

In Our Hands

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The answer is in your hands.

The wisdom of an ancient folk tale speaks to us through the ages, calling us to look within ourselves to find the answers to questions that we pose to others.

The answer is in your hands.

This wisdom serves well, too, as a basic introduction to Unitarian Universalism, a faith that a friend of mine once described as “a do-it-yourself religion.”

Now, I don’t think that’s necessarily fair or one hundred percent accurate, but it’s a place to start in thinking about what makes this religion unique.

For in this religion in which theologies range from staunch atheist to mystic Christian, where practices range from Buddhist meditation to pagan circle-casting, and where we are as likely to have a dance class as a Passover Seder, there are a few things that we have come to agree upon.

And one of those things is our power as humans to engage in the co-creation of the world we would like to see. Our power to make justice. Our power to create compassion. Our power to build houses for those among us who are homeless, to offer comfort to those who are in pain, and to live in ways that show respect for our planet and its creatures.

No matter what our particular religious beliefs, Unitarian Universalism asks us to understand the power in our own hands.

A while back, a new and growing congregation asked me to come and preach for them. When I asked if there were particular topics they would like me to address, my friend Carole, who was the chairperson of their Worship Committee, let me know that a lot of people were coming to their Fellowship and, after a few weeks asking the question, “How do I know if I’m a Unitarian Universalist?”

No one in that small and lay-led congregation had a good answer for them—neither the life-long UUs nor the ones who had just joined. Carole asked, sheepishly, if maybe I could. I gave it my best shot.

In the curriculum *Articulating Your UU Faith*, the Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove, a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, writes of her own struggle to explain our faith. She recalls from somewhere in her past a list entitled “You might be a Unitarian Universalist If.” It included items like:

- -You think socks are too formal for a Summer service;

- -Even your goldfish gets to vote on family TV viewing choices; and
- -You light a chalice before brushing your teeth

The list was not particularly helpful to her (or to me)—even if it makes us all chuckle a bit.

So Barbara had to go deeper. What she concluded was that the key to understanding Unitarian Universalism as a unique religion lies in realizing that *religion* and *belief* are not synonyms. She reminds us to understand that the purpose of religion is not to share common beliefs, but to share common humanity, to share relationships and commit to being in community with one another. She writes that “belief is not the collective identity of what Unitarian Universalist religion is about.” (ten Hove)

Sixteenth-century Transylvanian Unitarian Ferenc David famously wrote that “we need not think alike to love alike.” Perhaps this is the basis of what Unitarian Universalists are about. If you agree with this sentiment, perhaps you are a Unitarian Universalist.

If the question of defining our faith is still nagging you, however, perhaps the answer is in your hands.

One framework that I think is a good way to look at religion and religious belief is something theologians call the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” Originally from the work of Methodist founder John Wesley, it was described and named by Methodist theologian Albert Outler. While initially intended as a way to examine Christianity, all religions can be understood in part through this lens.

Outler saw that there were, to Wesley, four main sources for religion and faith. Each religion, including our own, uses them to varying degrees. They are:

- Scripture: What are the sacred written sources of the faith? What is the religion’s relationship with those sacred sources? Are they one or many, literally true or metaphorical, guiding documents for a living faith or codified and unchanging forever?
- Tradition: What is the historical practice of the religion? How important is that historical practice to the religion? What are the rites and rituals of the religion?
- Experience: How important is personal experience in the religion? Must the tenets and teachings of the faith be consistent with the believer’s personal experience?
- Reason: What is the religion’s reliance upon the use of reason? How much is taken on faith? How much needs to make sense, intellectually?

The United Methodist Church’s Book of Discipline explains how Wesley saw these things with respect to Christianity: “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Scripture [however] is primary, revealing the Word of God ‘so far as it is necessary for our salvation.’”

Unitarian Universalists would not agree with this order. To most Unitarian Universalists, the basis of our religion is experience. Above all, experience is primary to our understanding of our connection to

the world around us. Experience is our primary guide in developing a belief in (or articulating a rejection of) there being something in this world greater than ourselves (be that God, Nature, or the power of humanity to create justice when working collectively).

Now, experience isn't everything to UUs, just like Scripture isn't everything to Methodists. But it is primary.

I will even go so far to say that, insofar as Unitarian Universalists talk about salvation, it is based in human experience. Does that word make you bristle? Well, if so, you might just be a Unitarian Universalist.

That aside, salvation is a good word, and I want to spend a moment unpacking it. Our Universalist ancestors believed in a God so loving that God would not damn any human being to an eternity in Hell. In rejecting the prevailing notion of the time—that humanity was divided into the saved and the damned, Universalists made a radical statement about the power of love.

I believe we can translate this message into modern times. We can, if we want, take God out of the equation. We can, if we want, reject notions of heaven and hell, even of existence after death. What we are left with is a tradition that believes in the transforming power of love to save all of humanity, indeed to save the entire interdependent web of creation of which we are a part.

We are left with a tradition that teaches us to reject the divisions of humanity into those with privilege and those to be oppressed, and we are left with the challenge to do something about it. To do what we can with the power we hold within ourselves.

And there we have salvation, and it's in our own hands. It is up to us, as human beings with power and conscience, to choose to save the world.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion that believes that everything we do and everything we want to be is in our hands. The just and equitable society we want to see? In our hands. Community and relationships, peace and reconciliation? In our hands. The answers to all of our persistent questions about meaning and purpose? They, too, are in our hands.

Ours is a religion revealed in human experience, illumined by reason, made living in tradition and illustrated by the many sacred religious texts in which we find inspiration—texts as varied as the Scriptures of major world religions, the beauty of poetry and the writings of philosophers, scientists, and prophetic voices throughout the ages.

My friend and colleague the Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh once said, in addressing our human responsibility to fix human problems that “there is no invisible hand—it is our hands.” (Millspaugh)

Sarah's approach to justice-making is illustrative of Unitarian Universalism in a broader sense as well. Whatever we might (or might not) believe about supernatural forces or beings at work in our universe, we know we have power within ourselves.

Some of us, in fact, might choose to connect the power within ourselves to what we call God.

In my internship as a hospital chaplain, I was often asked to pray with people. As I was thinking about this sermon, a particular family came to my mind. I met this family on routine on-call rounds. They were huddled together in the surgical waiting room, obviously worried.

When I introduced myself, they told me that they had a loved one about to go into surgery, and they asked me to pray with them. I didn't know their theology more deeply than that they believed prayer would somehow help the situation—I knew only that they were distressed and sitting in a waiting room, prepared to be there for hours before any news would come, and holding on to hope that such news would be good.

And so I prayed with them. I spoke of being held in love and care, and of holding in their minds good memories of their relative who was sick. Finally, I prayed that the doctors and nurses in that operating room would be instruments of God's love on Earth.

You see, in my theology, there is not an interventionist being that could have changed the course of that surgery. But I knew that there was a fantastic team of well-trained medical professionals who could do their best. And so I prayed that they would, and hoped that these folks would know that the outcome of that surgery—whatever it was—was not because of the failure of God to care for their family member.

I prayed a Unitarian Universalist prayer, in traditional Christian theological language. It seemed to help them.

So, you might be a Unitarian Universalist if you choose to make the most of your life on Earth, if you choose to live your life in relationship with others, if, to paraphrase theologian Rebecca Parker, you choose to use your gifts to bless the world.

You might know that you're a Unitarian Universalist if you believe, like folk singer and UU minister the Rev. Fred Small, that "the only measure of your words and your deeds is the love you leave behind when you're done." It doesn't matter if you're right—it matters that you love.

You might know that you are a Unitarian Universalist if you understand that it is this choice, and not a shared set of beliefs, that calls you to be in religious community with others.

You might know that you're a Unitarian Universalist because you have to be. Because nowhere else have you found a community that accepts you just the way you are, because nowhere else have you

found a religion that is based on binding people together despite our disagreements, because nowhere else have you found a place that feels like home.

Or, you might be a Unitarian Universalist if you understand that no matter what our theologies, human beings have the power to create something better. If you understand that salvation is not something to hope for, something bestowed upon us by an invisible supernatural force, but instead is something we work for, something we build for, something we create ourselves, something available to everyone.

Something that is in our hands.

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