

"Talk Right"

Reverend Alison Hyder

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The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

OPENING WORDS: by Don Johnston

Come as you are. What you believe, bring with you as you come. If you have doubts, bring them with you also.

Come as you are, and inescapably you must come if you would be yourself. Of others, ask no more or less.

Let us be what we are as best we can. No one is better or worse than another, for no one has lived the life of all the others.

All are seekers, no matter how much they have found. All are in need no matter how much they resent it. All are proud no matter how humble they wish they were.

Let belief, doubts, shame, pride, humility and the inescapability of self set side by side in mutual and self-respect until there comes the feeling that in the depth of understanding and feeling:

We Are One.

READING: "Learning to Speak the Language" by Jane Rzepka, who is now the minister of our UU Church-by-mail, the Church of the Larger Fellowship. This was written when she was serving in Reading, Massachusetts [UUMA News, Autumn 1997]

My husband, Chuck, is a teacher. In his field - English literature - he needs to keep up with languages to research the early stuff. So we've been through Latin, Russian, German, French, and Greek. Now it's Italian. What with the language tapes ("Dove possiamo andare a ballare?" or "Where can we go dancing?") going in the kitchen, in the car, and in the study, you would think I would pick something up. But no. I try to think of the word for dessert - tartufo - and the British island Tortola comes to mind. I try to remember the name of the painter Tintoretto, and again I come up with Tortola. The Italian island Torcello? Tortola.

So I know how it is when you arrive at our church having been raised in another religious or cultural tradition. It's Sunday morning, and the word that comes to mind is mass. Or a spiritual source is not spirit of life, or God, or goddess, but Jehovah. Or coffee hour is next, but for you it's oneq. You think of Jesus, and the name that your brain comes up with is Christ. You want your baby dedicated, and the word that pops out is baptized. Believe me, I'm sympathetic! Around here, as far as I'm concerned, you can't make a mistake. So please, feel free to speak your language; ask any and all questions, and know that you are welcome. We'll find a way to talk.

SERMON: "Talk Right" - Rev. Alison Hyder

The number of birthright Unitarian Universalists has always been few. Not just nationally, because of course we are a rather small denomination, with only about 1,100 congregations in North America. But even within our churches, the percentage of people who were raised UU is minor, and those with Universalist or Unitarian grandparents even less. Perhaps as many as 90% of active UUs are "converts."

On the one hand, this says something positive about our role in reaching out and attracting those for whom more organized religions are restrictive or flat. We have long opened our doors to those who are too

radical or strange or independent to fit into the common mold. We offer acceptance and respect for the individual and promote change over certainty. We honor doubt. So we appeal to people who want to forge their own pathway through the questions and contradictions of human meaning. We strive for tolerance and understanding of different beliefs and lifestyles. We appeal to parents who want their children raised with an awareness and respect for other world religions, and an environment where their questions about God, or death, or angels, are considered not just natural, but intelligent. We are a sanctuary and a blessing for seekers of all sorts.

But on the other hand, these numbers indicate an unfortunate trend. We do not seem to be very good at engendering long-term loyalty or devotion - or guilt. Many of our children leave as they get older. They do not stay active in a UU church as adults, and we lose their knowledge and their experience.

Some of them, raised to develop their own beliefs and creative fulfillment, use their religious education as a grounding for a compassionate, ethical philosophy. They continue to have an active spiritual life, and may still identify themselves as UUs, but they don't belong to a congregation. Others, marry into other faiths, and with that open UU tolerance, go with the flow of their partner's more obligatory religious observances. And some reject Unitarian Universalism altogether and convert to religions that offer more ritual, or better music, or a clearer answer. Although this does seem to be changing somewhat, Unitarian Universalism has always done a better job of promoting independence than allegiance.

Not only does this result in a much smaller membership (out of about 629,000 self-proclaimed Unitarian Universalists in the U.S., less than 200,000 belong to a congregation) but it also has a significant impact on our UU church culture. Who is there to transmit the wisdom and sustain our important achievements?

My colleague, Daniel O'Connell, asks, "What if all the English teachers in our public schools - say 90% of them - had only been speaking English for a couple of years? Maybe the language the teachers grew up with didn't have some concepts we have in English. What if the phrases "question authority," or "we need not believe alike to sing alike" were simply untranslatable to their native tongue? How could they teach those concepts to children? ... I am reminded of a friend who spent his junior year abroad in Norway and also had to take a foreign language while there. English didn't count, so he now speaks Spanish with a Norwegian accent." [First Days Record Jan 1998]

That is how it is here. You may have been raised Catholic, with a Presbyterian grandmother, or attended Methodist and Lutheran Sunday Schools. Perhaps you went to Hebrew class only long enough to be Bar Mitzvahed, and discovered Buddhism in college. Or you still long for the doctrines of a religion that has denied and scorned you. You have figured out what it is that you don't believe, but how do you describe your growing new religious identity?

For many of you, Unitarian Universalism is a second language, and a tentative one at that. You are groping your way into understanding, unconsciously waiting for the cue to kneel, referring to Mass instead of services, to creeds instead of principles. I know at least one of you still hears the words of the Christian Doxology when we start to sing our aspiration. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..." his brain flashes, and it makes him wince every time.

What makes it particularly tricky is that Unitarian Universalism keeps changing, from one decade to another, as new people enter in with their own beliefs and experiences and discoveries. Because we do not have a creed or a religious dogma, Unitarianism has always reacted quickly to social and political movements, like abolition, Asian spirituality, and the civil rights movements. For instance, throughout most of the 20th century, Unitarianism was the refuge for an ethical atheism. Now, although most UUs still consider themselves Humanists first, more of us are engaged in some sort of spiritual practice. This personal freedom ensures a lot of philosophical diversity, but many people argue that it leaves us without much stability. What grounds us and holds us together? Are we really a religion, or just a social club? And who decides who is in or out? What is the definition of a *real*/UU?

It doesn't help that our congregations vary so much. There are UU Fellowships and Unitarian Societies and Universalist Churches; there are Congregations, Meeting Houses and Parishes. There is the UU Community of Lake County [Kelseyville, CA], the Unitarian Universalists of the Chester River [Easton, Maryland], and the Eliot Unitarian Chapel [Kirkwood, MO], not to mention First Congregational Parish, Community Church, and the Gaia Community in Kansas City, Missouri, all UU. Then there are the Unitarian

churches in countries around the world, like Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Pakistan and Romania. And every one of them will have their own culture and flavor, their own favorite traditions. Some congregations prize rationality and intellectual discourse. Some highlight social justice. Some seem to want to remain a controlled little circle, and others are friendly and engaging. Churches in New England tend to be more formal and religious than those in Maryland or Ohio. In fact, I often feel a little nervous in sending our new visitors to the UU congregations near them. They are almost always a little disappointed. Every UU congregation holds an equal dedication to the principles of human worth and integrity and reason. But we don't all express it the same way. You have to be willing to look beneath the surface to the ethical values that we share.

And that is what makes the language difficulty so challenging, and particularly here at the Meeting House. The last congregational survey, done in 1998, reported that about a third of the members had been here for less than 2 years, and two-thirds for up to 5 years, although luckily about half of the members had been UUs for over 10 years. So we have been mostly making it up as we go along out of the various hopes and talents and flaws of the people who wind up in Provincetown. And we all know what that implies! Let's just say it's not going to be business as usual. But because we are Unitarian Universalists, in fact, the results are up to us. We do not have to fit into any outside mold.

We do not have a creed; that is, a specific doctrine or dogma that you must accept and believe to be a member (such as the Apostle's Creed or the doctrine of Salvation). We have no sacramental laws or obligations. This freedom (some would say laxity) grew out of our respect for the individual reason and conscience, which saw its foundation in the way that we organize and run our congregations. Unitarian Universalists are part of the Free Church movement that insisted that each church had the moral and religious right to choose and ordain its own leaders. Ministers were called by the people they would serve, not appointed by some bishop or prince. And just like the minister, each Christian had the authority to read and interpret the scriptures for him (even her)self, without intercessory or mediator. Every person is responsible for his own salvation. So what this congregational style of polity means is that it is the lay members - not the ministers - who direct and run the church. Ministers urge and influence, and even buy and plan, but at the will of the people. This is a democracy. Or, to put it another way, everything is up for grabs. Everyone shares responsibility, and everyone defines the prevailing culture.

This is a wonderful, wonderful thing, the strength and the heart of our faith. Not only do we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth of every person, but we also empower every person to seek and speak the truth of her own life.

I hope you realize what an awesome responsibility that is. When someone walks in that door, they learn the truth about Unitarian Universalism from every member that they meet, and every conversation they overhear. One person might be talking about the nude beach, another wearing a goddess symbol, and someone else praying to her higher power, while the choir is rehearsing an African hymn. Questions about belief can elicit a wide range of responses. Whether you've been here for two months or 8 years, you represent our faith. You embody Unitarian Universalism.

Please forgive me if I find that a little scary at times. This is not because I don't find each of you caring, or articulate, or even reverent. If you come here more than a couple of times it is because you are on a search for personal meaning that is both thoughtful and urgent. I know you folks. You are passionate about the Meeting House.

So it is not that I don't trust your intentions. It's just that my perspective is different. My passion is for our faith. I am totally awed and inspired by our Unitarian Universalist heritage and the promise of freedom and reason and tolerance that we offer.

Due to my parents' mixed-faith marriage, I was raised Unitarian Universalist, but I stopped going in the 7th grade when we moved. My mom found a young fellowship, but my relationship to it was tangential, even after it grew into full ministry. So I have had the happy task of rediscovering my religion. In preparation for the ministry I took classes in UU history and governance and our philosophy of religious education, and I read biographies and theological essays. Our advanced acceptance of transgendered, gay, and lesbian people, our mix of pagans and atheists, Christians and Jews is founded upon a thoughtful and determined philosophy. We have ancestors to be proud of, and an often painful history of persecution and determination and service. We have bred revolutionary thinkers, from Tom Paine and John Adams to Harriet Martineau, from the

transcendentalists to Charles Darwin to Kurt Vonnegut. Unitarians and Universalists have instigated or furthered numerous social institutions that promote human ability. Our contributions are incalculable. Think: The Constitution of the United States. The free public school system. The separation of church and state. Religious tolerance. The beginnings of social work. Settlement Houses. The Department of Health. The American Red Cross. Then there's electricity, Morse code, the telephone, and the World Wide Web, developed by Tim Berners-Lee, who could have made millions but was committed to keeping the web public and free. Just to skim the surface. Unitarians and Universalists have changed the world through our firm dedication to human conscience, values, and endeavors. We think that religion is what you do, not what you believe.

It is part of my job as your minister to share with you my enthusiasm for Unitarian Universalism, and to talk about our UU principles and achievements. And of course I do, though sometimes only by inference. I assume that a sermon about living in the present or the uses of gossip will tell you something about our values. Or that by including a Mulla Nasrudin tale from Persia and a Margaret Atwood poem, with a quote from Malcolm X and an excerpt from the book of Isaiah, I am reflecting our deep awareness of the interdependent web of existence, and the diverse spiritual sources from which we draw. I do need to continue to speak directly about our history, and the development of UU thought, and of course, I will.

But I'd also like to encourage you to do some reading and exploring and questioning on your own. Our friends here from Chatham go and visit a different congregation every year. You can borrow a book from the library over there, or from me. Take a class on UU history or thought - I'll be offering one this spring. Come to minister's tea with your questions or thoughts. Visit the UU Association and the bookstore on Beacon Hill, next to the State House - they'll give you a map of the UU Heritage walking tour. In fact, we should take a couple of vans and do a field trip. See me if you're interested. In the meantime you can check out the website at uua.org. I know that a few people plan to go with me to our General Assembly this year in Quebec. But next year it will be in Boston, so I hope a lot more of us will go. I guarantee that you will have a blast. Just ask Dianne Kopser.

It may seem easy to be a Unitarian Universalist - there's nothing to memorize, no test of faith, no rites or dietary laws. But there are also no answers, no safety nets, and no saviors. And it is a big responsibility to act ethically according to the dictates of your own reason and conscience. It is hard enough to figure out one's stance on speeding, or public nudity, much less taking action on issues like racism or the death penalty or the war in Afghanistan. How deep does the inherent worth and dignity of all people have to go, anyway? You have to think it all out for yourself. And try to do the right thing. We can offer you no guarantees of forgiveness, or a heavenly father, or justice of any kind. But if you want companionship and support and some healthy debates, then you're in the right place.

Like English, Unitarian Universalism is a polyglot language, made up of many cultures and strains. So don't worry about using the correct terms - call this a church or society, call me a priest if you like - my Jewish grandmother often did! Celebrate Passover. Meditate on Jesus. Retain any practices and customs that deepen your soul and make you a kinder, more authentic person. Your experiences and beliefs only enrich our faith. What is important is that you speak clearly and passionately about the love that you've found here, and the respect and encouragement Unitarian Universalism has given you in your spiritual growth.

As my friend Jane Rzepka writes, when you come into a new tradition it's not always easy to find the right words. But around here, it's impossible to make a mistake. As long as you communicate your truth, you will always be speaking our language.

CLOSING WORDS: by the Universalist minister Rev. Olympia Brown, who was the first woman ordained by an American religious denomination, in 1864.

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith, which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world

beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message: that you are strong enough to work for a great principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the [One] which ever lives and loves.