

## The Good News of Unitarian Universalism

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, Flame of Life Universalists, Pueblo, CO, March 17, 2013

On February 13, the *New York Times* ran an article about a pastor apologizing to his denomination for participating in an interfaith service. The interfaith service was a gathering to mourn the Sandy Hook shooting, in which the pastor had lost a member of his congregation. The pastor, Rev. Rob Morris, was attacked by his denomination, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, for “endorsing false teachings” merely by being present with Muslims and Baha’i’s in a non-judgmental way, thereby suggesting that the differences between religions aren’t important and that Christ is not the only way to salvation.

If, like me, you are having a negative response to this story and are shocked and angered that a denomination would put doctrinal rigidity ahead of caring for the suffering and those who weep, welcome to the good news of Unitarian Universalism. Now obviously, it’s far from sufficient to claim that what is good about UUism is how different it is from other traditions. We have spent far too long going negative and not articulating what we have to offer on our own. But today of all days I thought it appropriate to begin with a story of religion being used, to misquote the Passover Haggadah, to harm and not to heal, to hinder and not to help, to curse and not to bless, and to refuse to serve the Spirit of freedom because spirited dogma is more important.

Religion is among the most important social institutions in the world because its currency is human meaning. People who are engaged in any kind of organized religion derive meaning from it, or derive meaning in struggling with it, or may even derive meaning from leaving it. But the fact that religion is a meaning-making enterprise makes it a very high-stakes enterprise. Which in turn means that UUism, for all of its flexibility, is very important and not just to those who are already UUs by conviction. If UUism has meaning to offer the world, a way of building a sacred canopy that can both protect and empower us, we’d better try to share something of that with other people. Because, to be blunt, I’m pretty sure all of us in this room want a world where religious organizations celebrate when religious leaders use interfaith opportunities to take care of people rather than punishing those leaders.

During my last visit, I spoke about why we don’t evangelize and why we should, about the stakes in sharing or not sharing the good news of Unitarian Universalism. But I did not say very much about what that good news was. We’ll focus on that today, as well as spending some time on how we might go about evangelizing. Don’t worry if you’re still uncomfortable with terms such as “evangelize” and “good news.” The goal is simply to consider a new approach to thinking about these issues.

There is one point I should make about what our good news is not before I get to what our good news is. We are all already primed to know that our good news is not about being saved if we believe a certain set of doctrines. But it’s equally important to understand that our good news is also not that we can believe or do whatever the hell we want regardless of the consequences. This perspective may be an unfortunate response to the sense of freedom that many people find in UUism especially if they come here from conservative religious traditions. But I think we tend to agree that unrepentant racism or homophobia, for example, are not in keeping with UUism. If

you come to a UU congregation and you are opposed to gay rights, the great majority of us UUs who support gay rights will not kick you out but we will be on pretty solid ground if we affirm that your opposition to gay rights is problematic from a UU perspective. Similarly, UUs are strongly against any kind of bullying behavior, so if you come to a UU congregation and you engage in bullying, you can expect the congregation to be opposed to those actions.

But enough about the negative. What is our good news anyway? Here it is. It's simple, and incredibly complicated. It's straightforward and far from easy. Our good news is this: We can transform our lives for the better. And we can transform our world for the better. Let me say that again. Our good news is this: We can transform our lives for the better. And we can transform our world for the better.

If this is truly our good news, it assumes a number of things. First, it assumes that we human beings, not some distant deity, are responsible for what happens in and to our world and the living beings on it. As UU minister and former UU President Bill Schultz writes in today's reading "The Mission of Our Faith," part of the mission of our faith is "to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands." This doesn't mean that UUs with a sense of the sacred must toss it out the window. It simply means that whatever the Spirit of Life and Love may be, it doesn't take action in our world. We have to do that.

If our good news is about transforming our lives and the world, it isn't particularly good news for the smug or self-satisfied. It's good news for people who know they need healing and wholeness. And here, I think, lies a deep tension within UUism between a yearning for betterment and a need to feel secure that we are fine as we are. This tension always reminds me of a wonderful joke. Two relatively new Buddhist monks at an abbey come to the abbot and ask him to settle a disagreement between them. The first monk says, "I have always been taught that enlightenment is simply a matter of waking up, opening our eyes to what is really real and accepting it." The abbot says, "You are right." The second monk says, "But abbot, I have always been taught that the veil of illusion is tricky and that we must work hard to wake up, which is why we meditate for hours every day and deny ourselves many pleasures of the world." The abbot says, "You are also right." A third young monk, overhearing this says, "But abbot, how can he be right and he also be right when what they say is in contradiction?" The abbot turns to the third monk and says, "And you are right as well." The tension between accepting ourselves and our world as is and between working for our betterment and the world's betterment may be a paradox. But that simply gives us something interesting with which to wrestle.

Consider it this way. UUs have for a long time assumed that our good news was that there was no hell, that we would not be damned for being unable to believe doctrines we simply couldn't believe, and that there were others like us with whom we could gather in covenant. And in the past, that may well have been our good news. But it's not sufficient today. Today our planet and the people on it are in crisis in too many ways to count: violence, poverty, inequality, environmental damage, a political corruption, soul-draining consumerism, rampant individualism and greed – the list goes on. A religion that can strengthen us for the struggle for a better world and give meaning to that struggle is a religion with good news for everyone.

What about the question of our own lives? Isn't it offensive to say that all of us should strive to transform our lives for the better, to seek wholeness and healing? Perhaps some of you are sitting here right now thinking, "My life is just fine, thank you very much. I don't need anything of the sort." Well, if that's where you stand, UUism can still be lovely for you, an interesting and thought-provoking way to spend a Sunday morning. No harm, no foul. But no good news either. Good news, by definition, is good news because the people receiving it need good news because their lives are full of bad news. When Jesus said "the Kingdom of God is among you," that was good news because he was talking to the dregs of society, the outcasts, the devalued ones. Their lives sucked. They needed good news, and desperately. In the same way, UUism only has good news for us if we need good news, if we see flaws and failings and brokenness and missing of the mark in our own lives. If we are willing and able to acknowledge where we lack wholeness, UUism offers us a non-judgmental opportunity to seek wholeness with other seekers. Otherwise, UUism is a social club with an intellectual component, not really much more.

I don't for a moment mean that at our cores we are sinners in the hands of an angry God, as evangelist Jonathan Edwards put it. I happen to believe, with most UUs, that there is love at the core of our lives. But I don't believe we are perfect, and I think UUism's knee-jerk people-are-good response to Calvinism is running out of steam. Human beings are bringing a lot of dedicated loving attention to our planet, and also destroying it. Human beings are taking care of other human beings and creating magnificent works of art and science, and also oppressing each other and killing each other. It's not a simple matter. Neither Calvinist pessimism nor Unitarian optimism suffices anymore. We need affirmations of our capacity right alongside affirmations of our failures. And as far as I can tell, that is true on the individual level as well as the collective level. I've never yet met a perfect person and I am far from one myself, and I bet all of us could say something similar if pressed. If we are simply willing to acknowledge our own frailties, Unitarian Universalism can help us do something about them in a loving and supportive community of other people with similar insights and, for the most part, similar values.

Another assumption that goes with our good news is that transformation is not easy, whether we are talking about ourselves or our society or our planet. There are a lot of ifs involved. Yes, our faith is that we can transform our lives and our world, but only if we work hard, since we are not readily given to simply waking up into compassion, and since the path of least resistance works against wholeness in our society. Yes, our faith is that we can make a difference but only if we work with others since we can't transform either ourselves or the world alone. Yes, our faith is that things can be better, but only if we identify the highest values that matter to us and struggle to live up to them to the best of our ability. I would love to know who ever said UUism is easy. Done right, there's nothing easy about it. So why is that good news? Because, done right, it changes everything. For the better.

While it is true that the good news of Unitarian Universalism does not rely on a creed, it does assumed shared values. Today I'd like to consider shared values in two ways, first in terms of the five values of Flame of Life Universalists, and second in terms of the basic claim of the original universalists from whom Flame of Life derives its name, the claim that God is love.

The five values of Flame of Life Universalists are as follows: All souls are sacred and worthy. There is a unity that makes us one. Salvation is within this lifetime. Courageous love will

transform the world. And truth continues to be revealed. If we have a creed, this is it, or as close as we come. And all five of these values play a crucial role in our claim that we can transform ourselves and our world for the better. Let's take them in order.

All souls are sacred and worthy: Forget for a moment about whether we *can* transform ourselves and our world. Let's ask the more basic question: why *should* we want to put in the work to do so? Perhaps the most important answer is that, since we affirm the inherent worth and dignity in every person and affirm further than all souls are sacred and worthy, it stands to reason that we want everyone on the planet to flourish, to live well, to learn and grow and know joy and love, to give and receive, contributing to a thriving world. This first value, and the parallel first principle, is the root of our good news. It affirms that each of us is sacred and worthy, bearing inherent human dignity, and thus in some moral sense we deserve to flourish. It is a right and good thing for us to thrive and to be happy. And if we are not thriving and living happily now it is our good news that we can and should work toward a life of delight and meaning. We may not get there alone and we may not get there easily. But it is our life's work to seek such a good life for ourselves. And if this is true of each of us, it is no less true for everyone else out there, thus our opportunity to transform the world.

There is a unity that makes us one: Why should we care about other people, if we don't already? What does my life have to do with the life of someone in Sierra Leone or Selma or Singapore? I'm never going to meet them or know anything about them, so why should they matter to me? Beyond the affirmation already considered, there is a second one that is like it: we are all part of an interdependent web and there is a unity that makes us one. We are bound up in each other's lives and we are, therefore, responsible for one another. There may be limits to what we can accomplish singly but if we work together and with broader communities for transformation we might be able to make life better for people in Sierra Leone or Selma or Singapore or down the street or across town. People who, however different they may seem from us, are part of a larger whole and whose well-being is as our own if we only saw it that way.

Salvation is within this lifetime: Many UUs who have come from conservative Christianity find "salvation" to be a word with baggage, but in fact the word salvation originally comes from words related to healing and wholeness. To "be saved" is to be well, to be whole. And who among us does not want to be well and whole at some level? The affirmation that salvation is within this lifetime acknowledges that we are not seeking some kind of after-death experience or status; we are seeking to be well, whole, thriving, flourishing, joyful, meaning-filled, right here on earth right now, or at least as soon as possible. And making this affirmation brings a degree of responsibility to our lives. We don't get to say that what we do on earth doesn't matter because what really matters happens after we die. Oh no. What we do on earth matters more than anything else possibly can. It makes the difference between joy and pain, meaning and meaninglessness, community and isolation. In claiming that salvation is within this lifetime, Unitarian Universalism lays before us an opportunity and an obligation to bring salvation to ourselves and the world in the sense of bringing healing and wholeness.

Courageous love will transform the world: So far I've mostly talked as though transforming our lives for the better is distinct from transforming our world for the better. But actually the two are quite interrelated. First, we cannot help but transform the larger world for the better if we

ourselves are more well and whole. But it's also true that many of us need to be further along in our healing than we are now to be of maximal use in the struggle to bring healing to the world more generally. It's so easy to take the path of least resistance and in a violent, isolated, selfish society the path of least resistance is violence, isolation and selfishness. If we are going to make a dent in healing violence into creative peace, we ourselves need to have some substantive peace within us. If we are going to draw community together, we ourselves had better be fairly well-healed in our interactions with others. If we are going to offer an alternative to selfishness and greed, we ourselves must be filled with generosity and trust. I'm not saying we have to be perfect. There's no such thing. But we have to bring strength to our world-healing work, and for probably many of us, that means building up courageous love in ourselves first.

Truth continues to be revealed: This affirmation began life as a negation of the conservative religious assertion that truth was sealed, but it is much more than that. It invites us into what Einstein called a holy curiosity because we never know where or from whom we will gain the next insight to help us become more whole and help us become effective world-healers. It invites us into humility, because everything we think we know now could be wrong and it almost certainly is incomplete. And if we see ourselves as self-transformers and world-transformers, we know that everyone else has been invited into the same mission of transformation, meaning that we have as much to learn from them as they do from us.

You'll notice that I haven't spoken much of love yet. While Flame of Life's five values do not explicitly include the claim that God is love, it's not a bad one for self-identified Universalists to engage with. It's a profound part of our heritage, for one thing: early Universalist minister John Murray famously encouraged his flock to evangelize with these words:

“Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

Much more recently, UU minister Scott Alexander has rephrased Universalism's core claim. I cannot imagine a way of articulating our good news that better links the old understanding of the Universalist blessing with the approach I've been sharing today. In Rev. Alexander's words:

“There is a place set in this creation for every last man, woman, and child. A precious, safe place has been set for each and every one of us-period! And it is our human job to respect, protect, and nurture the well-being of all of God's diverse and curious children. The early Universalists said, pure and simple, that every human being, no matter how strange or flawed or unlovable or broken or weird they may seem, is to be protected, cherished, welcomed, loved.”

This good news overlays the idea of God as love with the need for us to be love's hands in the world today, however we understand that imperative.

Why then must we share our good news of personal and societal transformation? Paul Robeson said it well: the song of freedom must prevail. Our obligation is both moral and practical: it is the

right thing to do, and it may make a substantial difference in our lives and the lives of others, even our very planet, if we evangelize and bring others with us on this transformational journey.

Even if you are convinced that we have good news worth living into and worth sharing, you might wonder how on earth to go about sharing that good news. After all, most of us only have the highly negative models of conservative Christians to go on. Here are some tips on evangelizing, developed by UU minister Larry Peers and also found in the book *Salted with Fire*. I've added some comments.

- 1) Talk with pride and enthusiasm. Remember that the word “enthusiasm” means “filled with God.” If the word “God” doesn’t work for you, think about being filled with life, joy, love, passion, devotion – whatever word captures how you feel when you think about what is most meaningful in UUism for you.
- 2) Look for opportunities for dialogue. Don’t barge into an unrelated conversation. Opportunities may arise in conversations about meaning, a search for community, a need for support, or other areas in which a UU church can be a valuable connection.
- 3) Welcome questions about the Unitarian Universalist faith. Know enough about UU history and polity to be able to answer them.
- 4) State beliefs positively. Do not say how UUism is different from other religious approaches. Focus on what we do affirm and how we live out our affirmations in the world.
- 5) Be patient and respectful of differing views. You’re just having a conversation. If they are intrigued, they’ll follow up.
- 6) Be clear about our core values and demonstrate them in our approach to the conversation about our faith. The conversation should, for example, take place in such a way as to affirm your conversation partner’s inherent worth and dignity.
- 7) Live our faith. Let our lives speak. We are our own best good news. If people want what we have, they might ask how we got it.
- 8) Listen to the other person; ask probing and thoughtful questions. Understanding where someone else is coming from is not meant to be a manipulative strategy but rather to show deep respect and to build a connection. And it may be that you can tell from asking good questions that this person is not in search of what UUism has to offer, in which case you can figure out where to go from there.
- 9) Give a personal testimonial. Last month I said this was something we did not always do effectively, but we can learn to do it better. Yes, our lives should be our best testimonial but we need to know how to use words as well.
- 10) Because experience is a source of our personal religion-making, listen to the other person’s experience and share your own. Someone else might not come to the same conclusion you do, but they can’t deny you the reality of your own experience. And if they try, they probably aren’t someone you want to be evangelizing. Mutual listening will deepen the relationship no matter what else does or does not get accomplished. And maybe in the sharing of stories someone else’s heart will be stirred in a new direction.

We have a magnificent opportunity in front of us, both in how we understand UUism’s good news for us and the world, and in how we share it with others. May we let our lights shine everywhere we go so that we build up a world full of thriving people. Amen and blessed be.