

**A SERMON: "You Might Be a UU If...."**

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You've all heard the jokes about Unitarian Universalists, I'm sure. What do you get when you cross a UU with Ku Klux Klan-er: Some one who burns question marks on people's lawns. That we begin our prayers "To Whom It May Concern". About the Jehovah's Witness who became a UU and went around knocking on doors, for no apparent reason. You might be a UU if instead of posting the 10 Commandments you put up "the 10 Suggestions." What does a UU say when someone sneezes? Oooh, ick! Get away! Germs!

My all-time favorite UU joke, -- so far -- which I'm sure many of you have received via e-mail is "How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb?" You know, after you have read in the list:

"How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. They only use candles."

"How many Lutherans? None. Lutherans don't like change."

"How many Presbyterians? None. Lights will go on and off at predestined times."

How many Methodists? It takes a "task force" composed of an equal number of male and female members with representatives of the Youth Group, the Seniors Fellowship, United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, Finance Committee, Church Council, Hispanic Ministry, the Sexual Minority Ministry, the Asian Ministry, and the Native Hawaiian Ministry

"How many Episcopalians?"

"We can't change that light bulb; my grandmother gave that light bulb to the church!"

How many Mormons? One man to do it and four wives to tell him how.

How many Amish? What's a light bulb?

These jokes about other religions are good, but ours, I think, is the best one of all:

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

"We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if, in your own journey, you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence."

These jokes *are* funny, and - like all humor -- they contain at least a grain of truth -- and it is, of course, healthy to be able to laugh at ourselves.

But -- did you notice a common thread among the UU jokes? They all imply that we Unitarian Universalists don't know what we believe -- or at the very least, that we can't articulate what it is we believe.

What makes us Unitarian Universalists? Answering this question is, of course, an obvious difficulty in a creedless faith such as ours.

In the past Unitarian Universalists have often been defined -- and some of us may still define ourselves, by what we *do not believe*. This is not surprising since, historically, both the Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church came into existence as reactions *against* two common prevailing religious doctrines of the 18th and 19th centuries. The Unitarians *did not believe* in the Trinity -- the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; the Universalists *did not believe* in predestination - that God had already chosen who would and who would not go to Hell.

Well, given this history and the nebulous quality of a creedless religion, it's not surprising that today also, many of us are likely, when people of other faiths ask us what Unitarian Universalists believe, to say -- if we're brave enough to say anything -- something about what we *do not believe* in contrast to the other religions around us.

W. Somerset Maugham, in his famous 1915 novel, *Of Human Bondage*, said, "A Unitarian very earnestly disbelieves in almost everything that anybody else believes in, and he has a very lively, sustaining faith in he doesn't know quite what."

I looked us up in a book for young people I have, called *My Friends' Beliefs: A Young Reader's Guide to World Religions*" and, sure enough, it says under Unitarian Universalist (p. 168), "It is perhaps easier to say what Unitarian Universalists *do not believe* than to say what they believe..." Well, at least we're in the book; we're such a small denomination we're not usually even included in books about world religions.

But I don't think it serves us very well as a religious movement or as religious individuals either to define ourselves in negative terms of what we *do not believe* or, maybe worse, not be able to articulate much of anything about our beliefs.

You may have heard somewhere before that each of us UUs needs to develop our own "elevator speech" about our denomination -- that is: what do you say when you're at a hotel for a UU conference, you've got on your little convention badge that says, "Hi, I'm so-and-so." and under your name it says, "Wildflower Church of Austin, a Unitarian Universalist Congregation". You get in the elevator on the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> floor and someone else, who's attending a different convention, also gets on, looks at your badge and says, "What's a Unitarian Universalist?" What do you say, in the time it will take you to get down to the lobby?

Writing this elevator speech is not easy. It is hard to articulate what it means to belong to this creedless religion of ours -- to profess the illusive faith that is modern Unitarian Universalism. No authority in the pulpit or at our headquarters in Boston or even in one single holy scripture tells us what doctrines we must believe in order to be members-in-good standing of this or any other UU congregation.

And yes, we are a diverse group of people in terms of our theological beliefs. Now I don't know, but in your congregation you most likely have religious humanists, agnostics, perhaps even atheists. Wildflower Church may have among its members UU Christians or others who believe in a personal God who can intercede in our behalf and at our request. You may have neo-pagans who see gods and goddesses in nature and who say prayers and perform rituals to obtain their blessings.

I'm pretty confident you have people here who believe in some sort of Ultimate Reality, a connecting Force, a Spirit of Life, of Love, a Divine energy that runs in and around and through the Universe, holding it together. Some of you probably believe that that Spirit may be summoned as a help to us through prayer or the focusing of collective energy; others may not believe that this force can be invoked at all.

Yes -- as a creedless church, we Unitarian Universalists hold many differing religious beliefs, and, so, we may not know what beliefs we all tend to hold in common. But have no fear, someone knows! *beliefnet.com* knows what Unitarian Universalists believe. And they can tell *you* -- on the basis of your answers to 18 simple questions whether or not you are a Unitarian Universalist!

Did any of you take the "Belief-O-Matic" quiz on line at *beliefnet.com*?

How many of you got Unitarian Universalism as one of your top 3 religions? Let's see, quickly, what some of your #1 religions were.

(Elicited responses from the audience).

I've taken the quiz several times. I always get Liberal Quaker for my #1 religion at 100%; Unitarian Universalism as #2 at 98% and mainline to liberal Christian as my #3 at 95%, followed closely by secular humanism and neo-paganism.

You may have heard the one that says, "A Unitarian Universalist is just an agnostic with children." After getting my Belief-O-Matic results, I like this one I found on the internet: "A Unitarian Universalist is just a Quaker with Attention Deficit Disorder."

But -- all kidding aside -- how come *beliefnet* knows what we believe when we don't even know ourselves? Let's look at one of their questions to see if they can help us figure out "What Unitarian Universalists believe?"

This is Question #1 on the Belief-O-Matic quiz:

**1. What is the number and nature of the deity (God, gods, higher power)?** Choose one. (There is...

*Only one God--a corporeal spirit (has a body), supreme, personal God Almighty, the Creator.*

*Only one God--an incorporeal spirit, (no body), supreme, personal God Almighty, the Creator.*

*Multiple personal gods (or goddesses)*

*Impersonal Ultimate Reality (or life force, ultimate truth, cosmic order, absolute bliss, universal soul),*

*No God or supreme force. Or not sure. Or not important.*

*Or None of the above.*

This is a pretty important question when you're talking about religion: What is the nature of God? And it is one of those religious beliefs we UUs are not going to all agree on. The range of individual belief among UUs on this question probably covers every one of those choices. And that assumption, itself, tells us something very important about what we believe:

Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion, which allows its members to decide for themselves their own particular beliefs about God and other theological questions. We believe in freedom of religious thought, not only among *different* religions, but also within our own religion.

In other words, as our minister William Schulz says, "The individual is the ultimate source of religious authority." We decide. We choose for ourselves what we will believe, and we allow everyone else that same right -- as long as their beliefs do not infringe upon those of others.

Why did the UU cross the road? To support the chicken in its search for its own path.

Here another very important belief *about* religion which Unitarian Universalists hold in common. It's not asked directly in the *beliefnet* quiz, but it is implied in several of the questions.

UUs believe that all religions, of every age and culture, reveal truth and wisdom, from which we can, and should, learn, as does science, philosophy, psychology and all other areas of human inquiry. We feel we cannot limit ourselves to the revelations contained in a single book or set of scriptures already written. In fact, we believe that new religious truths are continuously being discerned and articulated and that it is our obligation to be open to new sources of enlightenment.

Another way to say that which you often hear, and which phrase I like a lot, is that "Revelation is not sealed." That is certainly a very, very important fundamental belief of Unitarian Universalism.

It seems to me that perhaps much of what we share as UUs are not the same religious beliefs but the same beliefs about religion.

Another thing I personally think should be included in any statement of what UUs have in common (which we, of course, share with the members of many other churches) is a belief in the importance of the religious community -- "the beloved community" it is often called.

Not everyone nowadays does. There are many individuals living in our country who agree with us, and with other religious liberals, on almost every other point. They've been named the "Cultural Creatives" by a couple of sociologists who wrote a book about

it and who estimate there to be about 50 million “Cultural Creatives” in the United States.

These Cultural Creatives love nature and are very concerned about the ecological health of the planet. They place a lot of value on social justice and on helping other people. They want more equality for women and minorities. They are concerned about how big corporations and reckless government are affecting everyone. Sound like anyone you know?

In fact, if you enjoyed taking the Belief-o-Matic Quiz, you might want to go to [www.culturalcreatives.org](http://www.culturalcreatives.org) and take *their* test to see if you are a Cultural Creative, too -- I'll bet you are. In fact, there are several UU jokes that fit the Cultural Creatives perfectly, too.

*You might be a UU (or a Cultural Creative):*

*if you gave more to the Sierra Club last year than you spent on your mother's Christmas present.*

*if you think the holy Trinity is reduce, reuse, and recycle.*

And my absolute favorite one! -- *You might be a UU (or a Cultural Creative):*

*If you have ever been in an argument about whether or not breast milk is vegan.*

But here is a UU joke that doesn't fit *all* the Cultural Creatives,

*You might be a UU if you think a Holy Day of Obligation is when it's your turn to make the coffee at church.*

You see, the difference between us and most of the Cultural Creatives is -- they don't go to church at all! Not to our church, not to any church.

I'm not sure exactly why. They've been disillusioned by traditional religion, maybe. They think of themselves as “individualists”. They're just out of the habit of getting up and out on Sunday morning to go to church. There are many reasons, I'm sure, why more Cultural Creatives are not in the pews of UU congregations, or Quaker meeting houses or liberal Christian churches or reform synagogues or other religious communities where they could be in communion with people who hold values similar to their own.

They, the majority of Cultural Creatives, just don't seem to value having a religious community for themselves or for their children, but we Unitarian Universalists do -- or we wouldn't be sitting here in church on this beautiful April morning, we'd be down at Einstein Brothers Bagels or some place, sitting outside and drinking a latte with the rest of them.

I'm very glad to have found a church home, and I feel sorry for those Cultural Creatives who haven't. Because, something Paul H. Ray discovered in his study is that these people feel very much alone. They feel powerless. Despite the fact that there are 50 million others in this country just like them, they feel as if they are the only people on

earth who think the same way they do about environmental issues, about social issues, about political issues, about the human potential.

As people who *do* value the religious community, which for us is a UU church - we don't have to feel alone. We have each other. We have an institution well equipped support us in our "culturally creativity". We are very, very fortunate, I believe, in this regard.

There is one last belief I want to put forth as the one that is most fundamental to our UU identity, a sort of "bottom-line" UU belief. And it is measured by a number of the Belief-O-Matic questions:

We believe in the worth and dignity of every human being (our first UU principle), and we also believe that humans are just one part of the "interdependent web of all existence", as we say in our Seventh UU Principle.

We believe these things so strongly that we hold up right ethics, right actions, over right belief. It truly doesn't matter to another UU -- or at least, it shouldn't matter -- what you believe, what spiritual path feels like the best path for you. Absolutely all that counts is how you treat other people, how you treat yourself, and how you treat all living and nonliving things who share this planet with us.

Consequently, we can disagree on many theological points and still be Unitarian Universalists.

We can believe there is *one God, a supreme, personal Creator who has a body and sits on a cloud, and hears your prayers for more rain or less rain or whatever it is you want* - - and be a Unitarian Universalist-- as long as we affirm the worth and dignity of every human being -- even those who don't think the same way as we do.

We can believe Jesus is the one incarnation of God or that there are countless incarnations of God or that there are no incarnations of God -- and be a Unitarian Universalist -- as long as we respect the interdependent web of life of which we are all apart. And try to make our life's choices consistent with that value.

We can believe that souls are judged immediately upon death and are sent to heaven or hell or we can believe there is no heaven or hell -- and be a Unitarian Universalist. As long as we pursue justice, equity and compassion in every interaction we have.

And, if you told Belief-O-Matic that revering nature should be fundamental and that doing good works and acting compassionately are of the highest priority -- it doesn't really matter what the rest of your answers on the quiz were. You can be a Unitarian Universalist.

In fact, even if your Belief-O-Matic scores revealed that your beliefs are more consistent with those of the Quakers, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Sikhs-- even... the Republicans! You can still be a Unitarian Universalist, if you want to. We have no test of belief for membership in our church. We have only a covenant, an agreement, to treat each other and all of creation, as we would like to be treated ourselves -- as another famous "Cultural Creative" once said.

Well, I hope you had fun taking the Belief-O-Matic quiz, if you did, and that it gave you some insights about your beliefs. And I hope you've had some fun here this morning and that I've offered you at least one or two things to think about. And I hope some of this will prompt you into taking a stab at crafting your own "elevator speech". Here's mine. It's pretty long; I hope we get on at about the 23rd floor, at least.

Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion, which allows its members to decide for themselves their own particular beliefs about theological and spiritual matters.

Unitarian Universalists believe that spiritual truths can be found in the teachings of all religions and of all areas of human thought, and that, rather than having been decided for once and for all, hundreds or thousands of years ago, religious truth is still being uncovered and will continue to be revealed until the end of time.

Unitarian Universalists believe that each individual is obligated to engage in his or her own personal search for spiritual truth and meaning, using reason, intellect, experience and intuition as the final judge of what is true. We believe that our individual searches will be aided and enhanced by active participation in a free and open religious community of fellow seekers.

But, more than anything else, Unitarian Universalists believe that, in the final analysis, the only thing in this life that really matters is that we love your neighbors as we love ourselves. As Bill Schulz said in the affirmation we read aloud today, that we acknowledge our responsibility to "hold the whole world in our hands."

That's what Unitarian Universalists believe.

Now, here's your last UU joke for the morning:

*You might be a UU if ....*

*When you dress for a fancy dinner, you wear a little black dress, pearls -- and Birkenstocks!*

*And your wife thinks you look just great!*