

Religious Self-Determination: Exploring Individual Spiritual Paths and Creating Community

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A brief introduction: My name is Carol Stiles and I am the president of this congregation, the UU Church of Valdosta. In my other life, I am a professor and department chair of biology /Natural Sciences at Georgia Military College.

Here at the UU Church of Valdosta we have just begun the new church year. As a country we have just celebrated July 4th, Independence Day. So we thought it would be a fitting time to reflect upon the topic “religious self-determination.” Also, fitting for our congregation, this service is the result of a collaboration among your church leaders – Kimberly Tanner came up with the idea at the last board meeting, Doug Tanner began writing the blurb that goes in the newsletter, which I revised and then put together this talk around it. Valerie Webster, who is the chair of our new Worship Team, put together the other elements of the service, with really only the topic of “religious self-determination” to go by. Sue Bailey provided the story for all ages. Of course, I also want to acknowledge the other members of the worship team today who provided music, meet-n-greet, and so on. We do hope that you will stay for meet-n-greet and then a time of conversation around today’s topic.

On the piece of paper that you have received is a multiple choice question; if you’ve not already done so, go ahead and answer that question. I’m not going to collect these – not teaching this summer! Hold on to these for now.

Now, how many of you wish this was a short answer question, rather than multiple choice?? I tell my students that they learn more with short answer / short essay question–type tests, but still many of them do not believe me.

If you answered the letter “I., Nothing in particular,” you are not alone. In 2007, 10% of adults in the U.S. gave their religious affiliation as “None.” In 2014, that number has risen to 20%¹. Among adults under 30, that number is 33%². That is, one-third of adults below 30 do not identify with a religious group – a group that has come to be known as the “Nones.” [Author’s note, originally used none-ists,” but “nones” is more commonly used in the media.]

The study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, did find that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. A summary of this study describes the group in this way:

“Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.

With few exceptions, though, the unaffiliated say they are not looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.”²

“Spiritual, but not religious....” We have heard that many times – and some of us here in this congregation have likely said it in describing ourselves to others.

At the same time, many churches, especially mainline Protestant denominations, are losing membership. One might ask the question: “Can religion survive spirituality?”

The Unitarian Universalist Association gained membership for a while, but has slipped some since 2008. The UUA is 180,000 members strong. But national surveys indicate that over 650,000 people identify as UU.¹ (There is a survey on Beliefnet.com, “Belief-O-Matic” that has done much for making people aware of UUism!). Another way to explore your own spiritual path within the framework of the UU church is to read through the responsive readings in our hymnal. The readings are grouped together by faith tradition. Over many years of lay-leading for this congregation, I still find myself gravitating to the “humanist” section, which is in keeping with my personal philosophy of heeding the teachings of science – and that, if there is a god or universal spirit, that spirit is right here on earth in each and every one of us and in all of nature. And that's my elevator speech...

Historically, Unitarian Universalism grew out of Christian-Judeo roots, Unitarian meaning that people believe in the unity of god, a single god (rather than the trinity), and Universalism, meaning salvation for all. Unitarian groups were known in Europe in the mid-1500 and 1600's and established in America in

the early 1800's.³ Universalist beliefs have been around for thousands of years, but a formal movement did not begin until English Universalists came to America in the late 1700's, escaping religious persecution.⁴

That is, a land colonized by many seeking religious freedom and which declared independence from England in 1776, was likely an ideal place for people whose beliefs did not necessarily jibe with the established religion of the homeland.

Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, a non-creedal, inclusive religion, which draws from many sources for inspiration and spiritual practice. In 1984 the UUA adopted the seven principles, which we, as a UUA congregation, "covenant to affirm and promote."

Many times we are asked, really, what do UU's believe?

One common answer to this question is "UU's can believe anything they want....," which according to Doug Muder, writing in the summer 2014 issue of *UU World*, is the "absolute worst" answer, quoting: "In fact the exact opposite is true. Maybe more than any other religion, Unitarian Universalism pushes us to ask: 'Is that really true or is it just what I want to believe?'"⁵

Many other times, when asked this question, we turn to the Seven Principles. In fact, I was asked this once, at a national congregation-based community organizing workshop attended by mostly Christian and non UU participants, so I pulled out my little pocket card which lists our seven principles and sources....

Muder's essay is entitled "I don't believe in the Seven Principles." What's that, you say? Really? He adds: "In fact, I don't think of them as beliefs at all. I think of them as visions."⁵ Muder believes not in the truth of the seven principles, but that he is committed to making them become true, to "imagine those visions into existence." He explains:

"So, for example, it's hard for us today to put ourselves back into an eighteenth-century mindset and realize the full outrageousness of the Declaration of Independence's "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." Forget that Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner when he wrote those words. He could have been an abolitionist circuit rider and they would have been just as brazen. Whatever Enlightenment philosophers might have been writing, eighteenth-century people could look out their windows and see that these things were not true, much less self-evident. Everyone was born into a station in life, and the vast majority stayed there

for the rest of their days. Commoners were not the king's equal. In the real world, you had whatever rights your betters deigned to grant you, and the Creator had little to do with it.

Jefferson's Declaration wasn't a statement of fact; it was an invitation to dream. What if we imagine human beings in such a way that inalienable rights are woven into their souls?⁵

BTW, you may know that Jefferson is claimed to be a Unitarian, but never joined a Unitarian church.... And his vision, although certainly not perfected yet, has become reality in many parts of the world that have established religious freedom, freedom of speech and other human rights. And that was one of Doug Muder's points in his essay, that although "freedom and justice for all" seems like an impossible dream, look what has already been "imagined into existence."⁵

UU's are not very good at evangelizing and terrible at proselytizing (the latter, in my view, a good thing...). Part of this is a strong belief in religious self-determination – for example, as an organization, we do not send missionaries into areas to convert people - proselytizing - to UUism although our social justice network is extensive and embedded around the world. Evangelizing also has a bad connotation, but it apparently means "sharing" the good news, about reaching out to people, not necessarily striving to convert someone. Here is Rev. Peter Morales, UUA President describing liberal evangelism:

"It arises from the deepest place of our sense of what is sacred, of what it means to live religiously. Evangelism is the natural result of a deep belief that we Unitarian Universalists have something important and precious to offer.

However, in a profound sense, evangelism for Unitarian Universalists has everything to do with salvation. A religious community is a place that can save us from the crushing banality of consumerism, instrumental relationships, superficiality, alienation and isolation. Our communities are a place where we can connect with our true selves, with each other, with our communities, with our sense of the sacred."⁶

So, how do we build this community, what is sometimes called the "beloved community?" How, with an increased focus on individual spirituality in the U.S. today, do we save the religious community?

Another article in the current issue of *UU World* was written by Rev. Dr. Teresa G. Cooley, program and strategy officer of the UUA. Rev. Dr. Cooley says this: "Our denomination cannot flourish if we only offer one way of being in religious community." And this, too: "People who are disenchanted with church

today say they want more acceptance of difference. They want religion to make peace with science. They don't want morality equated with sex, and they want churches to deal swiftly and openly with leaders who abuse their power. They still want spiritual experiences. They want to serve others, stand up for social justice, and live lives that matter in the world. They want joyous, loving community with other people. But they're fed up with institutions."¹

Up to that last line, this sounds much like what UU'ism has to offer – “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” As with many UU congregations, our congregation, too, offers much in the way of social justice opportunities, which I, quite strongly, view as outreach and connection to our community, even if it doesn't necessarily equate to more members or pledges. Rev. Dr. Cooley ends with this, “the reason to change is so our values – that love is stronger than hate, that each of us has worth, that we will find truth and meaning if we search – can be a real force in a world that desperately needs those values right now.”¹

What else can we do as a congregation? Rev. Dr. Cooley and the Facebook Page, “I am UU” offer many suggestions about how we can provide alternative entry points to UUism – and we can explore these in the new church year to come.

But, we are fortunate to have many new visitors and new members in the past few months, and we are ecstatic about that. So, let us start with where we are now.... Our mission statement (printed on your order of service) states this:

“The Unitarian Universalist Church of Valdosta is committed to building a community of acceptance and love, where all people may strive for intellectual, moral and spiritual enlightenment. We offer a place to celebrate life's passages and to join in social action on behalf of local and global communities.”

I will not ask for a show of hands about how you answered your multiple choice question, but I can tell you already: there will be Christians, Buddhists, humanists, pagans, atheists, “other” and “none-ists” among us. How do we work as a congregation to both encourage and support these individual spiritual paths and provide a beloved community to all? This is a question many of us have discussed over numerous years – we don't have a good answer yet, and likely there isn't just one answer...

So, today, let's start here: one of the strategies promoted for increasing awareness of UUism is for each individual to prepare an “elevator speech” – a two-minute, or less – speech, the time it takes to ride an elevator - about why you are a UU. But today, let's start where we are, let's have a conversation about

where we, as individuals, are on the path of spirituality. How does your spiritual path intersect with the congregation's mission statement? How does it differ? If you can stay for the discussion after meet-n-greet, we will share these two-minute speeches about your spiritual paths – I've left space on your questionnaire for notes for your "short-answer essay!" As always, visitors are welcome to participate, because we want to know what perhaps brought you to us today (although, as always, you do not have to speak, but can stay just to listen...). (If there are many of us, we will break into small groups first, then come back together to have a conversation as a larger group, which will allow for greater participation...).

We do know this about UUs in general and about UU Valdosta, as described by a quote from our own Rev. Fred Howard, when he prepared the "About Us" section on our website: "We acknowledge that our collective strength is more than the sum of our individual efforts, and we strive to act together as a force for justice, equity, and compassion in the world."⁷

May we always hold this idea in tension as we move forward, building the beloved community.

Sources:

¹Cooley, Terasa. "Into the Beyond." *UU World*, Summer 2014, Online at: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/295275.shtml>

²Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project. "'Nones' on the Rise." Oct. 9, 2012. Online at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

³UUA. "Unitarian History" Online at: <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/history/6903.shtml>

⁴UUA. "Universalist History" Online at: <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/history/6904.shtml>

⁵Muder, Doug. "I don't 'believe in' the Seven Principles." *UU World*, Summer 2014, Online at: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/295159.shtml>

⁶Morales, Peter, "Evangelism: Letting Our Love Reach Out," Mid-size Congregations Conference. 2000. <http://www.uua.org/growth/midsize/conferences/2000/navigatingtransitions/129093.shtml>

⁷UU Valdosta. "About Us" Online at: http://www.uuvaldosta.net/?page_id=29