

“Articulating Our Faith”
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Whether or not you like the word “evangelism,” I like the definition that UU minister John Morgan gives: “sharing our dream with others in order to transform the world.” I was called to the UU ministry in 1994. Now, maybe I should stop right here and say something further about that term, “called.” In a more traditional faith, a clergyperson would usually say that they were “called by God.” UU ministers also speak of being called, but, of course, since our theistic beliefs vary, most of us stick with saying we felt “called.”

Anyway, this “call” didn’t necessarily make a lot of sense, considering first of all that I had two very young children. And where would I go to seminary? I was living in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. It’d be impossible for me to move to Chicago or Berkeley, where our UU seminaries are.

I ended up applying and being accepted to Moravian Theological Seminary, because it was the only seminary within driving distance of Emmaus. I was raised Unitarian Universalist, and I was nervous about being surrounded with Christian students and professors, along with their beliefs and church language.

My experience at Moravian, thankfully, turned out to be a very positive one, in part because everyone was very accepting of me and they were interested in hearing about Unitarian Universalism. However, my first attempts to explain who we are and what we believe, were, as some young people would say, “Awk-ward!” I found that I was extremely lame at giving some kind of coherent and concise explanation!

This reminds me of a story a colleague, Tim Temerson, tells.

He was in his local bank, opening up a new account. As the branch manager typed in his information, she asked what he did for a living. He replied that he was studying to be a minister. “Oh, really? What denomination?” When he said, “Unitarian Universalist” (and you know how when you reveal this information, you never know what’s going to happen next, right? You could get a blank stare, they might ask if you’re associated with the ‘Moonies,’ or they might say, “Oh, I’ve never heard of that.”)

Well, in my colleague's case, the woman said she had heard of Unitarian Universalism, and that what she had heard sounded pretty interesting. Rev. Temerson says at this point, "I started to get a little nervous. You see, I knew it wouldn't be long before I would be asked the dreaded question –the question that so many Unitarian Universalists struggle to answer, especially when talking to someone new to our faith tradition –"What do Unitarian Universalists believe?"

I don't know if you've heard the term, "elevator speech." This is when you have the length of a typical elevator ride to explain something, like Unitarian Universalism, to your fellow elevator user. Not a lot of time.

As future UU ministers, we were all encouraged to have an elevator speech at the ready, for moments just like the one Rev. Temerson is talking about. He had his elevator speech prepared. However, he continues, "Whenever I got this question, my mind always seemed to turn to Jell-O...On this particular day, the speech, which mentioned things like freedom, the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and social justice –that speech simply escaped me."

What Rev. Temerson DID say to the bank manager was uncomfortably similar to some of those first embarrassing explanations I gave my fellow seminary students. In both situations, the listeners' faces showed obvious confusion and lack of understanding as they smiled and nodded their heads politely, saying, "Hmmm...that sounds interesting" (with a fake smile) would be a typical response.

I had the distinction of being the first UU who had ever crossed the threshold of the Moravian Theological Seminary in its nearly 200-year history. And yes, I was welcomed, and I am grateful for that. But I was also fortunate in that I was able to be in regular contact via the Internet with UU students across the country. I remember one e-mail exchange in particular with a student who was attending Meadville Lombard, the UU seminary in Chicago. I was still envious of those UU students who were able to be immersed in a UU environment. When I expressed my regret at not being able to be a student there, he surprised me with his reply: "There are some great things about being surrounded by other UUs. But, actually, you have an advantage," he said. Really?? I thought. "By being at a non-UU seminary, you have to learn how to explain Unitarian Universalism to other people. We don't get that here."

It was one of those moments when I kind of went, ".....huh!" This fact had never occurred to me. This fellow seminarian, now a minister, Rev. James Kubal-Komoto, I suspect, has forgotten this exchange. But, for me, it was a kind of mini-

epiphany. He was right. Being forced to learn how to explain UUism hadn't FELT like an advantage, but I decided I was going to make the most of those opportunities. I didn't want to keep on feeling inadequate every time I was asked "that question," and I went to work on getting better at explaining Unitarian Universalism.

My approach was to memorize our seven Principles and Purposes and our Sources. I mean, that's pretty much all we have to go by, right? With that under my belt, at least I had a coherent answer. I still had the Jell-O brain issue, when my brain went jiggly, but at least I could spit out something about the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that we didn't have a creed, but rather upheld each person's right to search for truth and meaning. That people have different beliefs, and some were even agnostics or atheists.

That was enough to lead to some pretty interesting conversations with my fellow students.

About half-way through seminary, I was invited by the district executive of the Joseph Priestly District to be a growth consultant for a tiny congregation up in Athens-Sheshequin. Way up in Bradford County, near the New York border.

I led a workshop for them, focusing on how to talk with other people about Unitarian Universalism. I passed out copies of the Principles and Purposes cards. I then told them that they should memorize the Principles. One of the women looked at me, and then at the person next to her, with a mixture of shock and amazement, and said, "She's serious!"

I do think the Principles and Purposes are a valuable document. Actually, let's just take a quick look at them. They're on page Roman numeral x of our gray hymnals. (Read them).

Former UUA president, Bill Sinkford, says,

"The Purposes and Principles have become an integral part of our denominational life. Many of our congregations print them on their orders of service. They open our hymnal. They hang in our vestibules. Many of us carry them in our wallets. They serve us well as a covenant, holding out a vision of a more just world to which we all aspire despite our differences, and articulating our promise to walk together toward making that vision a reality, whatever our theology."

Although I'm no longer a young zealous seminary student (thank God!), I still think that using some of the language in the Principles and Purposes to help explain Unitarian Universalism is a good idea. But I've come to recognize that it's not enough. As Rev. Sinkford says, "They frame a broad ethic, but not a theology."

Our Principles and Purposes are like a compass; they point us in the right direction. They are an ethical guide. But spiritually, they don't have much to offer. I mean, how many people, lying on their deathbed, would ask to have the Principles and Purposes read to them for "solace and support?" (Rev. Walter Royal Jones)

No, they contain no hint of the holy. Another former UUA President, Gene Pickett, got it right, I think, when he said, "they describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves."

They point us in the right direction but they don't show us the way. That's one of the challenges of being a UU. It's up to us to engage in our personal spiritual quest, to find the path that suits us, to learn through direct experience what is sacred, what is holy, for us, how to live a spiritual life, as we would define it. And it's up to us here at UUFP to support each other, to talk with each other, to encourage each other on our varied paths.

Being a Unitarian Universalist puts demands on us. I believe that we are charged to become better acquainted with the "depths," as Eugene Pickett describes the spiritual search. As we do so, we become more grounded in our personal faith, and we become more comfortable, and effective, in communicating our faith to others.

Last Sunday, I led a workshop on congregational growth for the members of our Board of Trustees and the Membership Committee. We focused on the process of inviting someone to attend a service at UUFP. The timing was good, because, as you heard earlier this morning, March 17th is "Bring-a-Friend" Sunday.

During the workshop, we talked about the "elevator speech." We looked at the Principles and Purposes cards. And we recognized that, when someone asks, "What is Unitarian Universalism?" trying to answer that question directly can be really intimidating. So, we got rid of the cards. Seriously, though, I do think handing someone one of those cards can be helpful. But it's not enough.

As I designed the workshop, I was re-thinking my former recommendation to depend so much on memorizing those cards. I realized that trying to answer directly, in an intellectual way, takes us **outside** ourselves and what **we** believe and why **we** are Unitarian Universalists. With a direct answer, it's like we're trying desperately to be a Wikipedia article! And we're bound to fail.

In our society, when we're asked a question, we're expected to answer it. But, I thought, let's think "paradoxical." What ~~would~~—~~happen~~—~~if~~—~~we~~ ~~did~~—~~the~~—opposite (that makes it paradoxical? What if we didn't answer the question? What if, instead, we **redirected** the question?

We could say instead, "Well, what **I** like about UUism (or my UU fellowship) is..." When we got to this part of the workshop, and I proposed redirecting the question and making it more personal, I could see the tension going out of everyone's faces. And here are some of the things we came up with...

"What **I** like about it is...

The music

Its liberal viewpoints

We're free to search for our own spiritual path

It's inclusive

It's diverse

We believe in deeds not creeds

It's intellectually and spiritually stimulating

We have a good coffee hour

These are all personally meaningful responses that invite further conversation on a personal level. And isn't that where we want to be when we're discussing something that's so meaningful to us?

As the late UU minister Forrest Church put it, "religion has little to do with a particular body of beliefs or practices; it represents instead a gradual process of awakening to the depths and possibilities of life." A process of awakening to the depths and possibilities of life. Isn't that why we love Unitarian Universalism? Because that's exactly what our congregations enable us to do. Awaken. The congregation nurtures us; we nurture each other, as we awaken to those depths and to those possibilities of life.

I hope that you will invite someone to attend a UUFPP service. At the very least, they will get to see why you get up and come here on Sunday mornings.