

The Joke Is On Us

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I decided to begin the New Year with an exhortation against sin. I have high hopes that we together this year can fight against the most pernicious omissions in our way of being Unitarian Universalists. Our most egregious fault, in my humble opinion, is that we ourselves buy into the cultural jokes about who we are.

Did you hear what happened when the first Unitarian Universalist moved into Georgia? The KKK burned a question mark on his lawn.

All of those goofy jokes about going to a discussion about heaven rather than heaven itself, about being poor singers of new hymns because we are reading ahead to see if we agree with the lyrics: There is quite a lot of truth these jokes. I have been seen laughing out loud myself, but truly, we stand for more than mere freedom to argue and form committees. We come out of a four-hundred-year tradition of questioning and taking a stand. I hope that each of us this year will be making greater effort at saying who we are, rather than blowing it off with a shrug or a joke.

OK, how many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

"We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that's fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next

Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life, energy-saving, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence."

How often have we put our life energy into small causes instead of taking risks on the big things? How often have you personally practiced speaking out? It's time. Our society needs every one of our voices standing up for progressive values. It is impossible to have one hundred percent consensus, but I so hope we can move forward with enthusiasm in the more obvious areas where we have great agreement. If we wait for 100% agreement on topics and then tried to agree on the language, we'll deserve the image of always getting stuck rather than taking a stand.

What do you get if you put two Unitarian Universalists in a room? At least three opinions.

I think our legislative ministry main project this year will be marriage equality. We support the right for every committed couple to have equal protection under the law. I hope that we are all able to stand on the side of love. We plan some special events in support of same-sex couples including flooding Arnold Schwarzenegger's office with valentines on behalf of all people who love and commit to each other for life.

I know of only one person who identifies as a Unitarian Universalist locally who has serious disagreement with our support of marriage equality. If you do, it is your task to let me know and let me know why.

We come out of over 400 years of deep thought and life-risking stands on critical issues.

I think I need to regularly tell you more about who we are and where we come from. I have wondered if the reason some of our new folks are drawn to the community here and find our services interesting but seem to lack a depthful connection with the movement is that they don't know much about our history beyond who we are here in the Fellowship. And others of you have asked how you might learn some broader theological ideas to help you step into understanding religion in general better.

I recently heard Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School, talking about our theology as it developed in the 18th and 19th centuries here in the United States. I decided to summarize her remarks on how our theology developed here. I thought it would be a good place to expose you in a bit more depth to who we are and how we got to be his way. If we don't know our history, it certainly weakens our capacity to talk with our neighbors. And it weakens our ability to care for our own faith. We care for Unitarian Universalism by protecting what is good, and changing what needs to be changed.

First of all, what is theology? Theology is study of the nature of human being-ness. It has to do with what a human being is and what our relationship is to matters of ultimate concern. What is it to be a human being? What might it mean to be made in the image of God? What is the nature of God?

I never know how far back I should go to be sure that we are all in the same conversation, but today, I'll start with New England in the 18th and 19th centuries. Calvinism dominated the Protestant theology of New England. Calvin had been a great force during the 16th century Reformation in Europe. He developed a system of theology that was built on the idea that people are born depraved or out of grace or sinful. Calvin said that we are born flawed and only some of us will be saved. God knows who the saved are, but we don't. And it doesn't matter how you live your life — if you are not saved, you will be going to hell. Now I write this with a limited and an outsider's understanding. Many Protestant churches are based on the core teachings of Calvin — Lutherans, Presbyterians, the Reform Church — and I am confident that they would offer a more nuanced and richer interpretation of this doctrine of election than I just did. But as I understand it, a core belief in these groups of Protestants is that people do not come into the world with goodness already in them and God is altogether other. God is out there and all good.

William Ellery Channing and other Unitarians of that time disagreed with the Calvinist Puritans. Our side said that human beings have free will. They are born with the power to choose and the choices that we make have something to do with how our lives unfold. We have choices and a multitude of capacities, what Channing called powers of the soul. Among these are reason, the ability to feel, to sense the presence of God, and our conscience, which Channing believed was inherent and could detect the right way. This was a dramatically different understanding of human being-ness and God-ness from the rest of New England.

Dramatically. It is so different *still* from the interpretation of mainline Protestant ideas. We understand ourselves to be in a more synergistic relationship with God or the ultimate. We have goodness in us and freedom to create. We are in the image of God. God is present in us and not only as an all-powerful being out there. God is a relational power.

This is our foundational theology. It developed from the 19th century forward into the 20th century: Humanism, which affirms the goodness of our lives, the value of our capacities and our creativity and our moral consciousness. It is possible to talk about all of these capacities and not talk about God at all. In the 20th century, we have Humanists who say that the important part of this conversation is our human responsibility to do what is right. To claim it, not duck it. It is important not to rely on God's power but to live as if we ourselves make a difference. The language of "God" dropped out of some Humanist conversations. There is another strand of Unitarian Universalism, which has co-existed all along, which continues to name God and mystery but in less and less anthropomorphic language.

There is diversity in our heritage but what we have in common is the understanding of human being-ness.

I believe that these ongoing conversations about what it is to be a human being and what gives shape to a human life, in the midst of so much that is changing in physics and Process Theology, are endlessly fascinating. It never stops moving. Someone gave me a statement by the famous Clarence Darrow to read last week about why he was an agnostic. It was a wonderful exposition of Humanism from the 20th century but I found it quite old-fashioned.

All of us have to keep learning and growing. If you don't know much of our history, I wonder if you can appreciate what makes us unique. As I study the great teachers who formed us, I am very proud. The jokes about question-mark burnings leave me afraid that we don't take ourselves seriously enough. We are so much more than simply a place where dogma is not enforced. It is a radical thing to take human capacities and responsibility so seriously.

Once upon a time and not very long ago, a very wealthy lady was dying in Redwood City. She called a priest, a rabbi and me to her bedside. "Friends", she said, "I trust you. I've converted all my worldly goods into cash and put it in these three suitcases. When they lower

my casket, I'd like each of you to throw one case after me into the ground." With that we were each given a big case stuffed with hundred-dollar bills.

After the funeral, the rabbi and priest and I left the cemetery together. The priest spoke first. "I needed money for the church building fund so badly, that I must tell you I withdrew \$5000 from my case."

The rabbi spoke next and said, "I understand how you feel. I took out \$10,000 that I hope won't be missed." I was shocked at both of them because I had thrown in a check for the full amount.

We had a class this year called "Articulating Your Unitarian Universalist Theology." The point of the class was to help us learn to speak up when we hear religion being discussed. All too often we don't get involved because there is so much to say, so we get quiet or crack a joke and we let the moment pass. It is a shame to let it pass. How did you find us yourself? Mostly we come because we heard someone talking about Unitarian Universalism and realized that there was something worth checking out here.

Each student prepared a short answer to give in a public situation. We did quite a lot of reading and then polished up a few words so that we would be ready when the situation arises. We tried answering two questions: So what is Unitarian Universalism? And OK, so what do you believe?

A few brave members of the class have, with only a little coercion, agreed to share their statements.

My statements:

Unitarian Universalism is a religion in which each individual discerns truth instead of accepting a creed. It is a free faith with over 400 years of history standing for justice even when it has been unpopular. It inspires me to think for myself and to figure out what I

believe with the help of my fellow travelers. My community, the Fellowship, is a place in which values are lived and life itself is honored and celebrated.

I believe that we are each a part of God and that it is our work to bring about the beloved community here on earth. We are responsible to the world — our home — and to every thing on it. We are part of the great mysterious web of all creation. We should act as if the great moral compass depends on each of us individually and we should rise about petty conflicts by remembering that we are all in this together. I cherish our community and expect it to call me into my best self. I aspire to find goodness, beauty and truth in every moment.

(Statements by course participants Janette Rabin, Susan Walker-O'Brien, Lorie Esposito and Dick Edminster)

I hope that we have sparked a few answers that you might give, next time you are in a line and the opportunity presents itself. In fact, give your answer and then say, "If you are curious, our weekly worship is 10:30 a.m. on Sunday. You would be so welcome to join us. I'd be happy to meet you or even give you a ride . . ."

Blessed be.