

A Faith to Live By
June 6, 2021
Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

Today we have our Annual Meeting, following our service. This is a very important meeting, so I hope you all can attend. Shirley Stokes, our Administrator, has sent out our Annual Report via email, which I also hope you have or will read.

Because this is such an important day in the life of our congregation, let's look closer at our faith of Unitarian Universalism, and some possible common perspectives on what our faith may mean to us today.

We do have some important understandings and assumptions that underlie our faith, including our principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

- As UUs many of us view the universe as a single, un-fragmented whole, in which everything is a part, and nothing is left outside.
Thus - every person, every person, every person possesses inherent dignity and worth and is entitled to be treated with respect.

In her book *Testimony* UUA Moderator Meg Riley compiled many stories of people who have found our faith, and are grateful to being in a faith community, where they have a sense of belonging and are treated with respect.

For example, Rev. William Sinkford, past President of the UUA, as an African American seeker of faith, tells of his entry into our tradition with these words:
“No hellfire was preached from the pulpit.
A personal search for meaning, and a commitment for justice were the messages.
Even my aggressive atheism was acceptable.
Not everyone I talked to did agree with me - far from it, but people wanted to hear what was on my heart.
I was engaged less in debate, and more in conversation, in which sharing was possible, perhaps even expected.”¹

Another testimony is given by Ted R. Ogg who tells how he discovered Unitarian Universalism.

Growing up in the Texas panhandle, and realizing that he was gay, he fell into deep despair as he was being taught by the evangelical, born-again theology surrounding him that “being gay was an abomination, and a straight ticket to hell. God, they said, would not even hear him.”²

¹ Meg Riley. *Testimony*. Boston: Skinner House, 2018. P. 39

² Ted R. Ogg. *Back from Despair*. In *Testimony*, edited by Meg Riley, 2018,. 65.

A lesbian friend would invite Ted, to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Amarillo, Texas. Here are Ted's own words of what happened to him then:

"I was, for the first time, welcome to more or less, be myself. I found a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I found a laid-back, relaxed environment that invited me, to light a candle and share my joys and sorrows. I made my deviled eggs for pot-luck Sundays."

Ted continues:

"The love of this community brought me back from despair. I've learned that not only LBGTQs belong in worship, but many have been called to lead. I get very emotional when I read beautiful essays and stories by "my people." Of course, "my people" really includes all UUs, regardless of orientation. And to take that one step further, everyone on this planet, because we truly are a part of the interdependent web of life."³

Another person who discovered Unitarian Universalism at the age of seventy is Sharon Peddy Baker, who sought to find a religious home unsuccessfully, for most of her adult life. A change occurred when she attended a memorial service for a friend that was conducted by a UU minister.

Deciding to explore his church, she would later become a member.

Here are some of Sharon's thoughts on our faith and why it works for her:

"I don't feel the need to be forgiven. I don't believe in heaven or hell. I think the Bible is just a book of stories. I am at peace with the feeling I have when I am surrounded, by others who do not judge, and who believe that love is the most important thing we can do.

I just wish I had gotten here when I was seven."⁴

And Eddee Daniel tells of the long-term effect of the decision by him and his wife, Lynn to join a UU congregation over twenty-five years ago.

Eddee proudly tells this family story:

"One day in second grade when some friends were talking about what churches they attended, my child Alex said: "Unitarian Universalism."

When asked what Unitarian Universalists believe, Alex replied, "We believe in recycling!"

Eddee states his faith stance includes holding that "church is about doing as well as believing.

Our true beliefs are best revealed not in words but in how we live our lives."⁵

³ Ted Ogg. p. 67.

⁴ Sharon Peddy Baker. *Better Later Than Never*. Found in Testimony, edited by Meg Riley. Boston: Skinner house, 2018. P. 133-134.

⁵ Eddie Daniel. *A Message of Peace and Hope*. Found in Testimony, edited by Meg Riley. Boston: Skinner House, 2018, p. 209.

Eddee found Unitarian Universalism when he was very despondent, after being threatened with bodily harm after he had participated in a protest against the Iraq war.

He was threatened by a high school student he taught. Depressed and searching for community support, he and his wife Lynn visited the UU Church West in Brooklyn, NY for a Christmas Eve service, where they heard a message of peace and hope that resonated deeply. They became members and raised their children as UUs.

Here are Eddee's words of how he experienced raising his children UU:

"We both wanted our children to be raised with the good news that Unitarian Universalism has to offer: that all of life is beautiful and valued, and that we are all interconnected, that not only is it possible to affect positive change in society, but we have the responsibility to work to make it happen."⁶

Both of their children would come to embody the UU belief that we are called by our faith to be agents of change.⁷

There are so many reasons why people come to us and believe in our faith. I have just spoke of four such journeys into Unitarian Universalism, Each person's journey is a unique, sacred path, a faith journey. This, of course, includes each of you listening now who identify as UU.

Another aspect of our UU faith comes from our Universalist roots, which includes a fundamental drive towards goodness, a drive for well-being, which can be upset, even misdirected, but will continue to persist towards wholeness.

Here I am reminded of a story told by the wonderful psychologist, Carl Roger, from whom I was blessed to train with many years ago. Carl would talk about how each of us, no matter how injured, can be like potatoes stored in a dark cabinet.

Each potato will grow a long root, reaching for the light.

And so, it is for us, as humans, as our Universalist forbearers, taught, that we come into our faith, seeking community, seeking comfort, seeking light.

Our faith of Unitarian Universalism often teaches that creation is continuous, that revelation is unsealed, and that we each are taking part in what is being created.

Truth then, is never final, but always evolving as newness in creation, and we, interacting with creation are evolving as well.

A study of both the Unitarian and Universalist roots of our faith reveals an evolving faith, with freedom, reason and religious tolerance, as foundational, as our faith continues to break historical religious ground, and new ideas and ways of being take root, hold, and transform.

⁶ Eddie Daniel. P. 209.

⁷ Eddie Daniel. P. 214.as

An important aspect of the foundation of our faith is reason, by which I mean individual conscience and judgment, as a primary source of authority.
Each of us must be true to our own selves in creating our faith lives.

And as Unitarian Universalists we believe, as a faith community, in the primary importance of connection, of the importance of building bridges, and where no one stands outside our circle. Many of us know the quote by Edwin Markham, poet, which expresses well this aspect of inclusion as an aspect of our UU faith:

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!*

Within my short lifetime, I have witnessed and been part of our UU faith opening our circle to all people of color, for example. I remember well the debates and struggles in the 1960s over whether or not to integrate our congregations. Much to our credit as a faith, only two of all of our congregations refused to integrate at that time.

In the 1970s I witnessed and lived through the Women's Liberation Movement. At the time, most of the clergy and lay-leaders were male, but today, that has greatly changed, with women now having equal says in the life of our faith.

And I recall debates among parishioners during the aids epidemic in the 1980s, over whether or not our congregations might allow people who identified as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, to worship among us and even become members (there were no acknowledgements at that time of transgendered folks.)

In terms of how much our faith has evolved on this issue of gay rights, today our congregation is a welcoming congregation, as are many of our UU congregations. Indeed, many of the leaders of our faith today identify as GLBTQ.

When I look back at my own ministry, this widening the circle of our faith included my performing a same-sex wedding for a lesbian couple who had been together for many years on May 17, 2004, the very day the same-sex marriage law came into effect in Massachusetts. The couple met me at the sanctuary door at 8 am that morning, and may have been one of the first same-sex couples to be married that important day.

A couple of weeks later I conducted a wedding ceremony for seven lesbian couples, all members of the Northborough congregation I served at the time.

(I privately joked to friends that I felt a little bit like Rev. Moon, for those of you who know who Rev. Moon is).

That was a day I will never forget. The building was overflowing with love and with the resolve in the rightness of what we were doing that day-even though I was well aware of a very angry man in a front pew, who did not believe I should be performing same-sex marriages. I was glad I had asked the police to be present as well, for the safety of all, at this historical event.

I felt as if the roof was going to go off the top of the sanctuary, there was so much love present that day.

Over the course of my adult life, I have experienced our faith as continuously pushing the boundaries, of that circle that Edwin Markham spoke about:

*But love and I had the wit to win!
We drew a circle and took them in!*

Today, as much as ever, we need our faith to help us live our lives.

We who love Unitarian Universalism, who have been claimed by this faith, are the stewards of our faith with its courageous vision of collective liberation for all.

This past year of the pandemic has been traumatizing.

Most of us for sure are weary, and perhaps wary, of the road ahead.

We have all been changed by the experience of the pandemic.

We will not be able to go back to how it was before March 2020.

We will have to acknowledge what the pandemic has uncovered for all to see:

There are huge inequalities in our midst that we may have been able to previously deny;

-one year after the death of George Floyd, the protest, trial and conviction of his perpetrator, more than one thousand people have been killed by the police, and these were mostly people of color.

-the realities of income inequality continues to flow in the direction of the 10 % of the wealthy increasing their wealth, while the rest of the population, 90% does not.

-In spite of the majority of our country wanting to ban assault weapons in civilian hands, mass shooting continue to rise.

-And perhaps the most troubling symptom of today's new reality is that we as a democratic country are facing a crisis of our democracy that is unprecedented.

The most recent issue of the UU World is focused mainly *on (re)building democracy*, with a recognition that what is occurring now is a *national reckoning about race, justice and equity*.

As our UUA President, Susan Frederick Gray writes:

*Our democracy in the United States is fragile.
We have reached a watershed moment that will determine
how we move forward as a nation.*

*Despite its founding principles,
we have never lived up to the promise of justice for all.⁸*

Our UU faith is continuing its call upon each of us today:

- to continue to hold a vision of a more just, equitable, and anti-racist society,
- to create a world where no one is disposable, where all can thrive.
- to challenge our entrenched white supremacy culture,
- to organize and defend our democracy, challenging for example, the creation of laws that restrict voting.⁹

And moving even beyond our nation, our faith is urging us to advocate and act in whatever ways we can to widen the circle of our concern and caring for all of the planet, for all its peoples, and living beings.

Two ways we are doing this now as a congregation are, through the actions of our Social Justice Committee, and through the efforts of our Green Sanctuary Committee.

These two groups within our congregation have manifested over the course of this pandemic year, just how well we can, as a congregation, put our faith of Unitarian Universalism into action.

So, as we are about to end this congregational year, let us be actually amazed that we have done all that we have done, given the stressors of the pandemic on all of us.

And in the coming years let us not forget all the sacrifices made by those faithful UUs who have come before us.

We stand on their shoulders, as they urge us on, to take the risks to face the next challenges ahead, so that we, too, may contribute to widening the circle of our faith, a faith we can truly live by.

May it be so. Peace and love to you.

⁸ Our Commitment to Democracy is Theological” Susan Frederick Gray. UUWorld. Spring 2021. P. 2.

⁹ These five thoughts come from Rev. Susan Frederick Gray’s article, as cited above.