

UU Theology: What We Believe

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A couple of weeks ago, I had a dream where I was watching TV. No matter what channel I tried, all that was on was game shows. Even more frustrating than the limited selection of programs was that I couldn't find my favorite game show – actually the ONLY game show I watch - Jeopardy. For those of you not familiar with this program, contestants on Jeopardy are given the answers, and then they must figure out the correct questions in order to score points.

Life isn't a game show. In real life, it's the questions that are more often present in our minds. We ponder the reasons why, we wonder what for, we question how. Our human curiosity leaves us yearning to make sense out of our lives, out of the lives of others, and the things that we find around us in the world.

In our search for truth and meaning, we seek to find the answers – our own answers – to those existential questions that seem to have plagued the minds of men and women for millennia. We yearn to create a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives. We want to make meaning of where we find ourselves in life and what we see going on around us. Our search leads us to ask “why” and “how.” Questions like: Why was I born? Why is there suffering in the world? How can I find my purpose and live my life to its best use? How do we learn to live without war, strife, and struggle?

Theologians are those people who ponder the deep questions of life and other religious concepts, and then find a way to share their thinking with others. While none of us may consider ourselves “theologians,” per se, each of us does ponder, at one time or another, these deeply existential questions. We search for answers. And, as Unitarian Universalists, our Seven Principles encourage us, as a part of our faith journey, to search for our own truth and meaning.

We aren't asked to accept someone else's answers to life's bigger questions. We are not asked to accept another's doctrine or accept a dogma prescribed by someone else. UUs engage in the quest for answers to life's existential questions for themselves, asking and seeking answers as a part of our spiritual and faith practice.

We are asked to take our faith seriously – seriously enough to engage our minds and our reason, our experience and our conscience in the search for what is true and meaningful for each of us. We are asked to do much more than simply sign on to a standard set of “statements of faith.” UUs are asked to ponder and develop their own. Then, we are asked to live our lives in accordance to the answers we find for ourselves. We take our faith very personally and very seriously.

People turn to faith, to religion, to create a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, and to find answers to the questions that haunt us in the wee hours of the morning. We come to church to find community, to be with others on our search, to have a place to be seen and heard in our fullest humanity. Church is a place where we bring not only our joy, but our sorrow. We come here with our questions and our answers, hoping that in the company of others, we will find a way to make sense of our lives in order to live fully with a sense of joy and gratitude for the gift of being alive.

Theology, in its most “stripped down” sense, is the study of God. But, whether you believe in some version of “god” or not, I think the quest for answers to life's

existential questions is a study of “god” – of the ultimate purpose and meaning of life. Each of us takes on the role of theologian in our lives when we consider what has truth and meaning for us.

UU blogger David Markham recently wrote: “A good theology is a model, a cognitive map, which explains life to us. It tells us how things are and how they ought to be. It validates, it inspires, it provides purpose, meaning, and motivation. It explains our experience to us.”

For each of us, as Unitarian Universalists, our personal theology – our life purpose roadmap – is a useful tool, because we develop our answers in order to live a fulfilling and satisfying life. For UUs, our personal theology is more than a philosophical statement, it the commitment we make to life. It is a “working document,” if you will, of how we choose to understand and interact with the world, both known and unknown. Our search for truth and meaning leads us to define the parameters of our experience of and commitment to the life we find ourselves living.

And, another important point in my mind, is that we UUs are engaged in a “search.” That means that as we get new information, our theology can change; for us, revelation is not sealed. It means that our thinking about our faith is not a “once and done” proposition. It means that as different people we can find completely different answers, and still come together in this community of faith to be with one another on life’s journey.

That is a joyful and fulfilling aspect of being a Unitarian Universalist for most of us. Perhaps we have experienced other religions where the answers are provided, and we found that the answers given simply didn’t fit our experience or reality. Maybe the answers were plausible, but we found that the advocates of those answers didn’t live their own theology. Our desire to live a congruent life brings many of us to Unitarian Universalism, where we are encouraged to find our own truth and meaning, and then to manifest it in the way we live on a day-to-day basis.

We call ours a “free faith.” We each use the right of our own conscience, experience, and reason to create for ourselves the elements of our faith. We agree to honor each other in this freedom of religious belief in this community of faith. That requires a level of spiritual maturity and, frankly, love. Unitarian Francis David, who was among the first of our theologians in the 1500’s, said, “You need not think alike to love alike.” You have to have a loving heart to allow others to have their own beliefs and accept them, still, as a part of this faith community. You have to be willing to open your arms and your heart wide to be a Unitarian Universalist.

But, can you believe anything and be a UU? I know that I’ve heard people talk about our faith in this way to people who are unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism. Despite the fact that we are a “free faith,” you can’t believe anything you want and call yourself a UU. While we reject much of what is considered orthodox Christian belief, we do have our own theology, our own set of beliefs that we inherit from the long tradition of our faith. Our historical roots date back to the earliest years of the church, our beginnings as a named faith to the time of the Reformation.

Throughout the years of our history, we have developed a theology. There are beliefs that we hold in common, and as a faith, we have chosen to develop a theology that is positive and life affirming. What are the elements of our UU theology? Here’s how the Rev. Marilyn Sewell summarizes our beliefs as a faith community:

- *We believe that human beings are not doomed at birth, but have a choice. We believe in original goodness.*

As humans, we have choices, and can choose to behave in ways that are good or evil. We believe, as theologian Matthew Fox said, that we are born into “original blessing” and that we can choose to live our lives in the light of goodness, mercy, and love.

- *We believe that God is one. We believe that revelation is ever unfolding.*

A Baptist asks his Unitarian friend, “Do Unitarians believe in the one God?” The friend replied, “Oh, we believe in one god, at most.” We do not believe in the Trinity, God in three parts. “Unitarian” means we believe that God is one, and, of course, at this point in our faith tradition, individually we may or may not believe in God at all.

We accept that the God of all faiths is the same God, and we respect other religious traditions. We believe that the truth continues to emerge, that there is an ongoing evolution of thought, morality, and ethical understanding. Therefore we know that we do not have the only truth, and our work as faithful people is to remain open to the truths that will be revealed to us.

We believe that personal experience, conscience, and reason are the final authorities in religious expression and understanding. Religious authority, for us, lies in ourselves, not in a book, person, or institution.

And if our truth leads us to believe that there is no God, or that there are many gods, we have room enough in our congregation for that, too. Our love, our values, our faith lets us create a space for each other’s truths.

- *We believe that the kingdom of God is here on this earth.*

Heaven or hell are what we create in this life on earth, not something waiting for us in some presumed time after death. Unitarian Universalists focus on creating justice and eliminating suffering in the here and now, the only life we can be sure that we have. For that reason, we seek to show our love and our love of justice during this lifetime, putting our energy into making this world a better place for all.

- *We believe that Jesus had the spark of the Divine within, and that we, too, have some of that same spark.*

All are worthy, all are important. That can be a hard one to embrace at times, especially when we see the evil and suffering in the world that humans cause each other. And, yet, we hold fast to the belief that there is goodness within, and that, as humans, we have choices in how we live our lives.

- *We believe that love is more important than doctrine. We believe that God’s mercy will reconcile all unto itself in the end.*

I see it all of the time – people say one thing and do another. It happens in all of life’s aspects, including religion. Therefore, I don’t so much care what you say you believe, I care more about what I see you doing. Where is your heart? How do you show your love for this world, for the others who inhabit it with you? We are called as UUs to work with love and justice to manifest our beliefs in the world right now.

Despite what may happen in our lives, what we may choose to do, we believe that all are worthy of salvation, in the end. From our Universalist heritage, we inherit this concept of universal salvation, which was considered radical thinking in an age when people were told that they would be sent to eternal punishment for their unrepented sins.

And, it's a stretch even for the most loving heart to imagine that all, even the most evil or vile among us, by grace, will be reconciled to mercy and love in the end. Yet, that is what we believe. None are irredeemable. None are beyond the miraculous healing power of love to change.

There are many ways to summarize our Unitarian Universalist beliefs. One of my favorites is from Laila Ibrahim, a member of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California, who has summed up our beliefs as follows:

It's a blessing each of us was born.

It matters what we do with our lives.

What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth.

We don't have to do it alone.

Life is not a game show. The answers aren't given to us in a tidy package. It is our job to engage with the questions, to search for what has truth and meaning, and to emerge with an understanding of ourselves and life that is open to new information and insight.

It's a tall order, I know, but one that those of us drawn to a free faith yearn for the right to fulfill for ourselves. Let us remember, as Francis David taught us, that we need not think alike to love alike. And let us love one another in our search, our questioning, and our ever-evolving understanding. Blessed be.