

## (UU) Myth-Busting

© Rev. Erika Hewitt \* Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

It's been a good week to be Unitarian Universalist. In fact, I've never been prouder to call myself a UU. This week, our people gathered in Phoenix to bear moral witness to the racism embedded in SB1070, and to offer hope in a culture of fear. Our bright gold Standing on the Side of Love T-shirts appeared in the New York Times and on Fox News. I got chills when I heard an NPR reporter's voice describe our "Standing on the Side of Love" signs.

As Unitarian Universalists, we stood on the side of justice; we stood on the side of love – and we sat in jail cells. Through non-violent civil disobedience, it was us (among others) who brought hope to people in Arizona. A friend of mine who went spoke of being approached by strangers who wanted to thank her, and even hug her.

I'm not sure you know this, but we UU's have a new name, my friends – good news for those of you who have trouble choking out the ten syllables U.ni.ta.ri.an.U.ni.ver.sa.list. Throughout this summer of wearing our saffron "Standing on the Side of Love" T-shirts, from gay pride events to the National Day of Non-Compliance, we UU's have earned a flattering shorthand identity.

We've become known as "The Love People."

What brings me the most joy, as a longtime Unitarian Universalist (excuse me, I mean, as a longtime Love Person) is not that we got press. It's nice to appear in the news, but our visibility isn't what pleases me the most. My joy is that the UUA's Standing on the Side of Love campaign has provided us with a voice, and a place, and an identity.

We've badly needed this voice and purpose, as a people of faith. It's important that we know who we are; it's important that we're able to articulate our religious identity.

Myths and half-truths about us abound. Ask around and you'll hear any of the following: that UU's don't stand for anything (other than liberal politics); that our worship life centers around an intellectual, not spiritual, center; that Unitarian Universalism is a religion of individualism; that if you're a UU, you can believe "anything you want."

I am, here and now, declaring all of these statements to be untrue. As I counter each of these myths with "helpful heresies,"<sup>1</sup> you might not agree with me. That's fine; at its best, a sermon is a conversation- starter. For all of the UU myths out there, this, at least, is so: we don't have to share the same beliefs and the same truths.

*myth #1 \* there's no "there" there*

My colleague Meg Barnhouse tackles the first Great Myth of Unitarian Universalism when she says, "People talk sometimes about liberal religion as if it's a thin gruel, watered down to please everyone... so general as to be meaningless." She doesn't name these "people," so I won't either, but one of them might be a certain national radio host whose name rhymes with Harrison Peeler.

It's one of the most widespread misunderstandings about Unitarian Universalism: that absent the building blocks of creed and dogma, ours is an empty skeleton of religion. What some outsiders don't understand is that UU'ism is an alternative religion, not an *alternative to* religion. Where other faiths nail immovable planks of dogma to their support beams, blocking out the elements of doubt and mystery, we UU's invite each person to drape their vibrant silks of belief and conviction across the rafters.

"Contrary to popular belief," says Rev. Dan Harper<sup>2</sup>, "it is not easy to be a Unitarian Universalist. If you are a Unitarian Universalist, you will care deeply about making this world a better place for all persons, to the point where you devote your whole life to that end."

Meg Barnhouse puts it another way when she whimpers, "The UU Principles are demanding enough to make me whine."

Unitarian Universalists occupy a colorful, shimmering tent of our own creation, walls shifting as we take down the faded bolts of fabric that no longer serve us, and replacing them with new truths born of experience.

*myth #2 \* "UU's go it solo"*

Last fall, I met a Santa Barbara resident – I'll keep the circumstances fuzzy – who reminded me about the next myth ripe for busting: that "Unitarian Universalist" is an identity that you slip on and off like a pair of hiking boots. Upon learning that I'm a UU minister, the man identified himself as a Unitarian Universalist.

"Oh, you're a member of the downtown church," I concluded.

"No, I don't go to church," he corrected me, "I just consider myself a UU. But that's what's so great about the Unitarians: You don't have to go to services to be a UU."

This was news to me. On that day, it was neither the time nor the place to engage in myth-busting (as a result, there were bite marks in my tongue). If it had been, this is what I would have said:

Everything I understand about Unitarian Universalism – and everything our congregation does and says – begins with the belief that we are in relationship with one another. You

can admire UU'ism from the comfort of your home (or the brunch table, or the hiking trail). You can read about us, and feel allied with us in our social justice projects. But ours isn't a theoretical faith; it's a lived faith, an embodied one, and can only be real when put into the practice of relationship.

Saying that you're a UU without being part of a congregation<sup>3</sup> is like claiming that you "visit" Germany by eating bratwurst on your couch while you watch the travel channel. Unless you bring yourself to a community, engage in those relationships, and support your chosen congregation with your time, talent, and treasure... you are no more a Unitarian Universalist than *ich bin ein Berliner*.<sup>4</sup>

*myth #3 \* individualism rules*

Relationship is also instrumental in busting our next myth: that Unitarian Universalism prizes individualism and freedom above all else. I counter this half-truth with a heresy borrowed from UU leader Mike Durall: "personal freedom and individual autonomy have outlived their usefulness as core values of Unitarian Universalism."<sup>5</sup>

Now, I cherish our fifth Principle: *the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*. I believe that honoring *the right of conscience* means "hearing the voice of everyone equally, allowing everyone to have a say."<sup>6</sup> Our congregations are places where people speak their truth without conforming to doctrine; where "we need not think alike to love alike."<sup>7</sup>

The healthy exercise of democracy and the voicing of truth shouldn't entail bitter debate, choosing sides, and games of allegiance – but unhealthy UU congregations over-interpret and distort the principle of "democracy" when they put individual agendas above and apart from the Greater Good. As my colleague, Krista Taves<sup>8</sup>, explains beautifully:

Although we promote freedom, it is not freedom at all costs. This is not a religion for lone rangers. This is a religion for lovers of freedom who are called into community, because in community we are held accountable for the consequences of our beliefs.

As a people of faith, our relationships come before above any one issue or person, because Unitarian Universalism requires us to "[harness] some of our autonomy in the service of the common good."<sup>9</sup>

*myth #4 \* UU is a religion of the intellect*

In 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson used Harvard's pulpit to attack his Unitarian colleagues who offered nothing but "corpse cold" religion to their congregations. Nearly two centuries later, we UU's still struggle to overcome the charge – and the false expectation – that our worship life is grounded in "intellectual stimulation."

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations exist to transform the hearts and souls of our members, who then work to transform the world. Our purpose – if this is heresy, so be it – is to help people live lives of purpose and meaning, and to encourage one another to spiritual maturation. When I craft sermons and worship services each week, my goal isn't to provide "intellectual stimulation" that you might appropriately pursue in an Adult Ed course or on CSPAN.

Instead, I'm interested in shaping our religious journey as a "relational, experiential"<sup>10</sup> one. In my congregation, I craft sermons so they offer chewy bits of material for spiritual reflection; tools for the spiritual toolbox. *What are the deepest mysteries and truths that life has revealed to you, so far?, I want to know. Here are mine.*

*myth #5 \* "anything you want"*

*What, the intensely curious outsider wants to know, do Unitarian Universalists believe? Woe to those who offer the sloppy, well-intentioned shorthand response: "Anything you want." This myth gets me steamed up like no other. What makes me cringe is its vapid open-endedness: the suggestion that "anything goes." It's simply not true.*

"When we come together as Unitarian Universalists," says one of my colleagues, "we give up some of [our] freedom to believe in ways that are not responsible. We give up the freedom to believe in harmful or unjust things. We accept the burden of responsible meaning making, and reasonable beliefs. We as Unitarian Universalists agree that our meaning making must not be at the expense of others, or to the exclusion of others."

Dan Harper's<sup>11</sup> heresy is a bit more succinct: "You cannot 'believe anything you want.' You must believe, with all your heart and soul and mind, that love can transform the world."

What have you discovered, about this chosen faith?

How do you live your believe in the transformative power of love?

Most importantly, how do *you* continue to make meaning, and find purpose, in our Unitarian Universalist tent?

"This faith isn't a thin gruel," says Meg Barnhouse. "It's not even a rich and hearty gruel. It's walnuts and bananas, pancakes, mangoes, arugula, ginger, and avocado. The feast is prepared with effort, enjoyment, persistence, and commitment. Care to join me?"

## Endnotes

1. A phrase used by Mike Durall in his wonderful book, *The Almost Church Revitalized*.
2. Dan Harper's blog: [www.danielharper.org/blog/?page\\_id=457](http://www.danielharper.org/blog/?page_id=457)
3. For those who live too far away from a UU congregation to be part of it: that's what the Church of the Larger Fellowship is for! Visit this online virtual congregation – and be part of it! – at [www.clf.uua.org](http://www.clf.uua.org).
4. I know, I know: it means “I am a jelly donut.”
5. Durall, *The Almost Church Revitalized*.
6. From her essay, ““Who Says Unitarian Universalism's Principles Are Easy?”
7. The words of Francis David, 16<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian martyr.
8. In her sermon “The Spiritual Imperative of Choice.” See [www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/sermons/submissions/8788.shtml](http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/sermons/submissions/8788.shtml).
9. See her Nov. 2009 sermon, “The Almost Church Revitalized”:  
<http://montevistauu.org/sermons/The%20Almost%20Church%20Revitalized,%20%20November%2015,%202009.pdf>
10. In *The Small Church at Large*, Robin Trebilcock writes “There has been a global cultural shift. That shift has been from a rational understanding of religion to a relational, experiential, and intuitive understanding.” This was quoted by Michael Durall on page 72 of *The Almost Church Revitalized*.
11. Dan's blog: [www.danielharper.org/blog/?page\\_id=457](http://www.danielharper.org/blog/?page_id=457)