

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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Sermon: “Our Secret”

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I noticed something a few months ago, down at our congregation in Newport News. I checked with Joanne, our Director of Religious Education, and she noticed it, too, so it wasn't just me. Here's what we noticed.

We noticed that sometimes, when someone was asked to explain themselves as being Unitarian Universalist, they'd say that it means learning about other religions. We noticed that sometimes, when someone needed to explain our congregation as being Unitarian Universalist, they'd say that it's a place where we learn about other religions. There might be other things that, in either case, the person would go on to say, but first on the list, apparently the most important feature of *our* religion, is learning about *other* religions. That struck me as mighty strange. It got me wondering why the priority wasn't learning about Unitarian Universalism.

Now I have to admit that this is actually an improvement, though improvements are, of course, relative. There have been, over the years, a number of *lousy* ways of explaining what it means to be Unitarian Universalist, whether as an individual or as a congregation.

Not too long ago, for instance, most UUs seemed able to explain themselves only in terms of they were not — or what, more often, they did not believe. We don't believe the Bible is the literal word of God, they said. For that matter, we don't necessarily believe in God. We don't believe in hell. We might not believe in heaven, either, but definitely no hell. We don't believe in the Trinity, and we're not convinced that Jesus rose from the dead. Most of all, we don't believe in saying or singing anything that sounds too, well, *religious* — which, by the way, is the reason for the joke which asks why Unitarians are so bad about singing hymns, the answer being that they're too busy reading ahead to see if they agree with all of the words. All I can say is, thank goodness for the Universalists!

Somewhere along the way, I guess, somebody thought it would be better instead to try to talk about what we *do* believe, to make it sound more positive than just a list of things we don't believe. The trouble is, we don't have such a thing as a creed, namely an official statement of beliefs. In fact there are good reasons *not* to have a creed, but without one, all they could come up with was that we can believe whatever we want. Oy! Let me give you some reasons as to why that's rubbish.

First of all, if that's the best thing we can say about our own faith, then we're damning it with faint praise. Second, it's diminishing the long and proud history of our forebears who struggled — and in some cases died — for religious freedom. Third, it's damaging to our faith because it immediately dismisses any expectation of real commitment to on-going spiritual development. Fourth, it completely ignores the fact that describing ourselves as not having a creed doesn't mean that we settle for superficiality but rather demands the hard work of entering into right relationship with one another. And fifth, it's rubbish because the ways in which we experience, interact with and understand reality simply don't work that way.

For good measure, here's a sixth reason that shows how utterly useless it is to respond to the question "What do Unitarian Universalists believe?" with the answer "We can believe whatever we want." As noted by Galen Guengerich, who is Forrest Church's successor as Senior Minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, it's just like responding to the question "Where does your congregation meet for services?" with the answer "We're free to meet wherever we want."

So yes, it's an improvement to talk about what it means to be a UU in positive terms like learning about other religions, but that's only because there was nowhere to go but up. And it's at least recognizing that Unitarian Universalism is itself a religion, but that brings us back to the question of why the priority is learning about *other* religions rather than this one.

So I have a theory.

There's this idea that it's necessary to go somewhere else, to travel beyond the usual setting of our lives, in order to be transformed in some way by whatever we encounter, or at least to gain some critical piece of wisdom. That's part of Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey, for instance. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell summarized the basic structure of countless myths from around the world as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

It applies to the stories of religious figures, from Moses to the Buddha, and it continues to be the framework for modern myths from Star Wars to Harry Potter. That's in stark contrast, we might note, to the number of exciting adventure stories

about people staying home on their sofas. Some sort of journey is essential, the idea goes, to experience new situations and to encounter new challenges that simply don't occur in our own living rooms.

Now, aside from mythology, there's some sense to this. When a work group goes on retreat, for instance, part of the reason for going somewhere else is to *physically* get away from their usual surroundings in order to assist in the process of *intellectually* getting away from their usual ways of thinking. So my congregation's Board holds its retreat in Williamsburg, for instance, while the Williamsburg UUs hold theirs in Newport News. Even if it's just half an hour along I-64, a change of scenery can do a lot of good.

On the other hand, there's the caricature of the saffron-robed guru sitting on top of some distant mountain, assailed by people traveling from far and wide to ask their most burning questions. And, of course, the mountain *must* be distant, because it's well known that the difficulty of getting to a mountain directly determines the wiseness of the person sitting on top of it. As one of my favorite authors, Terry Pratchett, noted in one of his Discworld books, "It's a strange thing about determined seekers-after-wisdom that, no matter where they happen to be, they'll always seek that wisdom which is a long way off. Wisdom is one of the few things that looks bigger the further away it is."

So my theory is about how this idea applies to Unitarian Universalism. If this is a place — and it is — where we encourage people to do their own spiritual development, where we emphasize to children, youth and adults alike that we're not going to tell you what to believe but it's a matter of figuring out for yourself what you believe, does that then make other religions more, let's say, *interesting* in terms of what exotic wisdom they might impart to us, what secrets we might glean from them? If Unitarian Universalism doesn't seem to be supplying such secrets, is it then inevitably necessary to go looking for them by learning about other religions?

I'm not saying, of course, that any of this is conscious on anybody's part. But I know from my own personal history that, before I heard about Unitarian Universalism, I actively explored religions such as Hinduism and Judaism in a way that, looking back, I realized I was definitely searching for *something*, something special, some essential secret, perhaps, though at the time I certainly didn't recognize that that's what I was doing.

So this is what led me to asking the questions I wrote when I was putting together the description of today's service. Is every religion built around some deep and powerful insight? Is it a secret that is only shared with true believers upon their initiation into the mystery? If so, what is that secret for Unitarian Universalism? And when do we get told about it?

Now some religions do indeed claim to be based around such secrets. Usually, though, they turn out to be cults that promise initiation of the chosen into the mystery in order to get people more and more enmeshed. They mimic, perhaps, the mystery religions of the ancient world of the Greeks and the Romans, where ritual practices were kept secret from anyone outside the religion. But that was as much about defining and protecting their own community as it was anything else. By contrast, though, most of today's religions, at least those that are not cults, are pretty open about their central tenets and their core practices.

Go to just about any synagogue, church or mosque, for instance, and ask — respectfully, of course — what it means to practice that faith, and you'll almost certainly get a straightforward answer. Or you can study the scriptures of those faiths and read what their scholars have to say about them. Sometimes the meanings can be a little unclear, of course, but sometimes they're about as straightforward as possible.

To take one example, in the Christian scripture known as the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talks about how God will judge the righteous on the basis of what they did to deserve their reward in heaven: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. And whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me." Remember that, the next time you hear some politician on television claiming to be a good Christian.

Just about every religion has its mystical branch, of course. Judaism has Kabbalah, for instance, while Islam has Sufism. But these aren't about safeguarding the secrets of eternal life or supernatural powers or turning base metals into gold, though some practitioners might claim they are. Rather, they're about cultivating a closer connection with the divine, with something so much larger than our own lives that mere words are not enough, with some ultimate reality that is more mysterious and more wonderful than we can ever imagine.

On the other hand, there's a sense in many forms of mysticism that the ultimate purpose is to end up back where we began, to discover, just like monks in Francis Dorff's story, that the blessing we had been seeking had been within us all along. For those hoping to gain the secrets that would unlock the Universe, this can be a pretty big let down. We can imagine that the novice monk in the cartoon on your Order of Service had just asked his teacher what amazing things will happen when he masters the art of meditation. Will he be able to walk on fire? Will he be able to punch holes in brick walls? Will he be able to fly? What, he wants to know, happens next? So we can see the disappointment on the novice's face when his teacher says, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

Or, in the words of Walt Whitman that form one of the readings in the back of our grey hymnal, "Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last, in things best known to you, finding the best, or as good as the best — happiness, knowledge, not in another place, but this place — not for another hour, but this hour."

So for those of you who are here this morning because you wanted to know what great Unitarian Universalist secret I was going to disclose, or who perhaps came out of anticipation that I'd get into trouble with some sort of UU version of the Spanish Inquisition for openly sharing such a secret, well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. If anything, I would say that the secret — the secret, in fact, of all religions — is that *there is no secret*. There are things to learn and know, sure. There are inspiring stories where the hero's journey is played out again and again. There is wisdom that helps us to look at our everyday lives in new ways, and perhaps live a little more wisely as a result. But I'm afraid that there are no secret short-cuts to the good life, to happiness, to the respect of your peers, to world peace, to the Beloved Community. The only way to get there is to do the hard work that getting there always requires.

Before those lines of Whitman's that I just quoted, there were another couple of lines that are just as telling. "We consider bibles and religions divine," he wrote. "— I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still; it is not they who give the life — it is you who give the life." Unitarian Universalism makes no bones about the fact that this is a religion that *people* have made. It is a thoroughly, honestly human faith. Its past it is filled with the stories of countless heroes and heroines who undertook their own journeys of personal and social transformation — people like Michael Servetus, John Murray, Margaret Fuller, Horace Mann, Clara Barton, Maria Mitchell, Julia Ward Howe, Joseph Jordan, Frances Harper, Olympia Brown, Rod Serling, Whitney Young, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo. And its

future... well, that isn't something that is merely determined by the past: it's up to each and all of us, too.

For instance, when my congregation went on Retreat last year, spending a weekend at Pocahontas State Park just south of Richmond, I led a workshop based around questions that had participants think about themselves in terms of where they have come from, who they are now, and where they are going. Through a series of interactive activities, a guided meditation and even a card game, we narrowed in on our vision of ourselves, as a group, as a piece of our congregation. Some of the questions we considered were as follows: How do we cultivate the sacred in everyday life? How do we live in light of our values? How can we be more authentic to who we are? And in the process of responding to those questions, we compared answers and distilled them down to their essentials, which in this particular case turned out to be as follows: study, contemplate, explore, engage. Of course, a different group of people doing the same exercise would in all likelihood arrive at a different set of words — it would be interesting to see what words you all would produce — but whatever the words, there are meanings to be unpacked from them, which of course is the point.

So consider the first of those words from the Retreat, namely study. To be a Unitarian Universalist does mean to learn about Unitarian Universalism, from the proud history of our forebears to our Seven Principles and Six Sources. And yes, some of those sources talk about other religions, which are worth learning about both for what they can teach us about ourselves and for what they can teach us about how to thrive in a multicultural world. But it doesn't start there, and it doesn't end there, either.

Next, then, is contemplate. We don't just learn things because we enjoy knowing interesting facts. We learn in order to understand, to understand ourselves, to understand other people, to understand the world, to understand how all of those fit together and belong. We compare what we know of other times and other places against our own challenges and experiences, and we view each through the lens of the other.

Next is explore. We do ask those who formally join our congregation to commit to their own on-going spiritual development, for instance. An equivalent expectation is part of this Fellowship's mission statement. And that's because being a Unitarian Universalist is not a process that ends once someone has become a part of a congregation. Rather, it is the beginning of the next stage in whatever journey it was that brought them here. Nobody will give you the answers to the really big questions, and we're not going to tell you what to believe. Rather, it's a matter of determining your

own religious path for yourself... but the good news is that you're not the only one trying to figure things out.

And, then, engage. Ours is a faith that recognizes our interdependence at every level of existence, from the cells in our bodies to our selves in community. We practice an embodied faith, meaning, on the one hand, that we recognize and appreciate that we live as physical beings, not as abstract minds, and, on the other hand, that we put what we believe about ourselves into action in the world. Gratitude, compassion, justice, inclusion, kindness — these are not merely nice ideas about which we think happy thoughts on our own, but are values that we put into practice through the ways we relate to one another.

So I think that's one pretty good answer to those questions of how we can cultivate the sacred in everyday life, of how we can live in light of our values, of how we can be more authentic to who we are: study, contemplate, explore, engage. This is no secret, of course. We make no bones about the fact that being a Unitarian Universalism is an on-going, life-long process of continuing to discover our best selves and how we best belong in the world. We may occasionally travel to some distant realm in search of different perspectives, but in the end we'll come home to discover that what we really needed has been with us all along.

May it be so.