

It Matters What We Believe

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

Well, historically the Unitarians believed...and the Universalists believed...but now we have a wide range of beliefs.

Well, some Unitarian Universalist believe...but many others believe...

Well, it all depends on which UU you ask about that...

I can't speak for all UUs, however, I believe....

If you've been Unitarian Universalist for more than a day or two, and have had a conversation about religion with someone who is not a Unitarian Universalist, you've probably utter one of more of those phrases or something very much like them. And if you were ever new to to our church or to Unitarian Universalism, and asked a long time member what we're all about, you probably heard some of those phrases in their answer. There is no simple answer to the question "what do Unitarian Universalists believe?" Or even to the more specific questions, "What do UUs believe about God? Or Jesus? Or sin? Or heaven and hell?"

We don't recite creeds around here. Not the Apostles Creed, nor the Nicene, nor any other some of you may have grown up reciting from memory. In some Unitarian Universalist congregations common promises are made each week as a congregational covenant is recited—promises about how congregation members will be with one another. But we offer no unison statements of belief. Of greater significance than our not publicly reciting commonly held creeds or statements of belief, ***we don't have any.*** In the words of one Unitarian minister in the mid-twentieth century, "ours in a non-creedal church." There is no Unitarian Universalist creed, no statement of belief to which one must assent in order to be granted membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, or to be ordained into our ministry.

Of course, people have tried, from time to time throughout our history, to formulate statements of commonly held beliefs. My favorite, for the title alone, giving a good try at expressing a unifying commonality while still refusing to set anything in stone, is William Channing Gannet's 1887 *Things Most Commonly Believed Today Among Us*. Even our current seven Principles are often treated as though together they comprise a creed. I hear people talking about us "believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every

person,” or about our belief in the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” But in fact our Principles, along with our Sources and our Purposes, adopted by votes at successive General Assemblies more than thirty years ago, which you can find printed near the front of the grey hymnal, say nothing about belief and certainly nothing about what individual Unitarian Universalists must believe. Rather the document says,

We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

**The inherent worth and dignity of every person; *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;*

**Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*

**A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*

**The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*

**The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;*

**Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Like the covenants of some of our sister congregations do with regard to their individual members, in these Principles, our UUA by-laws call our congregations to make *promises* (we covenant) about how we will *behave* (we will affirm and promote these certain values), rather than outlining expectations or making demand about what we will *believe*.

Now, behavior and action grow out of beliefs. Our lack of creedal statements does not indicate a lack of beliefs, nor should it suggest that our beliefs are not important. “Ours is a non-creedal church,” wrote Wallace Robbins, continuing, “not because we have no beliefs, but because we will not be restrained in our beliefs...we dare not fence the spirit.” It is precisely because our beliefs are so precious that we refuse to turn them into creeds and demand allegiance to them. The tension that exists between our wanting now and then to codify our beliefs and our almost steadfast refusal to do so, points to our very respect for beliefs. It also reveals two of our most widely and deeply held beliefs: it matters what we believe, and we each must be free to determine our own beliefs.

People come to Unitarian Universalist churches for many different reasons. Nora is something of an anomaly in having so many members whose parents and grandparents

and even great-grandparents were UUs and members of this very church. Else very few Unitarian Universalists go to church because they were raised in a UU congregation.

I met a family once who'd been living mostly contentedly without participating in a religious community. But church-going was a way of life in their part of the country, and when a neighbor started talking about wanting to take that family's very young children to her very conservative church, the family showed up in the local Unitarian Universalist church the very next Sunday and joined soon after.

That story, of joining a UU church as a kind of defense against other religious influences, is not uncommon among us. Others come to our churches because one of our ministers was the only person they could find willing to solemnize their marriage—whether because one or both of the couple were divorced, or because theirs was an inter-racial or inter-faith marriage, or because it was a same sex marriage. Some come to Unitarian Universalist churches because they've heard or read that the questions that failed to endear them to their Sunday school teachers and pastors back in the church of their childhood might be welcomed here. Still others are here because of the stands we've taken on issues of social justice, or because the boss's sisters memorial service in the UU church up in the Cities was the only one they'd ever sat through without squirming at the theology. And others still finally come to a Sunday service in our churches because they've been bring their children to the co-op nursery downstairs, and attending community meetings in the social hall, and enjoying the contra-dances and the concerts and the Smorgs for years, and have begun to think that maybe a place with all that great stuff happening has something to offer in the way of worship, too.

We come to Unitarian Universalist churches for lots of reasons, and we stay for lots of reasons, too. Because, while it may not be a perfect match, it is the best we've found. Because we click with the people here and become part of the community. Because we like what the Sunday School teachers our children. Because the choral music is the best we've ever heard from a six voice choir, or the sermons are just the right mix of challenge and inspiration. Because, for some of us, it is our family's church and has been for generations.

Underlying all our reasons for coming to and staying at this church are the things we believe about God and creation and the human condition and our place in the universe. However convenient the location or warm the welcome or beautiful the grounds, we wouldn't stay in this or any other church unless we felt that our bedrock beliefs were not only acceptable here, but would be supported and nurtured, deepened and refined by the life of that church.

I have heard, not so much here, but in other congregations, complaints that members don't talk with one another much about things that really matter. That coffee hour and

lunch gatherings and potluck conversations seldom turn to in-depth conversations about theology or the things we believe. When I hear such comments I'm always a bit torn about how to respond. On the one hand, it does seem ridiculous that theology or personal beliefs might somehow be taboo topics at church gatherings. On the other hand, I've never been at a church meal or gathering—here or in those other congregations—when there wasn't talk of things that really matter. Church folks talk about what really matters all the time—our children and our partners and our parents, the triumphs and failures of our lives, educational and career decisions, our opinions about world events and national politics and local events, our childhoods and our dreams and our fears, the books we're reading and why, and how it is we came to be in this church. If we listen closely, the things we say about these seemingly mundane topics reveal a great deal of our theology. If we pay attention in these commonplace conversations, we come to understand what we and our companions believe about when life begins and how it should end, about our duty to our neighbors and our community, about our role in the natural order of creation, even about life's meaning and our own life's purpose.

It matters what we believe, but beliefs don't stand on their own, separate from the rest of our lives. Robert Walsh, in this morning's reading, said they "must be embodied in a living institution or they will have no convicting power." I think that's true. That's why we participate in churches rather than remaining individual Unitarian Universalists scattered out there in the world—and even those UUs who are scattered out there in the world, many of them anyway, do participate in a church, the Church of the Larger Fellowship. I also think our beliefs shape and inform all of our lives, so that when we talk about our lives we are talking about our beliefs. Perhaps especially so when we talk about why we join a particular church—but not only then.

A while ago I read Harry Scholefield's thoughts about why he was a Unitarian . In just a moment I'm going to tell you why I'm a Unitarian Universalist. Later, during potluck, perhaps you'll take your turn. Do those whose table you share know why this is your church? Do you know what beliefs drew them here?

One request; it's easy to define ourselves negatively, by what we're emphatically not. I hope you'll resist that easy path this morning. Talk, if you can, in positive terms about this church, not negative ones about churches or religions you've left behind or struggle with when you visit with friends or relatives. Tell one another what it is about this place that draws you here and keeps you here.

I'm a Unitarian Universalist not only because I was brought up in a UU church, but also because I was brought up in a Unitarian Universalist family. The stories I heard in church, the lessons I learned in Sunday school, the hymns and readings we sang and read and listened to on Sunday mornings, the adults who came into my life through the

church, consistently and absolutely supported and reinforced the values my parents held, the lessons they thought my siblings and me at home, about the wonders of creation and a loving God and the human condition and our role in bringing about the reign of heaven on earth. I remain a Unitarian Universalist as an adult because my own beliefs about a loving God, and the glories of creation, and the possibility inherent in human nature, and the existence of mystery, and the strength of hope continue to find resonance in the words and deeds of Unitarian Universalists of this age and ages past, and in the words and deeds of “all religions and all generations” which are taught and celebrated in our churches, and in the words and deeds of the forgotten and marginalized and invisible peoples of all ages and races and classes, of all genders and ethnicities and abilities whose voices we are even just now beginning to see, hear, teach and celebrate in our churches.

And you? It matters what you believe. Why are you here?

Amen.