

SEVEN EFFECTIVE ATTITUDES OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

Several years ago it was something of a rage within our Unitarian Universalist world to fashion so-called “elevator speeches,” short and informative descriptions of our eclectic and sprawling liberal religious way. The theoretical setting, an elevator ascending or descending between floors with an interested but uninformed audience (one or more persons), was emblematic of our glancing, sound-byte, brand-conscious, market oriented, competitive, consumer society. Our culture is famous for its many religions; and to be able to *brand*, that is quickly distinguish our Unitarian Universalism from the many other religions, was the objective of the elevator speech.

I was never a fan of such elevator speeches, judging they weren’t well suited to describe our rich liberal religious tradition.

Somewhat in contrast, a former intern minister Jeff Briere and I compiled in 2001 an oversized pamphlet, “101 Reasons I’m a Unitarian Universalist”. Jeff and I divided the 101 reasons and offered a paragraph or two about favorite aspects of Unitarian Universalism that included biography (we’ve had illustrious UU forebears), history (two hundred years of tradition and progress), practices, lore, and myth (much of the in-house stuff). It was intended to be an introduction for newcomers as well as a source of enrichment for members—a resource that could be read now and again and in bits as time and interest guided a reader.

This morning I want to take another tack in describing contemporary Unitarian Universalism by considering the attitudes of those who choose to affiliate as UU, whether long ago or recent *come-outers*. (A come-outer is a person who has left an earlier faith tradition [and sometimes no faith tradition] for UUism.) We are a congregation of come-outers.

If this were a traditional Protestant sermon, it would have a scriptural text. I’d use **Matthew 7:16**: “By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” (ASV) By this I would imply that doctrine takes second place to behavior. If you want to know the nature of Unitarian Universalism then become familiar with Unitarian Universalists, how they choose to live their lives.

Here, then, are seven effective attitudes of UUs:

ADVENTUROUS

Life is an adventure. This is a matter of the external world and a matter of one’s own being. The world is wide and wonderful. The more and more we experience the world,-- in its magnitude, in its diversity, in its beauty, in its challenges,--the more and more we love it and grow. It is our milieu—our right and fitting place. It is a place of our own, our natural and true home in which we discover and live our destiny.

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Each of us, from birth to death, is a work in progress. The narrative arc of our individual lives spans the inevitable ages and stages. We are presented with ever changing tasks, challenges, and reformed meanings and purposes. We value the worth and dignity of the human life bestowed on us. This is inherent, yet latent. Therefore, with hope and courage we dare to live that we might be fully alive: Thoreau, one of our Unitarian forebears, wrote in *Walden*: “*I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life....*”

A favorite expression of the adventurous life is the classical story of the Odyssey. My favorite telling is by the twentieth century Greek poet C. P. Cavafy: “**Ithaca**”

*When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,
pray that the road is long,
full of adventure, full of knowledge.
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,
the angry Poseidon -- do not fear them:
You will never find such as these on your path,
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine
emotion touches your spirit and your body.
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,
the fierce Poseidon you will never encounter,
if you do not carry them within your soul,
if your soul does not set them up before you.
Pray that the road is long.
That the summer mornings are many, when,
with such pleasure, with such joy
you will enter ports seen for the first time;
stop at Phoenician markets,
and purchase fine merchandise,
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and sensual perfumes of all kinds,
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
visit many Egyptian cities,
to learn and learn from scholars.
Always keep Ithaca in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for many years;
and to anchor at the island when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.
Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would have never set out on the road.*

*She has nothing more to give you.
And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
Wise as you have become, with so much experience.*

EMBODIED

One of the significant impulses within contemporary Unitarian Universalism is feminism which over the last three or four decades has transformed attitudes and practices. For example, from a small presence, the UU ministry now has a majority of woman.

With this surge we now have a strong sense that matters of the spirit—the religious impulse—is mediated by the body. For women this has lifted up the great occasions of reproductive life: the onset and cycles of menstruation, fertility and reproduction, and menopause. Women have nurtured a sense of being a physical chalice—the source and sustainer of life.

Woman’s spirit has led away from abstraction toward Nature and natural expressions. For some this has led to a reformed awareness of earth-centered religions, in which the pulse of Nature anticipates, parallels, and stimulates the pulse of the human body.

It seems to me how we respond to the great rites of passage, birth, coming-of-age, marriage and unions, and death, illustrates how our religion has grown more and more embodied—centered in the real rather than in platitudes.

This is a matter of *passion*, a word whose origin means *suffering*. Suffering is rooted in the human condition, as Buddhism has so aptly summarized: “all is *dukkha*,” a word that straddles a meaning between suffering and impermanence.

I know of no religious orientation better suited to offer a “Religion of Realities” than our liberal religious way. What is the human condition? How does humankind fit into the Natural Order, of the earth surely, but also of the Universe—its origins and evolution? And how does our incarnation, in all its aspects, determine the personal path we may follow to fulfill our destiny?

RESPECTFUL

One of the important twentieth century historians of Unitarianism, cited Individualism, Freedom of Belief and Conscience, and Toleration as the great markers of our tradition. Toleration always struck me as somewhat condescending, a more passive than an active attitude. Acceptance is only a little better. (Remember Thomas Carlyle’s famous response to Margaret Fuller’s declaration, “I accept the Universe.” He said, “Egad, she better!”) I favor Respect, which contains Acceptance and Toleration and more.

We respect the many religions of the world, not as much for their beliefs as for their origins in the same human impulse to meaning and purpose and the role these play in family and community. Such diversity is a fact of human culture. And then the great

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world religions each bring a different, relatively unique emphasis to Universal Religion: Judaism brings Justice, Christianity brings Love, and Islam brings surrender to God’s will, to the Abrahamic worldview.

Our attitude of respect, I maintain, relates to what we call our first principle: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” We begin with respect for self that logically extends to our fellowkind. Two hundred years ago, our forebears emphasized that human kind was indeed formed in the image of God and that we had a natural divinity, too. In a similar sense to the Buddhists bowing before one another to acknowledge the Buddha-spirit in one another, so we figuratively bow to the divinity of one another. Some of us might be more comfortable with Enlightenment recognition of egalitarianism and rights, but we nevertheless agree that what each of us recognizes in self extends empathetically to all.

In recent years our respect has expanded to include not only other forms of life, but also to include the whole of the earth. This has been expressed in another principle that declares, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

In my mind, Respect has an element of Reverence. Indeed, Reverence is Respect written large.

ETHICAL

Remember the Scripture that I mentioned earlier, the one that would ably serve as a traditional text for these remarks? “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

The fruits of a human life cluster as the deeds we do. It might be said that our UU way seeks, individually and together, The Life Beautiful. Surveys have determined that for a majority of UUs the beautiful life is both the means and the end of living. The Life Beautiful contains the Life Ethical, the examined life lived virtuously.

One of the great controversies of Christianity, between the Catholic and Protestant worldviews, involved Works and Faith. The Protestant tradition has been wed to Salvation by Faith versus the Catholic outlook of Salvation by Works. Unitarianism developed an early doctrine of *Salvation by Character*—that how a person lived her or his life, depositing right actions on the personality as character, mattered ultimately—certainly here and now, the one Reality that was assured. Beliefs without commensurate deeds were hollow. Works without embodiment in life and world were without consequence.

Our Universalist heritage, in particular, points us to embrace the good and do the right, not for fear of punishment or for reward in some imagined future existence, but because it is good and right to do so here and now.

A favorite voice of Universalism, Clinton Lee Scott, spoke to the primacy of an ethical attitude; in a poetic meditation he called “**The Larger Fellowship.**”

Churches are many, but religion is native to all human kind.

*In vanity creeds are drawn by unbending minds
and doctrines fashioned like garments to cover the nakedness of the unknown.*

*Theologies are the guesses of pundits,
a contrivance for dispensing with religion.*

There is religion authorized by no priest or prelate and resting upon no book of holy writ.

*It resides in the tender conscience,
in the ethical quality of thought and action,
in compassion for suffering,
in response to human need,
in moral indignation over wrong.*

There is in the world a vast, un-named fellowship of goodwill, of the well-intentioned.

The members are in all churches, temples, mosques, and in none of these.

Wherever good persons stand is holy ground, and the manner of their lives is their religion.

LOVING

Unitarian Universalists are lovers. We love the human condition in all its manifestations: female and male, young and old, straight and gay, every race and culture. We love the Earth and its Nature in its many aspects. We love the many world religions. We love the senses and the times and tides of our bodies. We love the free mind and will to meaning we can bring to bear in every circumstance of life. We love the richness of poetry and myth. We love the preciseness and clarity of science. We love tradition and we love innovation. We love contemplation and we love discussion. We love the arts; music, the spoken and written word, photographic image and painting, theater and cinema—all the creative forms through which human imagination seeks expression. We love our own life and we love our larger Life, despite the reality that living means dying.

Our Universalist tradition bends us toward Love. “God is Love” was the Universalist motto—an essential theological doctrine that compels loving God in return as well as loving God’s creation, especially our sisters and brothers.

We often cite Rupert Brooke’s poem “**The Great Lover**” that begins:

*I have been so great a lover: filled my days
So proudly with the splendour of Love's praise,*

And continues:

*Love is a flame;—we have beaconed the world's night.
A city:—and we have built it, these and I.
An emperor:—we have taught the world to die.*

RATIONAL

The figurative heart, a seat of emotion and passion, is one aspect of the yin/yang wholeness we seek. If Love might be called our yin principle, then reason is our yang principle.

Our Unitarian forebears, heirs of the Age of Reason (Enlightenment), maintained that God was rational and reasonable and created humankind with a similar mind that we might come to know the Divine through reason. Hence they extolled the free mind, unfettered by creedal limitations, or superstitions, or even timeworn tradition (tradition for tradition's sake).

We always seek to understand what we realize; and we are always quick to give up what doesn't stand up to the scrutiny of reason and reason's handmaiden science. Our worldview is guided by science's understandings, which by no means diminishes our religious experience. Indeed our religious experience expands: the majesty of an ever-expanding Universe, whose still mysterious origins reach back nearly fourteen billion years, brings us wonder, awe, and even reverence in responses exponentially greater than does the myth of Genesis.

PROGRESSIVE

The final attitude that we hold together in our freely chosen religious community known as Unitarian Universalism is the notion of progress. For us there is an arc for the individual, for humankind, and for society. It was the nineteenth Unitarian minister Theodore Parker who first declared: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Each of us, in the fullness of our lives, seeks to make our inherent goodness better and better, not just to pass through our years but to progress through them. So we seek the same for humankind and society. Progress in all these dimensions might be fitful or haltingly, but nevertheless upward or forward.

So we are religious liberals, for liberalism's optimism maintains that the most effective way to maintain what was good in the past is to transform it in the here and now. This is why we call our movement a Living Tradition, ever open and responsive to the call for better and better. Our arc bends toward progress.

So, if you want to know the liberal religious and historic way of Unitarian Universalism, get to know Unitarian Universalists, especially our effective attitudes: adventurous, embodied, respectful, ethical, loving, rational, and progressive. These cluster in an outlook that is true to words of Theodore Parker uttered a hundred, fifty years ago, an ever relative vision of our free faith:

*“Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere.
Its temple all space.*

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*Its shrine the good heart.
Its creed all truth.
Its ritual works of love.
Its profession of faith divine living.”*