

# Sick of Secular Values?

a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio

“Let all the beauty, we have known ... illuminate our hearts and minds.”

Each Sunday morning, as we begin our time together in this sanctuary, I or another service leader issue a “call to worship” – an invitation to those who have gathered here to set aside, if only for an hour, the burdens and responsibilities of the world – to leave behind (or at least to open ourselves to sharing with others) the cares and concerns of the so-called “real world” – and to enter into a sacred space where all the beauty we have known can be celebrated, where humble gratitude for all that is our life, can be expressed.

We come to this sanctuary, for that respite, that opportunity to step back from the hectic pace and the shallow chase – and simply *be*.

“Out of our busy-ness, we are called back into balance,” writes Rev. Susan Manker-Seale of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Tucson, Arizona. “We live our lives too much in a shell built of inattention and distraction.”

And so it is that sometimes, I can almost *hear* – especially at the beginning of the weekly time of silent reflection – a collective, spiritual *sigh* that signals our letting go of the world that weighs us down, as we settle into mindful attention to what lies inside, and what lies beyond.

This need for sanctuary, this ancient human longing for reflection and renewal, lies at the heart of the sabbath rhythm that has been a part of every human culture since the dawn of our race. Yet consider, for a moment, some of the phrases that *now* pervade our own, Western culture: “round-the-clock” ... “all the time” ... “24/7” (or its more recent extension, “24/7/365”).

I guess, at least in that last one, every four years, we might get a break, on February 29<sup>th</sup>!

Yes, we live in a non-stop world – the result of computerization and globalization and capitalization and ... well, it just makes me breathless to think about it. And, if you're anything like me (a classic "Type A" personality), the internal drive to keep pace with all that frenetic activity can be crushing – and, in many cases, literally, fatal – dangerous not only for the body, but for the spirit.

Is it any wonder, then, that out of this rat race more and more Americans are flocking to churches – driven, perhaps unconsciously, to seek that balance Susan Manker-Seale refers to. No, I would argue, the growth in American religiosity, as reflected in more and more surveys and studies, actually makes perfect sense.

But what *doesn't* make sense to me – and, I would suspect, to most of us assembled here this morning – is that people seem to be flocking to the kinds of churches where ancient creeds and doctrines – where modern prejudices and paranoias – require them to first turn off their minds, in order to simply open up their hearts.

And so this morning, I ask: What of the church where *both* the open mind and the open heart are celebrated and encouraged?

Princeton University Professor Robert Wuthnow – who is, I should point out, *not* a Unitarian Universalist, because we do not have a monopoly on liberal religion, even though we'd like to think so – Princeton Professor Robert Wuthnow writes in the book "The Crisis in the Churches":

"[Religious] liberalism should not be a reaction to fundamentalism, but rather [should be] a *counter-culture to secularism*. It needs to present itself as a third way."

Church consultant Michael Durall, who is a Unitarian Universalist, picks up this line of thought, in his book titled "The Almost Church," where he writes, "UU churches should challenge their members to lead lives that go against the prevailing consumer culture. It is here, [in the message of anti-secularism,] that conservative churches leap ahead of liberal faiths."

To which I must say, "guilty as charged." Conservative and fundamentalist churches in America have taken the message of anti-secularism – much as they have taken the language of the spirit – as their own, exclusive property. As a result, *most people*, today, believe they have only two options, in the secular-versus-sacred debate. Either they can turn away from the innate, human religious impulse which they feel deep inside, and thus lose themselves – that word choice is intentional on my part – *lose themselves* in the secular world ... or they can turn away from all they know about the world, all that they have experienced, and lose themselves – again, intentional wording – in a religious milieu filled with superstition and denial.

But what if there really was a *third way*?

Well, there is. Unitarian Universalism. Here, we can find a spiritual home that offers sanctuary from the materialism, greed and selfishness of the so-called secular world. Here we can be among friends and fellow seekers and be supported in our effort to keep our heads above the rising tide of consumer culture and numbing entertainment escapism. Here we can find a group like the Voluntary Simplicity Circle, where we might learn how to work, together, toward more balance in our lives; here we can find a group like the Social Action “Green Team,” where we might learn how to work, together, for a better and more sustainable world.

Those are just *two* of the ways you can feed your spirit, later this very day, at Heritage Church. And there are others. We have a new and energetic youth group for our teenagers, and a spiritual practices group for adults – both of which are also meeting, in this building, later today.

But, you might ask: Aren’t the same things, and a lot more, going on later today at the Vineyard, or at Crossroads? When I hear folks in our congregation express concern that, what with all the activities we have going on these days, we’re in danger of becoming “just like one of those megachurches” – I respond that, yes, we are indeed – like many other churches in America today – seeking to fill a void in the lives of people, by offering an alternative to the secularism and materialism and the me-me-me myopia that is undermining our social fabric – but unlike those other churches, we’re *also* offering an alternative to the rigid, narrow-minded creedalism and Biblical literalism that sometimes passes for spirituality these days.

We of the liberal religious tradition, as the Princeton professor indicates, follow a third path – a middle way. We are living proof that it is *possible* to be religious, possible to be spiritual people – to seek, once a week, the rest and renewal of the sabbath – without narrowly defining God, for ourselves or for others, without insisting that everyone believe in miracles, or the divinity of Jesus, without demanding that all live their lives according to ancient or anachronistic legal codes.

Last night, I showed to a group of gathered newcomers, at our Introduction to Unitarian Universalism, a video from my first ministerial mentor, Rev. John Wolf. Most of you, probably, have seen it, at one time or another – but I want to remind us of John’s words:

“There are a great many people,” he said – “Religious people, who ... prefer to work things out for themselves. They want to do their own thinking... A church – if a church is [only] a place for people whose minds are already made up – just isn’t for them.

“Many people don’t go to church, today, because ... they don’t like to be told what they have to believe. That is why there is a Unitarian Universalist church. That is what it is about. It is a church based upon individual *freedom* of belief.”

In other words, by being – for those who are sick of secular values – a sanctuary for free religious exploration, we fill a very important role in American society. A historic role – yet one that is perhaps more needed, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, than ever before.

And the thing is, we offer that haven for the spiritual seeker, without telling you what you have to believe. So far today, for example, we’ve sung several hymns – but none of them advocate a particular religious doctrine, much less claim to offer the one-and-only correct interpretation of religious truth. Even when we *do* sing hymns – as we did on occasion last week – that come from a specific religious tradition, we do so in a context of honoring that tradition, rather than promoting the infallibility of any certain set of beliefs.

The same is true for the texts we use. Those who are new to UUism often note the fact that we do not have scripture. Instead, we have, as our UU Sources say, “the words and deeds of prophetic women and men.” Thus, today, we have heard several readings – readings from Hindus and Muslims and Christians and Unitarian Universalists – readings that, it is my hope, offer something *universal* that might be of meaning and benefit to those of differing religious and spiritual beliefs.

Friends, we live in a time when many, many people are sick of the secular values that are disconnecting us from our deeper selves. Yet we also live in a time when many, many people are sick of the messages of hatred and fear and judgment issuing forth from the pulpits of the dominant religious voices in our society. It is time for Unitarian Universalism to take up its place, as a third way, a middle path, for those who long for a spiritual community based on compassion and love, diversity and tolerance.

You are the lucky ones. You have already found that middle way. You have already found that religious home. And I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you are *not that* unique! There are probably hundreds of people right here in Anderson Township and Newtown and Amelia and Madeira and Mount Washington and Milford – who are sick of secular values, but who are also completely convinced that *all churches are the same* – convinced that it is pointless for them to even darken the door of a church some Sunday morning – because they already know what they’ll find there. Dogma. Creeds. Faith statements they cannot say in good conscience, and intolerance they cannot abide with integrity.

Isn't *this* the good news of Unitarian Universalism? That there are other ways of being religious? Wouldn't it truly be good news, to all those people, to learn there is a church, such as Heritage?

This is, in fact, our purpose. Earlier this month, we embraced a new Mission and Vision for our congregation. That Mission reads, in part: "We are here to welcome people of all beliefs, to value diversity of all types, and to offer a safe place to explore all questions with honesty. With the strength that comes from community, we move forward with courage into the future, sharing our principles with an ever-widening circle of people, until the world is infused with the values that are the special aspirations of our faith."

I'll let you sit, for a moment, with those words...

*[time of silence]*

With that vision of inclusion as our foundation, we have also articulated several goals and initiatives – and this morning, I want to give you an update on just a couple of those.

We have indicated that we want to "engage the church in interfaith efforts to increase understanding among different religions." This coming Wednesday morning, I will be hosting an organizational meeting of the new Religious Diversity Task Force of GAPP – Greater Anderson Promotes Peace. I have invited representatives from local UU, Quaker, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Jewish and Islamic communities to come together and talk about how we might make more people aware of, and tolerant of, the remarkable religious diversity that exists even in an area as seemingly homogeneous as Eastern Cincinnati.

Our church Vision also calls on us to "encourage the use of Heritage space for meetings and community functions consonant with our own values." Just yesterday, we opened this sanctuary for a wedding ceremony for a couple who could not get married elsewhere; next month, we will host, here in this same space, the fourth annual Tellabation, a celebration of Native American culture and storytelling.

Our church Vision also calls on us to "speak out on, and promote, our UU values, as they relate to the issues of the day." Next Sunday, in my final sermon before the fall election, I can assure you, I will be doing just that!

But for today, I want to close by offering you the wisdom of Keshab Chandra Sen, leader of the nineteenth-century Hindu reform movement known as the Brahmo Samaj, which had ties to Unitarianism.

These words are from the back of our current UU hymnal:

Unto the church universal – which is the depository of all ancient wisdom, and the school of all modern thought – which recognizes in all prophets a harmony, and in all scriptures a unity – which [rejects] all that separates and divides – which seeks truth in freedom and justice in love – [and] which [one day] shall make of all [religions], classes, nations and races, one global community...

Unto *this* church, and all its members, known and unknown throughout the world – we pledge the allegiance of our hands and hearts.

May it be so.

Amen.