

An Elevator Speech

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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Earlier this week, I received an email – or rather the church received – an email from a gentleman inquiring about Unitarian Universalism, and asking some rather specific questions about what kinds of religious services we offer here at Heritage. This is not at all uncommon – in any given week, we probably get half a dozen inquiries from people who are curious about our church – all of which, I’d venture to say, when you boil it right down, amount to some version of the following: “How does your church compare to a Christian church? I’ve heard, or I’m aware, that there’s something different about you, but I’m not sure what it is. Please explain.”

Now if we lived, say, in Syria, the calls we’d receive might ask how our religion compared to Islam – or if we lived, for instance, in India, people might wonder how we compare to Hinduism, or Buddhism. But here, in America, what folks really want to know about us is this: where do you fit in, vis-à-vis Christianity? Though it is a question we sometimes find frustrating, we must acknowledge the fact that these are the terms on which religion is discussed, in our culture. These are the cards we have been dealt.

So when someone asks us about our church, we can be fairly confident that they are doing so based on a few basic assumptions about what religion is. For most of our family, friends, and co-workers, religion is about the Bible, and Jesus, and a God that both punishes and redeems.

This week’s e-mailer was no exception. He was interested in knowing whether one had to be a member of the church in order to have one’s baby baptized here. He wanted to know what version of the Bible we used. And he wanted to know if we believed in adult baptism.

Such questions may seem strange to most of us who gather here in a Unitarian Universalist church each week, but they are perfectly sensible to most of the people we know and come in contact with.

And so, I responded, as kindly and factually as I knew how, trying my best to explain that no, we really don't do baptisms of any kind, in fact, because that particular religious ceremony is based on the theological presupposition that human beings are somehow "fallen," and innately sinful, that, from birth, we are in need of having our damaged relationship with God ritually repaired. To his question about the Bible, I explained that we consider all versions and translations of the Bible – and indeed all other religious texts and scriptures (not to mention secular writings such as the Walt Whitman poem we read earlier) – to be less-than-perfect, human efforts to understand this life and its meaning – and as such we weigh their relative merits based on how they resonate in our individual hearts and minds.

That's what I told him, or something like that. But even as I was doing so, I was painfully aware of the places where I was slipping into the age-old Unitarian Universalist trap of explaining our faith defensively, and in negative terms. For all of us, whether we have training at it or not, sometimes it just seems easier to take the *via negativa*, to play the role of minority religion – or as they used to say in another, perhaps more innocent, era, that of "dissenting" religion – and respond to the inevitable questions about Unitarian Universalism by saying what we don't believe – rather than what we do believe. Sometimes, it's simply easier just to accept as a given those basic assumptions about spirituality in our culture – that religion is about the Bible, and Jesus, and a God that both punishes and redeems – and then to dismiss the whole kit and caboodle, and reply defensively that our religion isn't about any of those things.

But looked at another way, I submit, in fact, it is. For these are questions, respectively, about scripture, about Christology, and about theology. And there are Unitarian Universalist answers to each of those questions. Regarding scripture, as I told the e-mailer, our scriptures are as broad as is the human imagination; regarding Christology, though it did not come up in that particular conversation, we hold that Jesus was a great teacher, but mortal, and a man. Regarding theology, some of us believe in a somewhat traditional God, others in a more natural, innate divine force, others in nothing like that at all – but the key point here is that a multiplicity of

images of God, as our children are being taught in Sunday School class right now, move us, and thus are part of our Unitarian Universalist journey. Many paths, one church.

Furthermore, we can claim a proud a history rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. A couple of centuries ago, our forebears had plenty of heated debates about the authority of the Bible, and about the nature of Jesus, and about the nature of God. But times have changed, we are fond of saying, and so has Unitarian Universalism. In fact, that's another of the many things that sets us apart – we are a religion that changes.

Think of it: A religion that changes. To many, the very idea is an oxymoron.

Yet here we are. Unitarian Universalism is an ever-changing religion. As our hymnal proclaims, we are a Living Tradition – an evolving faith, changing with each passing generation as more and more scientific knowledge and awareness of the universe is gained by humanity, and as more and more new and different people come into our fold.

And we can change precisely because we have never been willing to adopt – I would say, because we have been wise enough never to adopt – an inflexible, unchanging creed as our one and only, timeless statement of belief. We have never accepted the notion that, if there is such a thing as absolute, eternal Truth with a capital “T,” that it has already been fully revealed, sometime in the past, to some special segment of humanity.

This openness on which we pride ourselves is, of course, a two-edged sword. For the curse of a creedless religion – or, to put it more positively, and use the title of the wonderful, introductory book about Unitarian Universalism we often give to new members, “the challenge of a liberal faith” is that we will always be answering the questions of those who do not understand a religion such as ours. Yet it is our responsibility, as carriers of the torch of religious freedom, to affirm the ongoing (and ever-changing) nature of human religious belief.

We understand, though it is hard to explain to others, that no one belief statement can capture what we are, as a faith community. We are a people who are comfortable with the gray areas – some of us actually relish the gray areas! – yet we are also a people who live in a day and a time when,

especially when it comes to religion, most people prefer things to be very black-and-white.

Which is why those family members and friends, co-workers and e-mailers, are, quite honestly, surprised, when we stumble and bumble our way through an attempt to answer what seems, to them, to be such a simple question: “What do Unitarian Universalists believe?”

We even have a name for this conundrum. I had to chuckle, this week, each time I drove past the church, when I looked at the sermon title out on the sign – and thought of the average passerby, wondering what the heck it meant: “An Elevator Speech.”

Well, as most of us know, it means this: Imagine you’re on an elevator, and a stranger asks what church you go to. You say “Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church,” and they ask, “What’s that?” or, in more proper Cincinnati-ese, “Please?” or “Come again?” Where I come from, it would have been, “Huh?”

But at any rate, there’s your quandary. You have only the amount of time until they or you get off the elevator to explain your church to this stranger.

No problem for someone from a creedal church right? A Christian, or a Muslim, or even a Buddhist, could answer in a heartbeat – because the answer is always the same, regardless of who is doing the answering. But for a Unitarian Universalist, as we know, this kind of question presents a big problem!

And so, over the course of my life as a UU – now a full two-dozen years – I’ve employed a variety of so-called elevator speeches, none of which, I must admit, I found the least compelling. More often than not, in fact, I have taken the approach of speaking from the heart, in the moment, counting on Grace to deliver me safely from the elevator by the time I reach the fifth floor. The results, as you might guess, have been mixed.

But lately, I’ve been trying a new elevator speech on for size, and it seems to fit me better. I want to share it with you today:

Unitarian Universalism is an inclusive religion that teaches us we're all connected, we're all in this thing called Life together – and so we'd better start learning how to love one another.

Probably two floors, at the most. Would work even in the shortest of buildings. And nary a word about the Bible, Jesus, or God – the absence of which, of course, would undoubtedly spark further questions. But that one sentence, to me at least, sums up everything one need ever know about what we believe.

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Perhaps because I have had, in the past four years, the privilege of serving as a minister at this church, with its proud heritage of Universalism – or perhaps because the culture in which we live seems so divided, and so much of what purports to be religion these days is predicated on exclusion, on the idea that “you're either with us or you're against us” ... whatever the reason, I have become convinced that the single most important characteristic of our faith is its inclusive nature. Thus, the first phrase of my elevator speech is “Unitarian Universalism is an inclusive religion.”

Just our name itself is inclusive – the combination of two historic religious traditions. And by pointing out, in positive language, that we are an inclusive faith, we note also an important difference between Unitarian Universalism and the dominant religions of our time, because, sadly, to be an inclusive religion in the early 21st century is not the norm. Yet I would say it is clearly the approach taught by Jesus, should you want to pursue that line of thinking.

In fact, it was this theological stance – the faith-filled conviction that no one was beyond the loving embrace of the Creator, that none would be excluded from the Kingdom of God – that defined the ministry of Jesus, and the early version of Universalism first practiced on these shores more than 200 years ago.

The second part of my elevator speech states that UUism “teaches us we're all connected, we're all in this thing called Life together.” From the original concept of the unity of God, to the more modern understanding that all life

on this planet, and indeed all matter in the universe, is interconnected, and, in fact, interdependent – this is what the Unitarian side of our family tree teaches us. We not only affirm a radical inclusiveness that, when we are at our best, knows no bounds – we also affirm a radical connection with one another, and thus are reminded that we do not and cannot exist in isolation. As Ralph Helverson says in one of my favorite readings in our hymnal, “We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient and self-sustaining.”

The final portion of my elevator speech builds on the idea of interconnection and interdependence, taking them to their logical conclusion: We’d better begin learning how to love one another. If we can’t figure how to love our neighbor as ourselves – and soon – if we can’t spread the Love that is the spirit of this church beyond these church walls – the human race and, in fact, all the beautiful life on this fragile planet, is in serious trouble.

I am reminded of the words of Chief Seattle, words upon which our Seventh Principle is based, words that are also included in our hymnal: “This we know. All things are connected, like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely strands in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”

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This is my elevator speech. Certainly, it is not be appropriate in all settings. It doesn’t answer the questions about baptisms and Bibles. It makes no claims about Jesus – though it alludes to the Golden Rule – and it makes no claims about God, though it implies the inclusiveness that we have historically attributed to the Creator. And it certainly won’t satisfy those who want black-and-white, definitive, creedal statements.

But I think it’s a fair summation of what Unitarian Universalism is, in our day and time – and, more to the point, what we stand for. I think it’s a fair summation of what we teach our children, and what our adults hear from this pulpit when I speak.

It is up to each of us to consider, carefully, how we might express the message of Unitarian Universalism to those who are curious. Many people are seeking a spiritual home in these unstable times – and many of them want nothing to do with the religions of exclusion.

I encourage you to give some thought to your own version of an elevator speech – and to how you might put it to use, in your daily life. We are each representatives of this faith we love. May we be, therefore, positive, confident, and articulate as we share it with others.

In the spirit of inclusion, connection, and love...

Namaste.