

The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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A little Jewish humor:

Two rabbis are having dinner together. They are close friends; they can tell each other anything. All night long they discuss the existence of God and eventually come to the conclusion that God does not exist. At last they go off to bed. In the morning, one of the rabbis gets up, looks for his friend all over the house, doesn't find him, goes to look for him outside – and finds him in the garden, absorbed in his ritual morning prayers.

Surprised, he says, “Hey! What are you doing?”

“You can see for yourself – I’m saying my ritual morning prayers.”

“That’s just what surprised me! We talked halfway through the night, we decided that God did not exist, and here you are saying your ritual morning prayers?”

The other rabbi replies, quite simply, “What does God have to do with it?”

(from The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality by Andre Comte-Sponville, p. 38)

A little Jewish humor, a little Jewish wisdom.

This was going to be a sermon about the alleged tension between reason and faith, the rational and the emotional, the mind and the heart, the body and the soul. But I’ve put off such a huge topic until the fall when we will all have more time and energy to delve deeper than I could go today. Besides, I think our rational and emotional sides, our reason and our faith, our minds and our hearts are all telling us the same thing these days – the great divide just isn’t there. Get over it! There is some great philosophical thinking going on in these areas, supported by the neurosciences, and we’ll talk about it in a few months.

I like the joke about the rabbis very much. What does God, or anything we can or can not believe in a rational way, have to do with what we find to be helpful, or enjoyable, or meaningful, or motivating in our lives? This is a core principle of Unitarian Universalism. We are the institutionalization of religious freedom. We say out loud, in our creedless membership requirements for example, that the specifics of our beliefs, or even our personal spiritual practices, do not need to conform one to the other. What matter are our relationships. Our seven UU principles are about our relationships.

But UUs across the country these days are all wrapped up in figuring out what our common theological position might be, or how we can come to grips with using the religious language of mainline denominations. After all, we had our beginnings in liberal Protestantism, they say. And there are parts of all this I can agree with, but not much. If I ran the UUA, what would take priority is how what we are doing in our churches and societies and fellowships is helping our membership and reaching out to the spiritually hungry, and correspondingly, how we have found the understanding and compassion to move beyond the walls of our buildings and help a hurting world.

What matters are our relationships. Unitarian Universalists have faith in the essential nature of relationship and interdependence. We really do try to trust the processes that continue to create our lives anew every day, although it isn't in some of our human natures to do so very willingly. Sometimes we want to just decide!

When I decided I wanted to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, there was a certain amount of immediate change that, of necessity, had to happen quickly. Like closing my art gallery and selling my two properties and getting my finances arranged. But very soon I realized that merely making the decision to become a minister does not a minister make. And all those academic credits and chaplaincy experiences in hospitals and ministerial internships wouldn't do it either. I had to trust the process of becoming a minister from the inside out, not the outside in. It was an amazing experience, a gradual one that I could feel happening bit by bit, an ordination that began before the official day on April 24, 2005, and continues as we speak. I had faith that if ministry was in me, I would recognize it, and I did.

I'd like to remind you, this morning, our last morning of really having any time for deep conversation as next Sunday's service will be even busier, of some things in which we can all have faith this summer. I do believe there are many parts of our lives that we take on faith, and particularly as Unitarian Universalists, famous for living with uncertainty. But here are a few of the faithful things. Here is my list for keeping your UU faith alive and well till we gather again.

Have faith in Miracle-Gro and the benefits of fresh vegetables and beautiful flowers.

Have faith in the healing powers of sun and rain, wind and water, laughter and tears.

Have faith in your thirst. Drink when you feel thirsty, whether for water or for the woods. Have faith that you will know what is right for you.

Have faith that YOU matter, even when it really doesn't feel like it.

Have faith that revelation is ongoing, we are always learning new things, and our understandings evolve.

Have faith that change is inevitable, and good. Without change, possibility is not.

Have faith that even the little things we do to help can add up in powerful ways.

Have faith that you do not walk on your path alone. Have faith that hands offered and hands taken are one and the same.

Have faith that what we do here, at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst, makes a difference.

Have faith that our photo directory will get here – eventually. The tower will be painted – have faith!

Have faith that even as we are missing each other and waiting to return in the fall, September 7 will probably come sooner than we really want it to in the end.

Have faith that the light of truth, the warmth of compassion and the fire of commitment can never really be extinguished. Ever.