

Everything You Need to Know About Unitarian Universalism...In 27 Minutes or Less!

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Well good morning, dear friends. About twice a year here at UCN, I am asked by the Membership Committee to make a concise, HALF-HOUR presentation on ***“The Essence of Unitarian Universalism”*** for those good folks considering membership in our congregation. Almost every time I make this presentation, someone from the Committee says to me, ***“You know Scott, you ought to share this helpful summary with the congregation as a whole some Sunday.”*** Well, after hearing this repeatedly, I finally decided to follow this suggestion...and so this morning ***(in the next 27 minutes or less, I promise!)*** I want to try to summarize (hopefully in a coherent and useful way) everything that I believe YOU need know about Unitarian Universalism -- well, honestly, it may not be Every Last Thing that you need to know (for ours is a very complicated and intricate religion) but, it will be everything that I believe is fundamental and essential about our religion.

Don't think I can accomplish this? Well, **hold on to your hats**, dear friends, because here we go...and for those of you persnickety-types who want to hold me to my ***“27 minutes or less”*** promise, **START YOUR STOP WATCHES NOW!**

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[THE FOLLOWING LIST IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

Everything You Need To know About Unitarian Universalism...

Our liberal faith can be delineated and described by:

- 1) Our History (a Brief Summary of the first 500 years)***
- 2) Our Soteriology (Our understanding of personal Destiny and “Salvation”)***
- 3) Our Eschatology (Our understanding of Life and Death)***
- 4) Our Epistemology (Our understanding of Knowledge and Authority)***
- 5) Our Ontology/Cosmology (Our understanding of the Structure and Spirit of the Universe)***
- 6) A Summary Statement of Unitarian Universalism***

Alright, so what I am going to do this morning is work from these six bullet points – sketching out (what I think) is the substance, soul, and spirit of our free faith.

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1) OUR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST HISTORY:

(A thumbnail sketch of where we came from...and why it matters)

So with the clock already ticking, let me begin with a brief ***“thumbnail sketch”*** of our long and proud history:

Historically, we are a 500-year-old **Judeo-Christian-based faith tradition**, with roots that go back to ***The European Reformation*** – which occurred in the 1500's-1600's.

Although the theological and spiritual foundations of Unitarianism and Universalism go back ***at least*** to the earliest days of Christianity, our institutional roots took hold in Europe beginning in the 1600's – in places like Transylvania, Poland, Switzerland, Holland, and England. (We still have some 125 Unitarian congregations in the Transylvanian region of Romania...as well as about 170 congregations in England...and a few scattered

throughout the rest of the world in Europe, India, the Philippines, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, and South America and Africa).

So...with these historical roots, in the earliest days of America, Unitarianism and Universalism (as we know them) sprang up (really) as **2 distinct positive, and hopeful liberal Christian sects** in the face of the prevailing negativity of Puritanical Calvinism (which focused – as you know -- on human sinfulness and depravity, and the likelihood of eternal damnation)

- Unitarianism (in a nutshell) spiritually asserted that there is a **unity, holiness, and goodness in God, humanity and creation**) and...

- Universalism (again in a nutshell) spiritually asserted that our creation is animated by **a good and loving God** who has a **universal love for all his creatures**...and so none are doomed to hell and damnation)

Both denominations prospered (in those early years) because their positive spiritual messages resonated with the hopeful spirit of the new nation. As the nation grew, Unitarians and Universalists were also (and this is fundamental to understanding why we are now so actively a **“social justice” church**) **leading social reformers** -- fighting to end slavery...and to establish equal rights (and protections) for African Americans, women, children, immigrants and workers...not to mention animals. We also led America toward prison and mental health reform...and universal/public education. We positively influenced the shape of American life way beyond our numbers, and continue to this day to be a hopeful movement fiercely devoted to the improvement of society and human life (which is why today we are so focused on anti-racism and multi-culturalism, LGBTQ and women’s reproductive rights, and multicultural efforts, climate and environmental protection and achieving global economic and political justice. One of the favorite 19th century slogans of both Unitarianism and Universalism was that they were working (in society) to **“bring The Kingdom of God to Earth.”** Fighting for social justice, human rights and a humane social order have ALWAYS animated and informed our faith tradition...and fiercely guide us now in these most challenging of human times.

With the turn of the 20th Century, Unitarians and Universalists (strongly influenced by both religious humanism and an appreciation for all world religions) slowly-yet-decidedly became a **“post-Christian”** (or said another (less humble) way a “MORE-THAN-CHRISTIAN” movement) religious movement. Not anti-Christian...not atheist... just **post-Christian**, firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian ethics (and the loving/community-minded spirit of both Judaism and Christianity)...but having moved spiritually beyond the confines of the “Christian narrative” to a **much broader and inclusive spirituality**...embracing the wisdom of humanism and all the world’s great religions and spiritual traditions – most especially Buddhism and Taoism. To this day, we believe that **all of the world’s major religions** have enduring wisdom and worth, and that no one religion – including our own – has a “corner” on all truth.

So today we are a relatively small, mostly-American (and yes, still mostly-White...but we’re working on that as we become more multi-racial and multi-cultural!) rather intellectual, post-Christian religious movement, with about a quarter-million men, women and children in the United States and Canada, tied to **our historic roots** but open (as **an evolving faith tradition**) to unfolding truth and new understandings.

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2) UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOTERIOLOGY

(Our understanding of human destiny and “salvation”)

Alright, let’s now move on to a few **KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS** that will help you understand our liberal how faith.

SOTERIOLOGY: is a fancy theological word which addressed the question of our ultimate human purpose and destiny (or **“SALVATION”**)

Most Unitarian Universalists (as I affirmed on Easter Sunday back in March) believe that human destiny and purpose must and will be “played out” here and now...in this mortal existence on this earthly planet....by the way in which we lovingly and carefully live our lives.

We are a “Character” and “ethical” and “lifestyle” religion...which emphasizes deeds over doctrine...behavior over beliefs...action over articulation.

We Unitarian Universalists believe that ***“It matters ultimately how you live”*** because how you live during your lifespan on this planet (the quality and care and compassion you bring to your relationships with life and persons around you) will determine your destiny (and meaning) as a human being.

Both the Unitarians and the Universalists in the 18th and 19th centuries regularly spoke of ***“Salvation by Character.”***

I think it was the great 19th Century Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, who once said, ***“Be careful how you live, it is the only sermon you will ever preach.”***

And a famous 20th Century UU affirmation was, ***“Don’t tell me what you believe, show me how you live.”***

So in our tradition, your ***“salvation”*** is achieved (day to day) through the quality, depth and decency of your relationships -- How you touch and treat life and others will determine if you have achieved your potential and purpose as a person.

Let me say this a slightly different way...

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

As a Unitarian Universalist, the goal of your religious life is to create **A HOLY CONGRUENCE** between:

- 1) What you believe, and
- 2) How you actually live...

Ours (then) is a **PIETISTIC** tradition...that does not mean we are ***“sanctimonious”*** or ***“holier than thou”*** (as people usually mean when they call someone “pietistic”) it means rather that we expect that a person’s faith will be clearly and consistently made evident by the way they live. During the reformation back in the 1600’s, there was a group of German Lutherans who came to be known as the ***“Pietists.”*** They were the first Christians (in the face of the orthodoxies of the Catholic church) to ask (in all things) **WWJD...“What Would Jesus Do.”** They believed that if they were going to call themselves “Christians” -- that is, self-identify as “followers of Jesus” -- their daily lives should **intensely resemble** (as much as humanly possible) the love...the compassion...the forgiveness, mercy and generosity which Jesus taught and lived during his life. We Unitarian Universalists also believe that one’s most deeply held religious values and beliefs should be **fiercely reflected** every day in the lives we live.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

Rev. Harry Meserve

“If being a Unitarian Universalist were against the law...would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

The Rev. Harry Meserve, serving our church in St Paul, Minnesota back in the 1960’s preached a famous sermon (which almost every UU minister at the time copied and preached on) ***“If being a Unitarian Universalist were against the law...would there be enough evidence to convict you?”***

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF REV MESERVE COMES DOWN OFF SCREEN]

So...for Unitarian Universalists, **“Salvation”** (your ultimate purpose and destiny as a human being) is **NOT** accomplished in some far-off, other-worldly “CELESTIAL” place after death (say in Heaven or some sort of eternal life)...it is (rather) played out right here, right now, in the ***“stuff of your own earthly life,”*** as you strive

(by the light of your highest beliefs and what you know to be good and true and ethical) to become the best person you can become...**NOW!**

And (as I have already pointed out in the brief history I offered) Unitarian Universalists have also always been concerned about the “salvation and destiny” not just of individual persons...but also the “salvation and destiny” of human society and the whole of creation. Unitarian Universalists not only believe **INDIVIDUALS** can “grow a soul” and “live noble and loving lives” themselves...they also believe **HUMAN SOCIETY** (and the whole of our natural creation) can (with the work of caring and principles human hands) achieve a destiny of beauty, decency, justice, hope, and love. As I said, In the 18th and 19th Century, our Unitarian and Universalist forbearers (who were, as I said activist social reformers) regularly spoke about their responsibility to **“Bring the Kingdom of God to earth”**...and today we (as a faith tradition) are still about the hard and demanding business of lending our lives to the work of transforming our world into the best possible habitation for every man, woman and child who walks upon it.

[PAUSE...]

And this leads us to the **SECOND KEY THEOLOGICAL TERM** that will help you understand UUism... **ESCHATOLOGY**...our understanding of life and death.

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Unitarian Universalist Eschatology

(Our understanding of life and death)

The Rev. Forrest Church, the famous and articulate minister of All Soul’s Unitarian Church until his death a few years ago famously said that **“Religion (all religion) is all about coming to terms with the twin mystery of finding yourself alive, and then realizing that you must die.”** Eschatology (to a classic theologian) is the study of **“final things”**...and is about the way all religions variously “come to terms” with THE TOWERING REALITIES of life and death.

Ours is (generally) what the theologians call **“a Realized Eschatology,”** meaning (as I have already observed) that we UUs tend to believe human destiny will and must be played out in this world, during these finite lifetimes we are given. For most Unitarian Universalists – and I say most because in our free faith tradition, there is no absolute doctrine or agreement – but for most Unitarian Universalists one’s destiny and purpose are **“realized”** (or **“achieved”**) right now, in this world, and is not dependent on “Other” or “future” possible worlds or lifetimes.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF REV DENNIS DANIES IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

THE REV. DENNIS DANIEL AND WIFE REV. SYDNEY WILDE

My dear colleague Dennis Daniel (whom we lost 2 years ago now) once said to me **“Scott...I have spent most of my career trying to get UUism down to just a few words...and I’ve finally got it down to just 3 words: **“THIS...IS...IT”**** What Dennis was affirming is that it is in this moral existence on this fragile earth that we must “spin out” and “shape” our destiny and purpose as human beings...we have no assurance of other worlds (nor do we need such assurance) to lead lives of purpose, meaning, fulfillment and grace. **“The Eternal”** (the holy and sacred) can be known and lived (and accomplished) now...

[PICTURE OF REV DANIEL COMES DOWN OFF SCREEN]

Now...some might find such a **“realized eschatology”** (THIS TOTAL EMPHASIS ON THE FLEETING LIFE WE HAVE HERE AND NOW ON THIS EARTH) a bit depressing or sad...but not to me! To me the fact that I believe the gift of my life is finite and limited (to my time on this amazing earth) gives my life an intensity of purpose, engagement and joy. As a UU, spiritually, I must get busy about the business of living my life as best I can because the promise (the opportunity) is not forever...I must drink deep from (and serve) this life while I have it...

I and many other UUs take comfort from the ancient Jewish idea of ***“The lasting immortality of Influence,”*** the idea that we “live on” past our own personal deaths through the legacy of the contributions to life we made during our lifetimes (the quality of our words and deeds...the goodness, compassion and generosity we lived...the quality of our relationships...even the gift of the children and grandchildren we left behind)

[PICTURE OF STONE BEING DROPPED INTO A STILL POND GOES UP ON SCREEN]

One visual way of understanding An individual human life is that it is like a SMOOTH STONE dropped into a still pond...the life “ripples out” in influence...and can be seen and felt long after the pebble has disappeared...perhaps rippling out to the very ends of the universe, beyond all time.

So, for most UU’s ours is a ***“realized eschatology”*** which focuses our spiritual and ethical energy on this life, in this human milieu, during this earthly lifetime -- that we can **know, smell, love and touch – here and now.**

But – with all this said -- I must pause to point out that Unitarian Universalists are a diverse spiritual lot, and so if I paused right now and asked members of this congregation what they believe happens after death, there would perhaps be a wide range of spiritual answers, beyond and above what I have said about our “this worldly” focus.

- Some of you may believe your consciousness as a person will somehow continue (in some form) after death...
- Others may believe your “spirit” or “soul” somehow becomes a part of the larger spirit or soul of the world...
- Others still might believe in some other form of spiritual transformation or continuation...

The point is that even though most Unitarian Universalists have a ***“realized eschatology”*** – and that we are fiercely committed to living our lives well in this life (to fulfilling our destiny as human beings here and now) -- there is no ultimate or doctrinal consensus on the meaning of life and what happens after death.

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3) Unitarian Universalist Epistemology

Our understanding of religious knowledge and authority

“By what AUTHORITY (by what sources of truth and meaning) do you say something is real, true or right?”

Alright, let’s move on to our all-important **UU EPISTEMOLOGY**...One of the biggest questions in religion is ***“by what AUTHORITY (by what sources of truth and meaning) do you say something is real, true or right?”***

All religions must answer this ***“knowledge”*** question, and answer it in a coherent and reasonable fashion.

Most of our traditional Christian neighbors say:

“The authority for my religion comes from the word of God (and the teachings of Jesus) as authoritatively spelled out in the bible – this is a perfectly reasonable epistemology.”

But we have a very different (and more eclectic epistemology)

[THE FOLLOWING “UU SOURCES” SLIDE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN...ONE AT A TIME AS I READ THEM ALOUD?]

Here are **The Six (Epistemological) “Sources” of Unitarian Universalism**

SLIDE 1

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

SLIDE 2

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

SLIDE 3

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

SLIDE 4

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

SLIDE 5

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

SLIDE 6

Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Now you can see why we are considered a “**Post-Christian**” faith...while we find “**Jewish and Christian teachings**” and scriptures to be “authoritative,” they are number 4 on our list, and considered no more authoritative than the teachings of other world religions and philosophies.

And always **FIRST** in our epistemology is **your direct, personal experience with and understanding of the world.**

More than any other aspect of our religion, it is our epistemology – our open-ended and inclusive and evolving approach to truth and wisdom -- that sets us apart from most religions.

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4) Our Unitarian Universalist Ontology/cosmology

(Our understanding of the structure of the universe)

Alright, the last (classically theological) aspect of Unitarian Universalism that is important to highlight this morning is **the way we understand the structure (and subsequent spirituality) of the universe...**

Here is a place, once again, where you can see our diversity and freedom...for UUs are “**all over the spiritual map**” when it comes to how they understand the structure (and spirituality) of the universe.

Now...traditional Christian ontology/cosmology = a highly structured cosmology --
God/humanity/devil...heaven/earth/hell

And while many UU's see and sense some sort of god/spirit/energy/presence transcending, informing (or infusing) the world...

Many other UU's more rational humanist...no transcendent or mystical realities...just **“what you see is what you get”** in this **empirical-science-defined world** of ours. Or as detective Joe Friday used to always say on the cop TV show “Dragnet” **“Just the facts ma’am...”**

I personally find myself (happily) **SPIRITUALLY STRADDLING** this (I think somewhat limiting and arbitrary) **HUMANIST/THEIST DIVIDE**. While I am a humanist through and through:

Humanity is fiercely responsible for the way we live upon the earth, and there is no one – transcendent or otherwise – to rescue or save us.

But I also feel (and trust and treasure) **a mystical, holy presence** infusing my world and humanity (wholly natural, yet sacred)...inviting and enticing me to participate in the world's progress and goodness. One of my colleagues (who is a proponent of what is called “Process Theology”) suggests **“God is like the smell of pancakes”** [like a teenager being lured downstairs to the kitchen on Saturday morning by the pleasing aroma of pancakes being cooked]. “God” – then -- is an **unseen/mystical/reliable presence “luring us” toward goodness, wholeness and joy.**

Now...if I were to pause (again) for a moment here, and ask all of you where you fall on your **Ontological/cosmological understandings**...here too we would sure by “all over the map”:

Between:

- (on one extreme) pure scientific/rational humanists who only see and affirm the empirical, science-proved facts of the natural world...and
- (on the other) more “spiritually inclined” Unitarian Universalists for whom the words GOD...SPIRIT...HOLINESS have great and comforting meaning.

The point here – and this runs through ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING I HAVE SAID THIS MORNING - is that if you come to a UU congregation expecting to find only people who agree with you (on all the important stuff about the world and how it works) YOU WILL NOT BE SPIRITUALLY SATISFIED OR STAY LONG.

You will not stay long because you will be uncomfortable with the **diversity and inclusion** that informs and animates every one of our congregations...and no where is this more true than when it comes to our ontology/cosmology.

[PAUSE...SCOTT LOOKS AT HIS WATCH]

Alright...how am I doing on time? Good, looks like I have just A MINUTE OR TWO to wrap all this up!

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SUMMARY STATEMENT:

Unitarian Universalism is a 500 year-old:

- **this-worldly...**
- **free-thinking...**
- **post-Christian...**
- **inclusive and diverse...**
- **spirit-filled (and joyful)...**
- **social justice seeking...**
- **community-oriented...**
- **ethical and character-based religion...**

a modern and evolving faith which devotes itself to the spiritual and moral development of every individual, even as it fights tirelessly to create a more just, loving, peaceful and humane world for all.

So...here is a concise **“Summary Statement”** that I think captures pretty much everything I have said to you this morning.

[SCOTT SLOWLY READS THE SUMMARY STATEMENT]

There is of course **much more** that can (and I pray will be) said about our liberal religious tradition - by me and others who FIND A SAFE AND NURTURING SPIRITUAL HOME HERE. And I also need to point out that surely (and this is another good thing) there are **OTHER** thoughtful Unitarian Universalists who would describe the essence of our faith in far different ways (and with very different emphases and understandings) than I have shared with you here this morning. One of the really cool [neat] aspects of our free church is that no one (least of all me!) has the corner on defining who and what we are. But, with all that said, I hope that I have succeeded in giving you **a more-or-less accurate, inspiring and constructive outline** of what Unitarian Universalism is today. I pray that this inclusive and free faith tradition feels like a comfortable and constructive spiritual home to you, and will be a place – of love and hope and insight and justice and service and purpose – that will serve you for a lifetime. So, together, let's get busy building the kind of noble lives and humane world we dream of.

Holy Cow...I achieved my goal of giving you everything you need to know about Unitarian Universalism in 27 minutes or less...AMAZING!!!!!! 😊

AMEN.