

Who are The UU's?

September 20, 2009

By now I can imagine you are puzzled and asking yourselves, “ What is she doing?” Opening the service quoting from the bible, a chalice lighting from a humanist, and a Meditation from Starhawk, a pagan. How confusing can a worship service get? Yet all of these are all from our hymnal. So what's the scoop on this eclectic band of worshippers called Unitarian Universalists, who can't seem to make up their minds? How did they get this way?

I would normally start with a history of our denomination, from our true beginning, with the Gnostics who irritated the early Christian church with their crazy ideas that men and women shared an equal place in life and in worship, or the with creation of the Nicene creed and the condemnation of the concept of Universal Salvation by the church council in 544 AD or when Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva for his Anti-Trinitarian views. Or maybe it was in 1553 with the unheard of Edict of Toleration that King John Sigismund of Transylvania enacted in 1568 , or in 1838 when Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the Divinity School address at Harvard University. Maybe it was when Olympia Brown slipped through the glass ceiling and became the first woman ordained by any denomination in the United States as a Universalist Minister in 1863; or was it with the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961?

The origins or our evolution contain lists of hundreds of liberal religious reformers, heretics and social activists and through 20 centuries and all over the world as Mitizi demonstrated this morning. Individuals that did and do call themselves Unitarians or Universalists and it would mean a month of Sundays to cover in detail; but today I would like to take a look at us, right here, and right now and who we are in this church, in the present.

One of the first tasks a new minister undertakes when considering a church, is a concentrated reading of the Settlement Packet, a very complete but cumbersome document created by a Committee of First UU members, which contain everything there is to know about this church.

Although each congregation is different, in size, building structure, interest groups and worship components, there is one common denominator that I have noticed with each of the many packets I have read over the years and this church is no different.

There is a section in every packet that asks this question of each member of the congregation, and I quote "...Aside from Unitarian Universalism, what faith traditions are important in your religious development. Check all that apply" Our actual responses are as follows: Agnosticism 32.7%, Atheism 20.2%, Buddhism 30.8%, Christian 53.8%, Earth Centered 41.3 %, Feminist 26.9 %,

Hinduism 49.0 %, Judaism 22.1%, Mysticism 19.2%, Nature 43.3% Paganism 25.0%, Taoism 17.3%, and 12 individuals answered "other."

Well, folks, here's where the fun begins as every UU minister attempts to read between the spiritual lines to try and sort out exactly how to lead their congregation in worship.

How characteristically UU of us; beautifully inclusive, but treacherously puzzling, as each of us know, when confronted with a newcomer or a curious friend who asks, " What do Unitarian Universalists really believe?"

According to the top five on the survey, we are a majority of cautious Christians, largely humanist, tree hugging nature seeking pantheist leaning, Mystically Pagan, socially aware, indecisive Agnostics with Buddhist leanings! How's that for an answer?

Due to the confusion this diverse array of answers can cause for our own members and newcomers or inquisitors, many UU churches have struggled with trying to define ourselves in benign, generic and secular answers in one short paragraph so as not to offend anyone.

I've tackled this dilemma for most of my adult life and have come to the conclusion that we are not, as one friend summarized this summer after my all inclusive spiel , "what you're saying is that you are a rest home for the religiously anemic!" That just proves, that if the Ku Klux Klan were to harass us, they would only manage to burn a question mark on our lawn!

Our attempts to be so inclusive have led us to shy away from our biggest asset, the 4th principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In this church, as we have defined ourselves, we are far from religiously anemic, rather we just the opposite, a remarkable congregation that has been given permission to explore and to embrace any and all religious and spiritual practices. There is no other church that has freed itself so completely from religious dogma that it encourages its parishioners to step that far outside the doctrinal box. What has resulted from this amazing sense of religious freedom, is a fear that one group might possibly over shadow our diversity with their own personal need for spiritual fulfillment. Thus we have a tendency to view one another with a wary eye, The Pagans shying away from the Christians, the Humanists becoming quietly intolerant of the Mystics. No one in this congregation should be afraid of expressing his or her religious leanings, nor should anyone who deeply believes in God have to hide their deepest source of strength from one another, in fear of being looked upon as weak or uninformed. This morning I would like to suggest that we come out of our respective closets and truly define ourselves as we really are. We are the Christians, who are strengthened by the mystery of this life through a belief in God and the goodness and lessons found in the life of Jesus. We are the Pagans and Wiccans who are strengthened by celebrations of the changing seasons, and see time in cyclical rather than linear terms. Pagans believe that spiritual knowledge unfolds from within themselves. The Humanists accept total responsibility for their own lives. There are no "god-given" rules to guide their actions.

They rely totally upon themselves and other human beings, and devote time and energy to being effective the world we live in. We are the earth centered Naturists, who gain insight and strength from the wonders of the mysteries of this life through interaction with the natural world. Each of these in its own way is a choice of spiritual practice, a means from which we all gain strength to cope with whatever comes before us. As a community we all gather together on Sunday to openly embrace this diversity, to re-connect proudly as true Unitarian Universalists, to learn from one another, to explore ways of accepting the fact that we require the acceptance, the love and the compassion of one another; the permission, to continue our search for a personal truth in a way that has the most meaning for us all.

Unitarian Universalism came about because of the need to escape from the harsh doctrines of a faith based in fear. That lesson holds true today as we encourage each of these components of our Society, our Church; The UU Judeo-Christians, The Pagans, The Humanists and the Earth Centered to come together, to speak openly of their beliefs between themselves and to one another. I invite, I encourage those who choose to lead and assemble and each of these groups to saunter right into the office and claim your spot on the church calendar. I will help each of you in any way I can.

We are people of a great faith, a true church without boundaries, or creeds spawned out of the many evils of inhumane judgment leveled on those who simply wished to follow their own pathways. Throughout our long and turbulent history, our ancestors fought for the premise that each of us was created as beautifully unique and fully capable of connecting with the spiritual mysteries of this life, be it with God or nature or with interaction between one another, without the threat of damnation.

That is our biggest asset, that we may choose to believe many things and to express those beliefs in many different ways, and our mission is to share that uniqueness of personal strength that we profess to embrace.

I want to know what you believe, personally and to feel most welcome to share your deepest sources of strength with one another.

We gather to worship, to pray to meditate, to reflect upon the common ground of our sacred quest, we cherish the freedom to connect with a source greater than ourselves; to express the ways in which we find strength and inspiration to greet each day with hope and courage.

I want our children to know your evolution of faith so that they may in turn become practicing Unitarian Universalists, that they might leave this Sunday school, and their homes with the confidence to speak their truth and to know that what they have to say just might be a great insight to another who is also struggling on this great journey.

We are the Unitarians and the Universalists and proud of our diversity. The groundwork has been laid; all that is left to do is to practice and to share it, all of it.

We are creatures of this earth, flying through space on a big blue ball, born with no instructions in which to find our own way, gently cradled in the arms of our creator, inspired by the wisdom of the ages, enriched by the flowing blue waters and rolling hills, in awe of life itself, we gather in common need, we pray, we ponder...we bow to the mystery...

So be it

Amen

Rev Holly Baylies©

First Unitarian Universalist Society

Syracuse, NY