

What do Unitarian Universalists Really Believe? – a sermon by the Rev. Suzelle Lynch – 07-26-09, UU Church West. All Rights Reserved.

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Do you remember learning how to swim? That first plunge into perhaps surprisingly cool water, jumping from the side of the swimming pool into your father's arms where he stood, urging you on. Or perhaps the first time you put your toe into a lake, how alive the water seemed, how it caressed your body as you went deeper and risked lying back in your inner tube and letting your feet come up off the sandy bottom. Do you remember feeling buoyant? Or perhaps you found yourself sinking like a stone.

I was one of those kids who embraced the water as though I were part mermaid, and thus for me, summertime has always been swimming time. I was sorry to miss our all-church pool party last week, but I was happily splashing around the lake at MUUSA, the Midwest UU Summer Assembly, where my family and I have enjoyed vacationing with several hundred other UUs of all ages for the past five years. And while I was there, in that lake, I found myself musing on swimming as a metaphor for our faith.

When I was about seven years old, my parents signed me up for swimming lessons, and I loved flapping and splashing in the shallow end of the pool. But then came the day our teacher decided it was deep-end time. She herded us all over to the diving board and lined us up, barking like a drill sergeant. We were told to jump right in to that deep water, to jump right off the diving board, one by one. When my turn came, I was so terrified I couldn't move, so the teacher grabbed my chubby little body and heaved me up the ladder and off the end of the diving board like a sack of potatoes. I screamed and screamed until the water closed over my head, but fortunately, I bobbed back up like a bubble, dog-paddling like a champ. And I've loved swimming ever since.

Figuring out what we Unitarian Universalists really believe is a bit like learning to swim. It doesn't have to be like my experience, though. We don't have to plunge into the deep end right away.

The first thing to note is that Unitarian Universalism is more about process than content. It's more about swimming than it is about the water. That's because we don't have a set of beliefs that we're all required to agree to nor a set of doctrines that we must follow. For Unitarian Universalists, beliefs about God or not, heaven & hell or not, and about the ultimate purpose of our lives here on earth – these beliefs are always individual and personal, and from my experiences hearing what UUs believe over the past twenty years, I can tell you that our beliefs are very diverse! (example of a couple from our church – one who believes there is nothing after death, and the other who expects to be united with loved ones after death....)

When I was growing up in our faith, I heard from my Catholic friends that they had something called "the catechism" which sounded both frightening and intriguing. They told me that the catechism gave them all the answers to questions about God and heaven

and hell and how to live your life and be a good person – questions I had, too. But in my congregation, we learned that different religions had their own answers to our big questions. We were encouraged to learn about those religions, but to look to our own experience of the world for our answers, as well as to ask our parents about what they believed. We were reminded that science was always finding new answers to the mysteries of the natural world, and that when we found our answers to big questions, we shouldn't get too attached to them, because they might change. We were encouraged to keep asking, to search our own minds and hearts, and to believe what seemed right to us. We were taught to swim, not to fill up the pool with water from a single source.

For the fact is that the waters of belief are many. The pool into which we are thrown at birth is supplied by diverse streams. What our parents think, what we are taught in school and in religious communities, and perhaps most of all what our culture values – these are some of the waters of belief which we must navigate.

Learning to swim those waters for Unitarian Universalists involves at least three basic principles: the doggy paddle, the front crawl, and the backstroke – otherwise known as the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance. There's also a fourth principle, but I'll say more about that later.

Earl Morse Wilbur, a scholar and author of a two-volume study that covers nearly 600 years of Unitarian history, identified these key principles. As Wilbur examined our faith during the times of the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, he found that while there were differing beliefs held among Unitarians in France, England and Eastern Europe, they held common values. Wilbur wrote that our religious movement is “fundamentally characterized by its steadfast and increasing devotion to... complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; ... the unrestricted use of reason in religion rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; (and) ... generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity.”

But rather than claiming that Unitarians believe in these three principles, Wilbur said, “Freedom, reason and tolerance... are not the final goals to be aimed at in religion, but only conditions under which the true ends may best be attained.” The true goals, he felt were to help humankind live up to its highest moral potential, and to create a world of peace and justice. (“A History of Unitarianism, Vol. 2”, p. 487).

Freedom, today and in the historical times Wilbur studied, is perhaps the most basic of the three principles. It's the doggy paddle – the elementary swimming stroke – indeed, it is the first method of swimming learned by human beings, if ancient cave paintings in Egypt are to be believed.

Unitarians have insisted that each person must have the freedom to pursue his or her own search for truth and meaning. We've been opposed to creeds -- belief statements which some religions impose on their adherents – from the earliest days of our history. The problem with the principle of freedom comes when we say, “As a Unitarian Universalist, I can believe whatever I want.”

This is a problem for two reasons. First, the truth is that we don't always choose what we believe. Remember the pool of beliefs filled up by parents, schools, churches and by our culture? What we believe often begins with the contents of that pool, and what's there is either enforced or undermined by the events and experiences of our lives. Our beliefs develop and change over the years – they aren't chosen once and for all in some decisive moment.

But even if we were able to freely choose beliefs the way we choose breakfast cereal at the grocery store, the answer to the question about whether freedom means we can believe whatever we want would still be “no”.

That's because as much as we affirm the freedom of the individual, we also know that our freedom must be tempered by the reverence we have for the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person, and by our cherished respect for the interdependent web of all life of which we are only a part. For example, we are not free to believe that Hitler was right in unleashing the Holocaust against the Jewish people. And so, far from being able to believe anything we want, we have on some level agreed that we believe what we must. Freedom is a tool, a basic way to get from one side of the pool to the other – it's not an end in itself.

Reason – the second principle -- is like swimming the front crawl because it's so powerful. With the crawl, a swimmer moves through the water with purpose – eyes on the prize, legs and arms moving in an efficient rhythm. If you want to cut through the waters of belief quickly, reason's an excellent method. Unitarian Universalists have long affirmed that it is the most reliable guide we have to truth, and that all other sources are subject to reason's testing. What we believe in, what we trust, should not deny what we know – and thus we are a faith that traditionally embraces new scientific discoveries.

But reason, like freedom, is a tool, not a goal. Affirming the principle of reason in religion doesn't mean that the only acceptable beliefs for a UU are those which can be proven by science or logic, for so much of life has to do with things reason can't fully explain or address. Things like love, compassion, grief, meaning, joy, transcendence – testing these with reason does not necessarily yield truth.

Tolerance, the third of the key principles Earl Morse Wilbur identified goes back to the beliefs of our religious forebears in Europe and England which diverged from those of orthodox Christianity concerning the nature of God and the nature of humanity. The orthodox insisted that God was represented in the Trinity of father, son and holy spirit; we replied that we could find no scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. Orthodox Christians held fast to the Calvinist idea that humans were totally depraved and sinful by nature – that we are born flawed and fallen. We offered the view that human beings were born with a nature that makes us capable of sin, but even more capable of goodness, especially if we leaned on God's help.

Because of these doctrinal differences, our religious forebears were not well tolerated by the church – indeed, a number of them were burned at the stake for heresy. And by the early nineteenth century in this country, the Christian orthodoxy attempted to exclude us from Christian fellowship.

Thus having been painfully excluded, we developed a passion for being inclusive – for tolerance of religious ideas.

But of course we have faltered over the years when challenged to live up to this deeply held conviction. One example of this is the Transcendentalist controversy of the 1800s when Unitarian ministers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, whose words we sang earlier, pushed out the boundaries of our theology in response to new ideas about the Bible from German scholars, and their own discovery and study of the scriptures of Hinduism and Buddhism.

The Transcendentalists felt that God gave humankind the gift of intuition, the gift of insight, and the gift of inspiration – so why not use these in religion? (from www.transcendentalists.com) Emerson and Parker declared that true religion did not require historical proof; that the source of religious authority was not scripture, but what they named “the universal religious impulse that all believers share.” (“Walking Together,” by Conrad Wright, p. 28)

This shift, while hardly shocking to us today, was heretical to most Unitarians of that time. Tolerance was valued, yes, but its limits were the boundaries of recognized Christianity. Emerson and Parker along with other Transcendentalists were ostracized and it would take 40 years before Unitarian ideas relaxed enough to accept them back into the fold. (“The Transcendentalist Ministers,” Hutchison, p. 202-3)

I tell you this history because I think it is important for us to recognize that our stand on tolerance has always been evolving. It also reminds us that our religious community, like all communities, struggles from time to time to set boundaries on belief and behavior.

And our struggles around tolerance haven’t been limited to theology – social and political issues have been involved as well. For example, in the Unitarian Universalist congregations of my childhood, the assumption was that all religious liberals were also political liberals – that we all agreed on issues of abortion rights, peace and environmental issues, to name a few. This assumption created a great deal of tension, and during the Vietnam War, some of our UU congregations even split over issues like whether or not to offer sanctuary to draft refugees. Today we know that our members hold a wide diversity of opinions on current political and social issues – but our more conservative members tell me they often feel a lingering intolerance, especially during election years.

The broad kind of tolerance we hold as a value now has to do with being open and accepting. Open-minded, open-hearted, willing to engage with human beings in all their diversity and with human ideas in their many beautiful and challenging forms. That’s why I think of tolerance as the backstroke of swimming – for as we backstroke, we’re belly-up, eyes wide, open to the full possible expanse of sky, and, quite frankly, we’re vulnerable.

Most of us accept that other people have the right to hold their own beliefs and practice their own religions – but we find it irritating that others do not necessarily regard us in

the same way, but instead, that they view us as fodder for conversion to their way of belief. Tolerance of the religiously intolerant is a huge challenge, indeed, many of us would rather close down our openness and join their ranks; rejecting and reviling them as they reject and revile us. I say it is possible to respect another's right to practice their faith, while still working concertedly to make sure our values prevail in the world.

You may have noticed as I've described these principles – the doggy paddle, the crawl and the backstroke – that they lean on one another and balance each other. Freedom of belief is limited by reason's testing, and by the kind of tolerance that would remind us that beliefs that oppress other persons or harm our planet are outside our boundaries. Reason's razor is tempered by the openness of tolerance, and the reminder that there are key aspects of life that are non-rational, like love, joy and grief. Tolerance in its narrow form is edified by remembering the importance of religious freedom, and in its broader form it is made sane by reason's logic. And as any swimmer knows, sometimes you use one stroke and sometimes another, and if you have a long way to go before you reach the shore, it's good to know them all.

You may also have noticed that I have not told you what UUs REALLY believe, only that we have strategies for swimming in the waters of belief.

So let me say something now about those waters. As you can see, the Great Lake of our wider UU heritage was originally fed by the river of Christianity. Our dissent from orthodoxy brought in new streams from biblical scholars, and others like the Transcendentalists whose river of belief in the power of each individual's intuition of the holy changed us forever. James Freeman Clarke, another Unitarian minister close to the Transcendentalists brought us his 1873 comparative study of the great religious traditions of the world, adding a gentle rain of openness to wisdom from all the world's religions. And in the ensuing years, our focus on Christianity became more and more dilute as the rivers of Humanist thought, feminist theology, liberation theology, Buddhism, and earth-centered religious rituals and traditions poured into our collective religious consciousness.

These rivers did not enter our Great Lake on a purely intellectual basis either. They were carried in by individuals, by people like you and me, who found their minds and their spirituality flowing in those directions.

Our great lake's waters of belief also were added to through the years by a welling up of social conscience and action among us ... from the Civil War days in which Henry Whitney Bellows, a Unitarian, and Clara Barton, a Universalist, formed the organization which would later be the American Red Cross; to the Unitarian Service Committee's work with refugees from the Nazis during World War II, through the ecology and peace movements of the 1960's and 70's, and into today's continuing work on peace, racial justice, the environment, and the rights of persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, social conscience and action added their rushing waters to our pool.

A retired colleague, Canadian Unitarian Minister Phillip Hewett wrote, "No person who is really alive holds fast to a system of unchanging beliefs year after year. At any given time, there will be beliefs of which he is utterly convinced, others of which he feels

reasonably assured, others still which he is beginning to question, and some which he is testing tentatively to see what validity they might have. Each day will bring at least some minor or subtle alteration to his structure of belief according to the ways in which he responds to ... new ideas, experiences and persons. (From Hewett's book, On Being A Unitarian)

This fluidity of our personal beliefs is what makes creeds so illogical for Unitarian Universalists. Hewett reminds me of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who is noted for saying that we can never step into the same river twice. The river is always flowing and each step into the water is different. That's the way water is ... constantly evaporating, changing, and returning to the sea. And so it is, too, with our beliefs – they flow out of our lives, and thus they ebb and turn with the tides and seasons of our lives.

Given the changing nature of belief for us, it is possible to go through life as a Unitarian Universalist without ever sitting down with ourselves and really considering what we believe. But wouldn't that be like staying on the beach? Like staying put in that lounge chair next to the pool?

Often it is our lives themselves that push us into deeper waters. Someone we love dies, and in our terrible sorrow we wonder if there is an afterlife where we will see our beloved again. We lose custody of a child, or we lose our job, and find ourselves questioning the meaning of our lives. Or perhaps something wonderful happens to us, and we find ourselves offering a prayer of gratitude to the God we didn't think we believed in any more. We watch the news and are desolated by stories of war and hunger and the meltdown of institutions we thought were rock solid, and we wonder what we can count on in this life. Or perhaps our children begin to ask us about God and Jesus and good and evil and what it is that we believe. When life is challenging or changing, we need to know what is there at our core, what we can lean on – what will give us courage and strength to carry on. When life is challenging or changing, the wellsprings of our faith can bubble up to the surface of our lives in surprising ways.

I don't think most UUs are content to stay out of the water, or even in the shallow end of the pool. I believe that part of why we are drawn to this faith is not just because the people in our particular church seem so nice and friendly, but because we want to plunge deeply into the ultimate questions of life and are unwilling to accept answers that don't make sense to us. And we value this faith tradition that encourages us to go deeper and then honors what we find and encourages us to act on our beliefs.

If you were waiting for the mysterious fourth principle I mentioned earlier... well, for me, that's it: action motivated by love. It's so important, it's beyond naming as a swimming stroke, for even though it is advanced, it's also so simple, any one of us can do it. Swimming in the Great Lake of our wider Unitarian Universalist heritage and beliefs is wonderful opportunity, but it requires a willingness to learn this advanced lesson: to reach beyond the walls of our comfortable congregation, to extend our arms in support of those who suffer, to advocate and protest and bring our power to bear on our elected leaders so that those who are oppressed might be offered the same privileges we experience. As one of our forebears, William Channing Gannett, put it, "We believe that we ought to join hands and work to *make* the good things better and the worst good,

counting nothing good for self that is not good for all; (and we believe) that this self-forgetting, loyal life, awakes in (us) the sense of union, here and now, with things eternal.” (from “Things Commonly Believed Among Us,” written in 1887). We seek to act as a moral force in the world, and we know that to do so, we have to live our faith.

Swimming in the Great Lake of Unitarian Universalism also asks us to be leaders in reaching out our hands in welcome to new people who are dipping their toes into our waters. It is a recognition that Unitarian Universalism is not just about the river of our personal beliefs, and having this nice group to share the Jacuzzi with. Rather, it is about generously inviting the wider community to our pool party, to the beautiful shores of our deep lake, and about learning from each other how to swim.

What do Unitarian Universalists REALLY believe?

Come to the water (take the plunge) and you'll find out!

Amen.