

## “Seeking a Spiritual Home”

A reflection  
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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
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I come to you today, with good news. After all – isn't that what you're *supposed* to get, at a church, on a Sunday morning – the “good news”?

Well, the good news I'm here to share with you today is neither my interpretation of some ancient Biblical text, nor someone *else's* interpretation of a piece of scripture – but rather that most modern and, these days, mundane of things: polling data. Yes, today's good news, is *polling data*.

Over the past year, a well-respected and independent research organization called the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life – part of the Pew Research Center (that's P-E-W, as in those hard wooden benches that still provide remarkably uncomfortable seating for the majority of American churchgoers) – over the past year, the Pew Forum conducted a massive survey of Americans' opinions on religion and spirituality. In all, more than 35,000 people were meticulously interviewed, resulting in a margin of statistical error that makes the latest CNN political poll, pale by comparison.

Just *listen* to the headline that came out of that survey:

“Most Americans have a non-dogmatic approach to faith.”

I'll say it again: “Most Americans have a *non-dogmatic* approach to faith.” It sounds almost counter-intuitive, these days, doesn't it?

But contrary to what we may think, given the unbalanced media focus on, and the political homage and deference paid to, the most shrill and dogmatic citizens among us – contrary to the image and the hype, a strong majority of Americans is, in fact – just like us – non-dogmatic, when it comes to religion.

And I do mean a *strong* majority. Here's the data: Even among those Americans who indicated that they are affiliated with a particular church or religious organization – in other words, with non-church goers factored out –

70 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, “*Many religions can lead to eternal life*”?

Let me say that another way, so that the true significance of this startling statistic might sink in:

Seventy percent of believers in America – out-and-out committed believers – believe that there are *other paths* to salvation, besides their own!

Folks, we’ve heard a lot about “hope” in the past several days, but I have to tell you, this is a statistic that gives me *incredible* hope – for the future of our nation, and our world. Just imagine: More than two thirds of what could fairly be described as religious “true believers,” accept that fact that there are many different, and viable, religious paths.

Now we here at Heritage know a thing or two about diverse spiritual paths. We, and our Unitarian Universalist sister churches across this country, truly *are* the embodiment of that mantra, “One Church, Many Paths.” Look no further than the personal stories that were shared from this pulpit last Sunday, if you doubt that claim.

But to think that a large majority of my fellow citizens actually subscribe to the tenet that, as the saying goes, there are many different ways to the mountain-top – well, let’s just say I had no idea. When I read the Pew report, and looked at the bar graphs and pie charts, I had to double-check myself, to see that it actually said, what I thought it was saying!

So yes, this latest, and largest, survey of American religious values and beliefs gives me great hope – hope that a society which appears to be bitterly divided by creed and class, race and party, may not – in fact – be as divided, as the sensationalist media would have us think.

As if to underscore that remarkable statistic, another question was asked those who were surveyed: Do you believe “there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of *your* religion?” A very similar number – 68 percent – agreed. Even within their own religious tradition, two-thirds of devout Americans, acknowledge there is more than one acceptable interpretation of what they are being taught.

Friends, this is what I call good news. Good news, because it speaks of open minds, and open hearts – in America, in 2008. Good news, because it hints at the possibility that after all, we might – just might – find common ground, and learn to get along, and co-exist, as human beings, and religious beings, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And good news, because it bodes very well for the faith tradition which *I* call home. In fact, it reflects exactly what we Unitarian Universalists have been preaching, all along.

This survey was released on the heels of a provocative and inspiring book by Princeton professor of religion Leigh Schmidt, titled “Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality, from Emerson to Oprah.”

*[show book]* Now with a title like that, how could I not pick up this book?

According to Schmidt, in America today, anywhere from 20 to 25 percent of the population could be described as “seekers” – people who are not part of a particular, organized religion, yet who have a spiritual longing that moves them to explore different religions, different paths, different ways to the mountain-top.

Schmidt cites one particular survey that should be of great interest to us. Researchers from UCLA interviewed more than 112,000 freshmen entering 236 colleges and universities across the country. While the portion of the *overall* population that are considered seekers ranges from one in five to one in four, a full half of those entering college – 48 percent – are religious or spiritual “seekers.”

But here’s the kicker: Schmidt writes, and I quote, “Now *who* ended up being the ‘ideal type’ for that 48 percent constituency? The Unitarians.”

Yep, seems they offered some descriptions of different religious beliefs and principles, different religions’ dogma and non-dogma – and to the young adults in America who could best be described as spiritual seekers – which, remember, comprise about half of their generational peers – Unitarian Universalism, in Schmidt’s words, came out as their “ideal type” of religion.

Talk about *good news!* Talk about hope!

Schmidt goes on to say, it was “the Unitarians, along with Buddhists [who] embodied the distinctive pattern of scores that most dramatized the spiritual seeker ... while at the same time polling highest on the commitment to integrate their spirituality with a *social ethic*... As an embodiment of a much more diffuse set of religious impulses in American life, they appear to have a lot of fellow travelers.”

Folks, that means that we have a lot of fellow travelers. Or at least, a lot of *potential* fellow travelers, on this non-dogmatic faith journey. Taken together, what Schmidt, and the Pew study, are saying, is that a large number of Americans – and a particularly large number of younger Americans – are religious *seekers* – and that they’re seeking a spiritual home, just like this one – an open-minded, open-hearted community where many paths to truth are seen as equally valid, where many practices are welcomed and celebrated, where many kinds of *people* are themselves welcomed and celebrated, and where – whenever injustice threatens the rights, the dignity, or the freedom of people, a social ethic leads to committed action. A

religious community which, as we say in Unitarian Universalism, “stands on the side of love.”

Friends, all the research out there indicates that there are a lot of “restless souls” in our society today – folks who are seeking a community and a place to practice a religion that is *non-dogmatic*. Non-creedal. Not exclusivist, superior, or judgmental. This is what they are looking for. We are who they are looking for.

Allow me, for a moment, to take a little poll of my own. How many of you, in the sanctuary this morning, first came to Heritage Church or Unitarian Universalism (perhaps even today), because *you* were seeking a spiritual home that was free of creed and dogma?...

Well, the good news is, up to a quarter of the adults in our society are also seeking the same thing. That, my friends, is the good news...

But here’s the bad news. According to the same Pew survey, less than one percent of the U.S. population identifies themselves as Unitarian Universalist. That is one statistic, I imagine, which is *not* a surprise to you – nor was it to me.

In fact, our membership falls in at 0.7 percent of the American religious landscape. Again, we’re in good company – Buddhists also comprise 0.7 percent. But with so many people seeking a spiritual home – and so many seeking a spiritual home *like ours* – well, there’s some kind of disconnect there. We aren’t doing our job, when it comes to telling people we’re here, and what we’re all about. We aren’t doing our job, when it comes to inviting those seekers who are most assuredly out there – and not *way* out there, somewhere else, but most assuredly right there in our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our schools – inviting those seekers to visit us, and see for themselves, if we are, again in Schmidt’s words, their “ideal type.”

What would it feel like, to be the “ideal type” for a large percentage of American religious seekers? How does that kind of language make you *feel*? If nothing else, it certainly undercuts the notion – a notion deeply cherished among Unitarian Universalists, I might add – that we are a misunderstood minority. That surely no one would agree with us, or with our way of practicing religion. What these current surveys underscore, is the fact that there are plenty of people who would, and do, agree with us – and who would be overjoyed to find a religious home such as ours – just as most of us were, at one time or another, overjoyed to find this home.

At a workshop I attended this summer at our General Assembly, speaker John Sanders put it this way: “There appears to be a sea-change taking place in the world – a growing hunger for a relevant and reasonable

spirituality. It is up to us to let these people know about our deep spiritual and historical roots, and to offer them the waters for their thirsty souls.”

Friends, as we bring the water we have collected from all over the world, next Sunday, to this sanctuary, for our annual Water Ceremony, let us keep those words in mind: “*offer them the waters for their thirsty souls.*” As we begin a new church year brimming with promise, and filled with exciting new opportunities for personal and collective spiritual exploration, let us keep those words in mind.

The question has often been asked, “What kind of church shall Heritage be?” Perhaps – just perhaps – ours might be the church where the spiritual seeker – the seeker who might not even dare to believe that a non-dogmatic religious community of many diverse paths could actually exist – where that seeker is offered water for a thirsty soul. Where *universalism* – in every sense of that beautiful and powerful word – is lifted up and lived out. Where welcome becomes the byword of our faith.

As the great Theodore Parker said, may ours be a religion “which, like sunshine, goes everywhere – its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart; its creed all truth; its ritual, works of love.

May it be so. Amen.