

This House for Hope: A Religion for Our Time
A sermon delivered at the
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Today we welcome five new members and two re-committed members to this Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship. We welcome them into this faith journey, this gathered community, this house of caring and concern, of promise and hope.

In seminary one of my favorite professors, David Bumbaugh, would comment on how ironic it was that a non-creedal faith, a faith proud of not imposing a creed, a set of doctrines, a body of mandatory beliefs, on its members, this non-creedal faith was named after two theological doctrines. We are Unitarians – which, historically means we are not Trinitarians, that is, the belief in the union of three persons in one Godhead.

And we are Universalists. Historically, this meant we believed in universal salvation.

Today I want to talk about what, in general, it means to be a Unitarian. What is the belief system of a non-creedal faith? What is it we do believe in? Anything?

And for a guide I will use this book: *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*. John Buehrens, a past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the US; and by Rebecca Ann Parker, the president and a professor of theology at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California are co-authors.

Interestingly, Buehrens and Parker begin with the theological concept of **eschatology** [I will be using a number of 50cent words in this sermon!] and characterize eschatology as the Garden in which we live and grow.

Now, **eschatology** usually refers to the End Times, to final matters, to the afterlife, to heaven and hell. It asks: what is the final goal or destination of our lives? For Christians, the Rapture. For Hindus or Buddhists, Nirvana or Enlightenment. Or that Mayan End of the World – expected this December 21st, 2012. Eschatology: The Biblical Armageddon. the idea that the Messiah will return to earth and defeat the Antichrist (the "beast") and Satan the Devil in the Battle of Armageddon. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armageddon>; accessed 22 May 2012.)

Well, as Unitarians – We do not focus or highlight an afterlife. Much more compelling to us is our life here in this world: establishing an earth made fair, and all her people one in the here-and-now. We do not focus on some life after death.

Parker tells us that our classical **Universalist eschatology** believes in the ultimate inclusiveness of God's love. God, Universalists argued, is too loving a Being to condemn any of God's creation to eternal punishment. Our Universalist eschatology believes in the ultimate salvation of all souls.

Buehrens writes of our **Social Gospel eschatology** that tell us “we are here to make God's dream of justice, abundance, and peace real on earth, for all people.” (6) We are

partners with God in preserving, protecting and finishing God's creation. That is the goal of our lives.

Eschatology asks: where are our lives headed? Where are we going? What is the purpose of existence?

Our Unitarian eschatology tells us that we must live at home in this world, spreading inclusive love and egalitarian justice for all. We are here to respond to the world with gratitude, with realistic hope, with a knowledge that this world is our home, and it is enough.

As one of our hymns tells us: "Earth was given as a Garden, cradle for humanity. Tree of life and tree of knowledge placed for our discovery. Here was home for all your creatures born of land and sky and sea; all created in your image, all to live in harmony." [#207]

The second theological category is **ecclesiology** – how we structure our Unitarian churches and fellowships and societies. The walls of our house.

For other denominations the church may be structured in a hierarchical fashion: laity, deacons, ministers, a presbytery or panel of elders; priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, a pope.

But in Unitarian Universalism the lay membership owns their own building [not the denomination]. The lay membership writes their bylaws and policies and procedures. The lay membership calls their own minister. Though a minister has what we call "freedom of the pulpit" – the right and responsibility to speak her or his own truth from the pulpit – nothing that is said from the pulpit is considered the "gospel truth." All can be analyzed, critiqued.

Members are self-selected.

And congregations are gathered together under a covenant – a promise that they will faithfully and with care walk with one another.

One of our classic covenants tells us we promise:

To dwell together in peace,

To seek knowledge in freedom,

To serve human need,

To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine [or, if you will, the OverSoul, the Spirit of Life]

Thus do we covenant with each other. [#471 by L. Griswold Williams]

The third element in our house is the roof – what saves us from the elements – lightning & fire, pounding rain & punishing wind. Where is our salvation?

The theological word for the study of salvation is **soteriology**. Now, soteriology is a Christian study, of the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ. Salvation as atonement for our sins. Salvation as our personal deliverance from Divine punishment, from the pangs of hellfire.

Unitarians don't much believe in the idea of a sinful humanity and, centuries ago, Universalists rejected the idea of hellfire and damnation.

Soteriology and the idea of salvation must be revisioned, reinterpreted, to make much sense to the typical Unitarian. And so, of course, we've tried to do this.

For example, in the Rev. Lynn Unger's poem *Salvation*:

By what are you saved? And how?
 Saved like a bit of string,
 tucked away in a drawer?
 Saved like a child rushed from
 a burning building, already
 singed and coughing smoke?
 Or are you salvaged
 like a car part – the one good door
 when the rest is wrecked?

Do you believe me when I say
 you are neither salvaged nor saved
 but salved, anointed by gentle hands
 where you are most tender?
 Haven't you seen the way snow curls down
 like a fresh sheet, how it
 covers everything, makes everything
 beautiful, without exception?

[Lynn Ungar in *Blessing the Bread: Meditations*; Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996, 20-21]

And what is it from which we UUs need to be saved? Loneliness? Despair?
 Brokenness? Or maybe anxiety, or greed, or our pride?

How might progressive religionists define sin? Or evil?

Soteriology – our salvation – is part of our idea about how the world works, how the world might be saved, how we might repair a broken world, a broken self. Soteriology. Salvation. The sheltering roof of our house of hope.

It is not until the fourth segment of their book that Parker and Buehrens talks of **theology** – the foundations for our house. [Or, as one of my professors would say, our *theology* or our *atheology*.]

What are our ideas about deity? How do we – or do we – talk about God?

Who is that God in whom we might believe? And who is that God in whom we most certainly do not believe?

If the idea of God is simply untenable, simply too prickly or too nonsensical, how might we describe the “ground of our being” or “the ultimate mystery that is the source & sustenance of our lives?” (xii) Do we speak of this Source in scientific terms? Psychological needs? Myth and metaphor? The language of Mother Nature?

Unitarianism does not ask us to believe in a God, or one prescribed idea of what that God is like.

Our faith does ask us “To whom do we belong?” “To what do we belong?” What greater-than-us something or someone do we serve? *To whom do we belong? What or*

whom do we serve? [all of us belong to – or serve – our lovers, partners, spouses, to our family, friends, community, nation; to LUF]

We may serve the rigors of the scientific method. Or we may serve civic ideals, or the duties of citizenship, or the ideals of justice. Maybe we serve the demands of Nature. Or we serve the cry of our neighbors – whether jobless or homeless, hungry, bullied, imprisoned. We may serve God – the call of Ultimate Love, Compassion, Merciful Justice.

What do we serve? To whom do we belong?

We UUs maintain that the individual takes responsibility for discerning their theology. But, in Unitarian Universalism we also maintain that a community of care and careful critique is needed for us to recognize and refine that theology.

Theology – whom do we serve? [Remember Bob Dylan sings to us: “You gotta serve somebody.” And that somebody might be God, or it might be something like Wall Street, money, possessions...]

The next piece of our theological home asks: Who are we humans?

That question is the topic of **theological anthropology**. [welcoming rooms]

It asks of us: is human nature good? evil? Or something in between?

Are we the heirs to Adam & Eve’s Fall from Grace, selfish vice-prone sinners? Or are we people created in the image of God, a little below the angels.

Are we self-serving, neuroses-filled pleasure seekers, always looking out for number one. Are we products of our physical and social evolution – prone to altruism, as well as to self-survival.

Unitarian Universalists would say we humans are inextricably interconnected, situated in a dense, complex, interconnected web of Being.

Theological anthropology asks: what does it mean to be human? To be fully human – body, mind, spirit? To live in right relationship with each other, with the earth, with the divine? How do we know this full humanity, these right relationships when we encounter them, or try to establish them, or maintain them?

Theological anthropology asks: what does it mean to be sexual beings? What does it mean to love and be loved?

A separate branch of theological anthropology is **pneumatology** – the doctrine or study of the Spirit. [*Pneuma* – lungs – what fills our lungs, our very bodies – with life-giving air? What literally inspires us?]

Pneumatology asks: what enlivens us? Brings us joy?

What is that Spirit of Life of which we sing?

What is our sense of the holy? Where and when do we feel that holiness?

What is our idea of spirit? Soul? How do we grow a soul? Or, as one of my professors would ask us: “How goes it with your soul?” [A very different question than: “How are you?” which we tend to answer automatically. “How goes it with your soul?” is a question that asks us to dig deeply, answer deeply.]

Like Garrison Keillor's powder milk biscuits, pneumatology asks us: what gives us – whether shy persons or not – what gives us the strength to get up and do what needs to be done?

Finally, Buehrens and Parker speak of the threshold, the door of our house of hope – how we come in and, more importantly, how we go out and live in the world.

Their topic is **missiology** – our sense of mission, the way we share our ideals, values, “good news.”

Examples of other faiths missiology:

For the Starship, Enterprise, Space: The final frontier

Its 5 year mission

To explore strange new worlds

To seek out new life and new civilizations

To boldly go where no man has gone before.

For the 19th century United States, the idea of Manifest Destiny – that it was the destiny of the US to expand across this entire continent.

For Buddhists the “good news” is enlightenment; our mission as Buddhists [if we choose to accept it] is to become a bodhisattva – an enlightened being – and return in successive lifetimes until all people reach enlightenment.

For some Christians and Muslims, to convert everyone to their respective faiths is the mission of their religion.

So, we ask: What is the mission of Unitarian Universalism? What is the mission of this fellowship?

What is the “Good News” that we want to shout from the rooftops, make manifest in our community?

As Unitarian Universalists our good news is our stand on the side of love. And so we stand with our straight brothers & sisters. And we stand with gay & lesbian & bisexual & transgender & transsexual persons. In the US our annual meeting will be held in Phoenix and we will stand with immigrant families. We shout from our rooftops: “Love makes a family”.

Our good news:

“Value all families.” – all families have value.

Our good news:

Peace can be a way of life. We say: “Teach Peace.” “If you want peace, work for justice.” “We must be the change we want to see in the world.”

Our good news:

Diversity need not mean divisiveness. And so we say: “Goddess Bless the Whole World – No Exceptions.”

The Reverend Justin Schroeder, senior minister at 1st Universalist Church of Minneapolis, writes: “As a church, we believe in bearing witness to the Universal Love and underlying unity that holds us and connects us all, and that invites us to become fully human, alive, and of service to something larger than ourselves.”

As our hymn tells us: “All life is a gift that we are called to use, to build the common good, and make our own days glad.” Life is a gift. Cherish it. Enjoy it. Work so that others may enjoy it, too.

This is the mission of our faith, writes Bill Schulz

To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
 To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
 To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
 And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

We are Unitarians because we do share a theological world view. As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, we are named after two doctrinal concepts: Unitarianism – that there is one God [today, we might joke that UUs believe in one God, at most]; and Universalism – that all people are ultimately “saved.” A more modern interpretation is: we are Unitarians because we see the fundamental unity of the universe – we all arise from one Big Bang, from one Great Radiance; we are all inextricably connected. We are Universalists because, acknowledging this fundamental unity, we proclaim that all creation must have a seat at the Table of Life, and we work for love and justice, to ensure that is so.

And we are Unitarians because we feel the need to ask questions, of ourselves, and of each other.

Those questions, that questioning, and the answers – however tentative – make Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship a community of faith. However much we like the coffee and cake served afterwards, we are not a kaffee klatsch. However much we enjoy socializing before and after the service, we are not a social club. However much we appreciate the presentation, we are not a lecture series.

We are a covenanted community of individually spiritual, and communally religious, people, a community of faith – asking those big questions: Who are we as humans? Why are we here? Where are we going?

Those questions, that often meandering and ever-challenging path in search of truths, wisdom, hope, are why we are here.

We are a faith community, acknowledging, wrestling with, celebrating the mystery that is our life.

May we stay forever young in our faith, forever strong in our hope, forever fervent in our work toward love and justice.

Welcome to this community of reverence and thanksgiving, sanctuary and celebration. We bid you welcome.

And, as one of my favorite philosophers, Canadian Red Green, says: “Remember, I’m pulling for you. We’re all in this together.”

Amen.

Readings:

This is the mission of our faith:
 To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
 To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
 To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
 And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

(#459, William F. Schulz, president of the UUA from 1985 to 1993; executive director of Amnesty International from 1994 to 2006; professor of International Relations at The New School; and most recently the president of the UUSC.)

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.
 We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.
 We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.
 We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.
 We need one another in the our of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.
 We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.
 We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.
 All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

(#468, George e. Odell, from a Reform Jewish prayer book)

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.

There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.

Once felt, [this connectedness] inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community.

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

Together, [together] our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

[#580, Mark Morrison-Reed, with his wife Donna, was the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Toronto]