

“The Elevator Speech”
Copyright the Rev. Jane Dwinell

Who are we? Just what is this religion? Why should anyone come here and participate in the life of this congregation?

A few years ago, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, asked us to work on our “Elevator Speech.” That is, a short, concise way to explain Unitarian Universalism should someone on an elevator ask you... and you have six floors in which to do it... all of 45 seconds.

Now, you may not have a building with an elevator that tall... but we all have occasion to be in one, somewhere!

So, all excuses aside... could you explain this religion and our community to someone who asked? Would you want to? Does this make you squirm, or do you feel comfortable putting this centuries-old and ever-evolving faith into a few words?

Not many people know about our faith... except in jokes... like:

Three kids were playing and they asked each other what religion they were.

“I’m Christian,” said the first child, “and our symbol is the cross.”

“I’m Jewish,” said the second child, “and our symbol is the Star of David.”

“I’m Unitarian Universalist,” said the third child, “and our symbol is a candle in a cocktail glass.”

How about this historic-flavored one?

Hosea Ballou, the great Universalist preacher of the nineteenth century, was arguing the question of eternal damnation with a Methodist man of the cloth. Ballou quoted a number of Bible verses that showed the love of God for all, but the Methodist minister was unconvinced.

“Brother Ballou,” he remonstrated, “if I were a Universalist, and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away and I’d still go to heaven!”

“If you were a Universalist,” Ballou replied, “the idea would never occur to you.”

Then there’s this one:

Once upon a time, at a Sunday service in one of the very big Unitarian churches in Boston, a man was making a ruckus in the back pew. After every sentence the minister

spoke, the man shouted, "Amen! Halleluia!"

One of the ushers approached the man and spoke to him discreetly.

"Sir, uh, we just don't do things like that here."

"But I got religion!"

"You certainly didn't get it here."

And one of my favorites:

A young Unitarian Universalist was visiting a more traditional Christian church when the pastor asked her if she were saved.

She whispered to him discreetly, "In my church, we aren't allowed to get lost."

OK, all kidding aside, what would you say to someone who asks, "What kind of church do you go to?"

You could take the person on a historic journey that starts here:

I believe in God the Father
And in Christ Jesus, His only son, our Lord.
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried
On the third day rose from the dead
Who ascended into heaven
And sitteth on the right hand of the Father
Whence he cometh to judge the living and the dead
And in the Holy Ghost – the holy catholic church
The remission of sins – the resurrection of the flesh
And life everlasting.

Wait a minute, what did she say? Yes, that's right, the Apostles Creed. I suspect that many of you said that in your childhood house of worship.

Unitarians and Universalists have never said the Apostles Creed... ever. Historically, they chose other words to express their faith.

This is the Winchester Profession from 1803, adopted by the New England Convention of Universalists:

"We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest, and final destination of mankind.

“We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

“We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.”

Now, compared to the Apostles Creed, that’s a pretty radical statement. The Universalists were radical. They believed in Love and in the importance of expressing the divine nature as Love through service. They removed the hellfire and damnation language, and worshipped the just and the good.

The Unitarians did the same, in a more intellectual way, embracing one God, and an important example in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Then along came Ralph Waldo Emerson who brought the teachings of the Eastern religious texts into the Unitarian discussion and introduced the concept that the Divine could be found in nature – in everything.

God was no longer out there, but in here and all around.

By the twentieth century, the Unitarians were moving away from Theism to Humanism, embracing science and the good works of humankind as the saving grace of the world. The presence of Humanism grew throughout the twentieth century until most people equated Humanism with Unitarianism... thus all the Unitarian god jokes like this old Unitarian prayer: Dear God, if there is a God, if you can, save my soul, if I have a soul.”

When the Unitarians and the Universalists merged into one denomination in 1961, the Love of God, and the Love of Humanity came together in one faith. And in the past 20 years, there has been an emergence of a different kind of theological view, one that arose from feminism, when women reclaimed sacred images of the feminine, and a more mystical, nature-based spirituality began to be practiced among Unitarian Universalists.

So today we have sitting here, as in just about every other UU church, humanists and theists, atheists and agnostics, mystics and pagans, all of the aboves and none of the aboves.

Just how do we explain this to people?

Here’s how President Sinkford explains it:

“The Unitarian side of us tells us that there is only one God, one spirit of life, one power of love. The Universalist side tells us that God is a loving God, condemning none of us, valuing the spark of divinity that is every human being. Therefore, one God, no one left behind.”

Here’s some other Elevator Speeches, as printed in the UU World magazine. See what

you think:

“We believe that your spiritual life is personal – a relationship between the individual and deity, however you define it. Rather than choose your path for you, we provide a safe place for you to discover and pursue your own path.” Lyn Worthen, Salt Lake City, Utah

“Unitarian Universalism is a religion for people who are trying to live a good human life, regardless of their religious beliefs. Unitarian Universalism welcomes people of all different beliefs, encourages us to seek our own spiritual truths, and believes in a balance of -- and respect for – both reason and emotion.” Pat Jaworski, Nashville, TN

“Unitarian Universalists believe in the Inner God – the god of human responsibility and human creativity, the god of love, compassion and empathy. This belief arises from the heritage bequeathed by the two founding denominations now joined.” Ken Morrison, Thunder Bay, ON

“Unitarian Universalism is a democratic, pluralistic religious community which encourages each individual to develop a personal religious philosophy and which emphasizes social and environmental concerns.” Richard Hewitt, Vancouver WA

“Our denomination is unique because every Unitarian Universalist has the right to develop a personal philosophy of life, without being told what to believe. We can learn from all philosophies and religions, and also from science and the arts. We explore important life issues in a caring community, united by shared values rather than by shared theological opinions. And no matter what we do believe about theology or philosophy, we try to live a good life and leave the world better than we found it.” Chris Schriener, Fremont CA

“In Unitarian Universalist congregations, we gather in community to support our individual spiritual journeys. We trust that openness to one another’s experiences will enhance our understanding of our own links with the divine, with our history, and with one another.” From my good friend, Jonalu Johnstone, Oklahoma City

So what would you say if a person approached you on Church St. and, waving their hand this way, said, “What a beautiful building! Just what kind of church is that?”

Think about it.

What if your co-worker says to you, “Gosh, you talk about the church you go to a lot. Seems like you do interesting things there. Just what kind of church is it?”

Or perhaps you are brave enough to ask a friend to come to church sometime, and your friend says, “I don’t know. I had a bad experience with church when I was a kid. And besides I have my spiritual life walking in the woods.”

Different situations, different people, possibly different answers. Your friend may be

happy with a longer explanation, the woman in the mini-mart demands a shorter one, and the co-worker, something in between.

Now it's time to practice. Yes, that's right practice... here in the safety of this sanctuary with people you know and who know you. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Every day do at least one thing that scares you." With the people sitting near you or someone on the other side of the church... try out your elevator speech.

So how was it?

It's not easy. This is a complicated faith. Each of us will have a different take on it because each of us is in a different place theologically and spiritually, and the sense of community found in organized religion will mean different things to different people at different times.

Here's my favorite occasion when I used an elevator speech.

I was at the General Assembly in Salt Lake City a few years ago and had just come out of my hotel in the morning and was on my way to the day's activities. A crowd of UUs, all with our nametags and T-shirts and political buttons was gathered at the curb waiting for the light to change.

A businessman in a suit, carrying a briefcase, was in the midst of this unusual looking and lively group.

He turned to a woman near him and said, "Are you with a meeting here? What kind of group are you?"

To which she replied, "We're part of a liberal religion having our annual meeting. You wouldn't be interested."

Ah... how to win friends and influence people!

The light changed and people began to cross the street. I walked up to the man.

"Hi, we're Unitarian Universalists having our General Assembly. I want to apologize for that woman. Ours is a liberal, non-creedal faith where people come together in community to discover their own spiritual truths and to work together to make the world a better place. Although our religion arose during the Protestant reformation and used to be primarily Christian, now Unitarian Universalists look to all the world's religions for inspiration and keys to ethical living."

"Sound great," he said. "I'm from Albany, New York and I'm here on business. That sounds like something I've been looking for. Do you think there's a Unitarian

Universalist church there?"

"Sure," I said, "Just look them up in the phone book. You'll be glad you did," and we parted ways.

When all else fails, we can at least make fun of ourselves:

How many UUs does it take to change a lightbulb?

Well, they've got a discussion group going on it, and a committee's working on it, and they've written a survey and tallied all the responses, but they still don't know the exact number.

How about...

Unitarian Universalist theology is based on pot-luck, Everyone brings something different, everything is shared, and everyone takes what bits they like.

Or..

Arguing with a Unitarian Universalist is like mud-wrestling a pig. Pretty soon you realize the pig likes it.

Which reminds me:

A young mother and former Baptist, Sherry Wells spent many Sundays visiting different churches with her son Brett. The two were not pleased with any of them. But when they visited the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, all the boy could say for a week afterward was:

"Can we go back to the church where people laugh?"

Amen.