective historic amnesia and unmitigated praise of our nation is the singular path to patriotism. Interestingly, yet not altogether surprisingly, that quote is being lopped off at the knees. The full quote, spoken by Carl Shurz, who served as Union Army General, later U.S. Senator, and U.S. Secretary of the Interior, reads, "My country; and my country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right." This is a call to action, spoken by one who witnessed one of the most despicable times in our nation's history: the Civil War; a definition of patriotism that regards it as a civic duty to hold our nation up to it's professed ideals.

Another who understood that patriotism sometimes requires from us disruption of the status quo, to speak the truth to power, was Fredrick Douglass. On July 4th, 1852 in Rochester, NY, he gave a speech to an eager crowd, as invited by the town's leaders. He titled his speech, What to the Slave is the 4th of July? In it, he spoke of the horrors of slavery and questioned the motives of those who asked him, an escaped slave whose freedom had been purchased for him only

seven years earlier by British friends, to speak on the celebration of American independence while his people remained in bondage. He says,

"I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

Yet, even as Douglass illustrates the distance between he and his White crowd of listeners, he repeatedly addresses them as "fellow citizens." Even as he rebukes the "revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy" of the United States, he identifies as a citizen. Each time I reread this speech, I wonder why he ever chose to return to this country after his speaking tour in Europe? Perhaps it is a similar reason that we are all still here, living on U.S. soil, yet not ignorant of our nation's shortcomings and atrocities, both past and present.

This is our home. This is where our memories, our familiar haunts, and (some of) our friends and families live. This is where some of our dead are buried. This is where our unique cultures are created, a mix of the old and the new. This is our ancestral land, the land where present and past generations have come to seek the promise of a better life, and the nation in which we place our hopes and dreams and, yes, our sky high expectations.