

# The Dawning Future

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I love being a Unitarian Universalist. I love being part of a religion in which every person matters, a religion that gives us the freedom to explore our own beliefs, a religion that entrusts us with the responsibility of articulating those beliefs to one another.

Sometimes, it gets frustrating, though. You see, Unitarian Universalists like to disagree. We even like to agree to disagree. We're very good at disagreeing.

Is there a God? What happens when we die? Is human nature inherently good? Evil? Neither? Ask four Unitarian Universalists any of these big theological questions and you will undoubtedly get six answers. Maybe eight.

Which makes it hard to explain when someone asks, "So, you're a Unitarian Universalist. What do they believe?" I get that question a lot. And it's hard for me to answer it—and I've spent more than my fair share thinking about the answer.

Unlike many religions, Unitarian Universalists don't come together around shared belief. We don't have a common teaching about important theological matters. We don't have a shared holy book that we look to for answers—or a shared interpretation of the many important books we do use.

And yet, we do come together. We join together in worship, each of us bringing to this sacred hour our mind and heart, each of us bringing our questions and our struggles, each of us seeking connection to something beyond our individual selves. We come together as a community again and again—to learn, to hope, to act for justice, to be with one another, to make meaning together.

We come from different places and with different experiences, different ways of looking at the world. Like the water that we pour together in our annual ritual of ingathering, we mix and mingle and share with each other, and we leave here different than we came in—even if just a little bit.

And we do agree on some things, after all. We wouldn't be here together if we didn't.

I'd like to touch on three of those things today—three connected things that Unitarian Universalists in fact agree about. Those three things are: the importance of relationship with others; the understanding that each of us has only a piece of the truth; and the trust that we have the power to in some way shape our future.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion that requires community to practice. I might get some pushback on that statement once my sermon hits the internet (maybe even once this worship is over), but I'll stand by it: this is a religion you just can't do alone.

Our forebears in this faith struggled with this—understanding that both individual religious experience and also communal religious practice were important. I will argue, though, that one can have all of the individual spiritual experiences possible and still need others to make meaning of those experiences.

In the aftermath of the unthinkable horror of September 11, 2001, my theology was shaken to its core. No longer could I accept that human beings were inherently good; worthy, yes, but not good. Like many people in our nation—especially those who lived in New York—I really didn't know what to think about much of anything.

It's possible that I could have gone and sat on a mountaintop and figured everything out. But I don't believe that human beings are made that way—even the most introverted among us. I needed a community of care around me to even begin to reconstruct my shattered worldview. I needed a community of reflection with whom to rebuild my theology. I needed a community of practice to challenge my forming thoughts with questions and new experiences.

Eight years after that awful day, I remind myself again and again that I am delusional if I think I've actually figured things out for good—but at least I have a firmer foundation on which to build meaning, thanks to the relationships in my life.

This interaction in a community of relationships is important to the practice of Unitarian Universalism.

What's so important about a community of relationships?

What's important is rooted in the second piece of our faith that brings us together: I assert that Unitarian Universalists can also agree that what each of us knows is a piece of the truth.

Long ago, the Buddha taught this same lesson, using the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Each of them could tell something about the elephant—but none of them could know it all.

In the Buddhist retelling of that story, a wise king used this reality to settle arguments over theology. Many people were convinced that one way of looking at the world was right—and the Buddha reminded them that such people “see only one side of a thing,” and thus they are doomed to argue with one another.

In disagreeing with one another, Unitarian Universalists make the concession that none of us has the complete truth, that none of us can claim the “one right answer” on any matter.

That’s a powerful statement in a society where people are becoming more and more sure that they are right and everyone else is wrong—people of all theological, political and social viewpoints have dug in their heels and closed their eyes. Our religion teaches us to look and listen to everyone around us instead.

Whether it’s about history or theology, religious belief or political viewpoints, none of us can claim a monopoly on the truth.

As Joe sang earlier, “we each have a piece of the story.” And we need to tell those pieces to one another.

Because we each know part of the truth, it becomes more and more important to share our truth in community. We come together to understand how others see the world differently than we do, to stretch each other and ourselves, to collect the bits of truth that run like threads among our varied experiences.

But what do we do with all of that collected truth?

We need to use what we learn with and from each other to act. Our capacity to act forms the basis of a third agreement in Unitarian Universalism: that human beings have the awesome ability to shape the future.

Whether we are endowed by a creator with these powers or they are a result of evolution (or whether the answer is a bit of both), whether we believe in unknown forces at work in the Universe or just that our minds and hands can be put to good use, Unitarian Universalists have a common understanding that humans have the power to be participants in creation, and not mere spectators to it.

Earlier, we sang the praises of: “a freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more; and bids the soul in search of truth, adventure boldly and explore.” Marion Franklin Ham’s words echo through the ages—as meaningful today as they were when he wrote them in 1933.

As Unitarian Universalists, we come together not only to share our past but to create our future. We must participate in creation, following the things that call us to action.

If we are called to bring justice to an unfair world, we must know that we have the power to do it.

If we are called to bring healing to the bruised, battered and broken, we must know that we have the power to do it.

If we are called to add beauty to the abundance of all creation, through art or music or words, we have the power to do that, too.

We have the power to bring love where hate holds sway, and the power to bring hope where despair is overwhelming. We have the power to imagine something better—and the power to make that imagination real.

As Unitarian Universalists, we cannot be satisfied to watch the world unfold before us. We are called to action—with the full understanding that our actions have meaning, that they have purpose, and that they have the ability to change things in this world.

That is a pretty amazing thing on which we can agree.

Given that, let's agree to disagree on the rest, OK?

#### **Works Cited/Consulted**

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