

5 April 2009:
**“T-Shirts, Bumper Stickers, and Elevator Speeches:
Unitarian Universalism in Twenty Words or Fewer”**

© Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak U.U. Congregation

* Introduction: excerpt from *The Colbert Report*, viewable at
www.fuuse.com/article.php?story=20060228212124264.

Be honest: could you do any better than Bobby?

I first showed this clip in June 2006, in my sermon about UU evangelism. “Please don’t do that,” I implored the congregation. I continued,

We’ve got to be articulate because (maybe not on national television, but at almost any other time), you could be asked what Unitarian Universalists believe. In fact, bet on it: you *will* be asked, and you’ll likely be caught off-guard. Do you have an “elevator speech”? If you’re a parent, can you help your child create a “recess speech” so that he or she can respond confidently, not uncomfortably, when peers pepper them with questions?... We’ve got to do better. We must be articulate when speaking about Unitarian Universalism.

Three years later, this video still makes me want to hold my head in my hands, even as I recognize that our ever-evolving religious tradition is *complicated*. It’s not easy to explain all of its complexity and nuance. Maybe you’re still learning about where our faith came from, and what it stands for... or maybe you’re still learning to *pronounce* it.

In this sermon, I’m challenging us to identify ourselves accurately and simply. Who are we, in twenty words or fewer? How concisely can we describe Unitarian Universalism? Is it possible to fit our theology or values on a bumper sticker or a T-shirt? As we explore those questions, we’re going to edge up to, and then skirt around, two pitfalls.

Pitfall #1 – Sometimes we get sloppy by allowing our liberal politics, as individuals, to stand in for our theology. For example, there’s a bumper sticker that says “Unitarians for Obama”¹... but that’s not very descriptive, given that you can also buy buttons² that say “Postal Workers for Obama,” “Cat Lovers for Obama,” and “Garden Gnomes for Obama.”





Here's another arena where I encourage to you find the religion beneath the politics: before the November election (and even now), many of your cars sported "No on Prop 8" bumper stickers. I love seeing those stickers – as your minister, I'm proud that so many of us have been visible in the fight to repeal Prop 8 – but I hope that you would be able to articulate the relationship between your support for marriage

equality, and who you are as a person of faith. That's why many liberal churches, like ours, have displayed banners that say, "Stand on the Side of Love." Unitarian Universalists are confronting the legislation of exclusion and the denial of rights with our life-saving message that all people are equal, and have inherent worth; all people are equally deserving of dignity and rights, and of plain old love.



That leads us to **Pitfall #2**. It's easier to say what Unitarian Universalism is *not*, than what we *are*: we're not dogmatic; we're not creed-centered; we're no longer a Christian religion, collectively; we aren't Biblically-based; we don't all believe in God, or the same God, or the God that other religions speak of. That's not as compelling a statement as speaking *affirmatively* about who we *are*.

In the 16th century, our great Unitarian forebear Francis David offered a sound-bite so powerful that we still use it today:

We need not think alike to love alike.

Love is at the heart of our faith: love that gives life the shape of justice, and inclusion. Unitarian Universalism draws wider the circles of life, rather than closing doors. In the words of a bumper sticker from the UU Family Network:

We are all family & We all have value.

The tradition of UU's inviting everyone to the table is also captured by a T-shirt³ that says:



We're looking for a few good men, women, blacks, whites, yellows, browns, heterosexuals, lesbians, gays, accountants, artists, Christians, Jews, Pagans, Atheists, Buddhists, Philosophers & Heretics.

Where does our foundation of love and compassion come from? Our history has two parts, because Unitarianism and Universalism merged in 1961; for centuries before, each tradition had developed its own theology and beliefs.

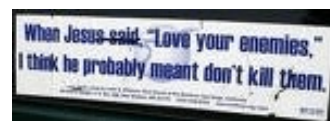
The **Unitarian** movement arose in the 1500s from our forebears' beliefs about who Jesus was. Was he divine, God-on-Earth? Or a wise human being? The latter, Unitarians declared. Jesus was a sage, a prophet, a Teacher of Love. His life and ministry are most meaningful to us, not his reputed miracles nor his violent death, much less the resurrection that his followers wrote of. This is the Jesus I believe in, having been raised Methodist; the reason I have this bumper sticker:



Jesus didn't teach me to hate.

The even more sassy and in-your-face version of that bumper sticker is this one:

*When Jesus said, "Love your enemies,"
I think he probably meant don't kill them.*



Unitarians also believed that there is one God – in modern parlance, “All names for God point to the same mystery.”⁴ Their understanding of the holy was an expansive one, and that sentiment is captured today by a bumper sticker that says,

God is too big to fit into any one religion.

My colleague, the Rev. Vicki Weinstein, loves that one, but also suggests⁵ a counterpart: “*God is too small and simple to need all these fancy religions.*”



Since our Unitarian and Universalist histories overlapped quite a bit before merging, it's sometimes hard to draw a crisp line between them. One thread of our **Universalist** tradition has always resonated strongly with me. Universalism arose, centuries ago, as a response to the questions: *What happens when we die? Who's blessed? Who's saved?*

We're all saved, proclaimed the Universalists. No loving Creator would condemn or punish any part of a beloved creation. No one falls outside the loving arms of the Holy.

As my favorite bumper sticker says,

God bless the whole world. No exceptions.



If the word “God” doesn't work for you, perhaps you'll prefer the bumper sticker that circulated when I was a student at Starr King School for the Ministry:

Grace Happens

...or you might prefer the bumper stickers that were dreamed up and voted on by my former congregation, the UU Church of Davis:

Fundamentally Open-Minded & We're all in this together

We're here to share and enjoy the unquenchable goodness of life and all of creation, says Universalism, and therefore we need to revisit that dusty theological word, "salvation." We might say that the only salvation that matters is the grace we offer one another, in this lifetime. As the T-shirt puts it,

Born OK the first time.



This message, says a colleague,⁶ "does speak to something central to Unitarian Universalism, our belief that human beings are fundamentally good creations." We find redemption by serving the human family through love and justice; we UU's view ourselves as co-creators and shapers of the world, as captured by a bumper sticker produced by our headquarters, the Unitarian Universalist Association:

NURTURE Your Spirit. Help HEAL Our World.



Our desire to help heal the world goes far back into our history. Our Universalist ancestors were so renowned for their social justice projects that in 1921, when one leader was asked what Universalists stand for, he replied,⁷

We do not stand. We move.

Both our Unitarian and Universalist histories, in fact, are filled with illustrious names, from statesmen like John Adams to exemplars like Susan B. Anthony and Ralph Waldo Emerson. One T-shirt (and tote bag)⁸ proudly proclaims,

Unitarian: In Good Company...Abigail Adams, John Adams, Margot Adler, Louisa May Alcott, Susan B. Anthony, e.e. cummings, Charles Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Florence Nightingale, Christopher Reeve, Albert Schweitzer, Pete Seeger, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Frank Lloyd Wright...(and even more names)



It's no accident that even a short list contains the names of scientists and intellectuals. Unitarian Universalism has always prized the use of reason, and rationality. We embrace



science. Far from conflicting with our sense of Mystery, most of us find that the forming edge of science snuggles up perfectly against our sense of awe and wonder. This is summed up by a T-shirt with “a subtle statement that Biblical literalism starves the human spirit.”⁹ Against a photograph from NASA of gas pillars in the Eagle Nebula, the letters read:

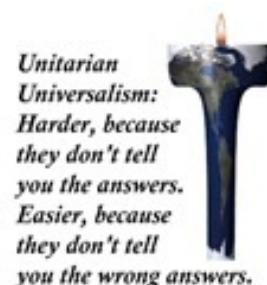
Which is more awe-inspiring: 6000 years, or 13,700,000,000?

Good question. Ah, yes, the questions. We UU’s do indeed live in the questions, as Wilson described so beautifully in his reflections. We would rather wrestle with uncertainty than subscribe to pat, one-size-fits-all answers. Two T-shirts¹⁰ convey this sentiment:



Some questions are too important to dismiss with answers.

Unitarian Universalism: Harder, because they don't tell you the answers. Easier, because they don't tell you the wrong answers.



...and then there’s the T-shirt that borders on the irreverent¹¹:



I'm a Unitarian Universalist: the bedrock of my faith is an unshakeable belief that your guess is as good as mine.

While we’re on the “irreverent” track, I must mention the T-shirt that displays The Top 10 Reasons to be a UU.¹² Among those ten reasons:

9. You can believe in dinosaurs; 8. Male and female, God created them; male and female, we ordain them; 4. Our symbol is down with fire, but we'll lay off the brimstone; 1. No matter what you believe, there's bound to be another UU who agrees with you.



Let’s mention, however briefly, our “down with fire” symbol: the flaming chalice.¹³ The chalice has been the symbol of Unitarianism since World War II, when it was used to



identify trucks that brought aid and safety to war-torn zones in Europe. Since the chalice is a lovely, malleable symbol – and a powerful one – it’s no surprise that many of us wear them on jewelry, T-shirts, or on our cars. On one hand, the chalice symbol is limited: it identifies us only to *one another*, since very few people know what the flaming chalice means. On the other hand, it’s a great conversation starter. If someone notices a chalice on a necklace or on your car, it’s an opportunity to jump into your elevator speech: an answer to the question “What do UU’s

believe” so brief that you could recite it while taking an elevator from the ground to the 10th floor.

I’ll let you settle on your “elevator speech” – and practice them with one another – over the coming days. In case you’re wondering, mine changes from time to time, but recently I’ve created an elevator speech that’s adapted from (yes) yet another T-shirt¹⁴:

*honor diversity * ask the questions * live respectfully * see the connections (on back: Is it any wonder we need so many words?)*

Whether you can fit your speech into six words, or twenty-six (or, in the case of this sermon, two thousand), I hope the right words arise at the right time. If you need one last spark of inspiration, I close with the eloquent words of my esteemed colleague, the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church.¹⁵

In our faith, God is not a given, God is a question. God is not defined for us, God is defined by us. Our views are shaped and changed by our experiences. As we grow, our faith grows. We struggle with what it means to be alive and yet have to die. We probe the depths of our own being for little hints of meaning. We create a faith by which we can live and struggle to live up to it. Throughout, each of us is fated to travel his or her own path... We have chosen to journey together because we find that it is helpful. We find that it is good.

May we continue to find it good, and a sweet gift, to journey together.

Endnotes

1. Available at <http://bumperstickers.cafepress.com/item/unitarians-for-obama-bumper-sticker/23352398>
- 2.
3. From www.uniuniques.com/ClearanceSale/Clearance%20Files/Looking_%20for_Good.htm
4. Rev. Galen Guengerich
5. On her blog, PeaceBang.com.
6. Read Rev. Rob Hardies' sermon at www.all-souls.org/sermons/20050821.htm
7. Lewis Fisher quoted in *The Larger Faith* by Charles Howe, p. 96.
8. <http://shop.cafepress.com/design/24176596>
9. From www.uu.wittyselfexpression.com/
10. Both designs are from www.uu.wittyselfexpression.com/
11. Sold on zazzle.com
12. Zazzle.com.
13. <http://eclectic-cleric-fpc.blogspot.com/2008/09/flaming-chalice-images.html>
14. Available at www.zazzle.com/uus_and_words_tshirt-235724084514371415
15. From *Born Again Unitarian Universalism*.