

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM SIMPLIFIED
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Today's service is yet another variation on "normal" when applied to the services I lead here at Nora Church; Kristine Paulson, Sheldon Rieke and I are sharing the time usually reserved for the sermon. Kristine and Sheldon will tell you about their experiences at our most recent General Assembly (GA), the annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists from across the nation. Their job is to give you a taste of that gathering that was held last June in Ft. Worth Texas; my job is to introduce the newcomer to, and remind the longtime UU about, the core values that under girded that, and every, GA. Their challenge is to pass along some of the spirit of General Assembly 2005, and my challenge is to simplify a most complex (and complexity loving) religious tradition.

I want to be a bit silly in the service of making a point. Have you ever wondered what an average, down-to-earth person experiences when they ask you and me about Unitarian Universalism? I mean, when the question comes, not from the suit-and-tie/simple-black-dress-and-pearls crowd, but someone from, say, the NASCAR-tattoos-and—"Yes-I-bought-this-at-Target" crowd, what do you suppose our Seven Principles really sound like?

Bear with me. Here's what I think they sound like:

Well, we believe in respecting the worth and dignity of every person...

1. *Manually turn on the TV. Find the three-digit code for your TV in the code list below.*

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And we call for justice, equity and compassion in human relations...

2. *Press and hold the CODE SEARCH button until the INDICATOR LIGHT lights, then release the CODE SEARCH button.*

We believe in accepting one another and encouraging one another to spiritual growth...

3. *Press and release the TV button...*

Uh, we believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning...

4. *Enter the code using the Number Buttons. After your code is entered, the indicator light will turn off.*

Then there are the rights of conscience and the use of the democratic process...

5. *Aim the remote at your TV and press the ON-OFF button. Your TV should turn off.*

Oh, and we share the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all...

6. *With your TV on, press CH+. If the TV responds, no further programming is required.*

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Lastly, there's our respect for the interdependent web of all existence...

7. *Enter your code here for easy reference.*

Fancy words out, instructions for programming a remote control in. That's what I think we sound like when we try to engage regular folk with words from the heady heights of our privileged, cerebral, formally educated, religious ivory tower! We're asked a reasonable, straight ahead question about what we believe, and the next thing you know we're spouting some line about diversity or shuffling our mental cards, trying desperately to name at least *one* of our celebrated (long dead) ancestors that will impress the socks off our innocent questioner. It's not that we *mean* to be condescending bores, it's just that the great bulk of our religious tradition has been influenced by some fairly high-brow men and women. And it shows in the ideas, concepts and language we use to describe our movement.

The good news is that our denomination is getting serious about attracting people outside our historically white, relatively well-to-do ranks. The bad news is that we've a great deal of work to do in order to be the inclusive people we imagine.

Although I was truant from this year's General Assembly, I've heard and read enough about it to know that it reflected a willingness to point a critical eye toward our class biases. It was in the readings and music that were chosen, as well as the workshops and lectures. It was in the way the president of our Association, Bill Sinkford, set priorities and conducted himself. We've much to be positive about, those of us who've been laboring for a Unitarian Universalism that is eager to be

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accessible and *relevant* to working class and poor people. Our congregations are beginning to see that accessibility and relevance need not mean “dumbing down,” but accessibility and relevance are not the only reasons for us to start looking at how we think of and describe our way of religion. As part of a tradition that has no *single* central story – for example, that of the Buddha, Moses, Jesus or Mohammed – the transmission of all that is good about UUism relies, in great part, on how we, its practitioners, describe it. And, to paraphrase longtime UU minister Khoren Arisian, if Unitarian Universalism is reduced to whatever spin any of us wants to put on it, we will have lost the fundamental values that have held us together for the past two and one-half centuries. Indeed, UUism itself will benefit from a simplified approach to describing our way of religion.

So what are those fundamental values that serve to bind us together and make us a people – the ones that provided the backdrop for the Ft. Worth General Assembly? I thought you’d never ask! Familiar to some of you by now, here’s my simplified version of Unitarian Universalism:

- We are a combination of two denominations that began in this country about two hundred years ago. The Unitarians said, based on their reading of the Bible, that Jesus was a great man and teacher, but not God. The Universalists said, again based on their reading of the Bible, that everyone goes to heaven when they die.
- Since we began we’ve been willing to change our religion if science or reason required it. That’s why you can plan on meeting everyone from a liberal Christian to an atheist at most UU congregations.

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- And what holds us together – what has *always* held us together – are three shared values: religious freedom (the right and responsibility to develop our own beliefs), religious community (a group of more or less like-minded people who share those basic values) and religious activism (fancy word for using our time, gifts and money to make the world a better place).

Folks, we ought to know our own history well enough to be able to expand on this simplified version of UUism, but that doesn't mean we ought to give the honest questioner a dissertation; we should know, in general terms, our own past. We ought to root our account of UUism in our experience here at Nora Church, but that doesn't mean we're off the hook for talking about the rest of the Unitarian Universalist Association; we should know, at least in general, what's going on in the greater denomination. But we *must* know some short, accurate account of our religion if we're to rub shoulders with our Lutheran and Catholic neighbors. How else are we to celebrate our commonalities as well as distinguish ourselves from them? And we *must* talk about such these in clear terms things if we're serious about attracting more working class folk to our denomination and our church. Otherwise we'll eventually be reduced the status of the blindfolded characters of the old Hindu proverb – the ones who latch onto the trunk, tail or ears of the elephant, yet never realize they've touched but a part of what is theirs to explore.

How do we simplify this heady, verbose and proud religious tradition? In addition to a short summary based on religious freedom, community and justice, we must now enough history to tell our story. We must know that reason and experience are at

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least as valuable to us as scripture and tradition. We must know that ours is a radical religious freedom, including, but not limited to, liberal Christianity. We must know that we move from the freedom of each individual to the bonds and challenges of a local congregation, where we test and stretch our beliefs in the safety of tolerance and acceptance. And we must never forget that beyond this beloved hill lie a county, state, nation and planet that fairly groan with suffering, calling us to be engaged, compassionate and generous.

One of the chapters in the most helpful of all resources as we seek to simplify our religion, *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, begins with a story from UU minister Jane Rzepka:

It is 1957. The congregation has gathered for the first annual blueberry pancake breakfast in my parents' back yard. People are talking about buying a building, looking for a minister and mortgaging their houses to do it. Others are recalling the service they put together about Hinduism, and how moving it was (or wasn't). One man, in tears, pours out his heart to a couple of close church friends, three old-timers pass around petitions, another small group practices a song they'll be singing together a week from Sunday – they have a ways to go. Two others are actively debating the fine points of evolution. Worker-types pour orange juice, find more plastic forks and teach kids to flip the pancakes on the precarious homemade grills. Children tear around the yard, the teens are huddled near the pond, feeling obstinate about something, and blueberry bits are smushed all over the place. When it begins to rain, the more muscular among us try to push the first car (of a very long line) out of the mud.

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For all our ten dollar words, dense metaphors and haughty principles, our way of religion can be boiled down to Jane Rzepka's story. There is a simplicity and purity about that scene. There is passion and heart in that scene. Our challenge is to put it into words that honor it and proudly hail that Unitarian Universalism can change lives! If we're serious about confronting the social biases that are reflected in our heady language, we'll choose words that are grounded, accessible and relevant. And we will have moved a little closer to realizing the potential of our free religion.

Kristine and Sheldon will tell now you about our most recent General Assembly. As they speak, newcomers to UUism are invited to keep in mind that what the Minnesota State Fair is to Minnesotans, General Assembly is to Unitarian Universalists: the great get-together.