

What We Love
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“What do Unitarian Universalists believe?” This summer in my role as a hospital chaplain, I have been asked some version of that question more times than I could possibly count. Whether it is by patients, family members, staff, or even a fellow chaplain, there is almost always a well-meaning curiosity behind the question, often accompanied by a confused facial expression. I imagine many of us have found ourselves in a similar situation, where our conversation partner asks us to speak for our whole tradition, and expects us to list a particular creed or set of concrete beliefs - things that one often associates with organized religion. When I first claimed Unitarian Universalism as my faith, facing that question generated some reactions that I would rather not experience if given the choice. Perhaps you know what I am talking about. That internal flutter of panic; that flurry of mental scrambling as I search for the best four-sentence explanation that almost always includes the words “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and a vivid description of a flaming chalice. In my hospital setting, where we strive to serve in an interfaith capacity, I’ve gotten pretty good at automatically delivering the following response: “Unitarian Universalism is a creedless faith tradition that recognizes, celebrates, and seeks to live out the wisdom inherent to many religions and philosophies.” A succinct and comprehensive answer, which I would suggest is inviting to almost anyone regardless of what beliefs they may or may not hold. But there is something about that answer that really bothers me. It’s too formulaic. It’s too bland. It’s too safe.

Now, for a hospital, bland and safe seems to be the way to go, something that my patients who complain about their hospital meals can often attest to. But if there is one thing I know for sure about Unitarian Universalists, it is that we are not called to be bland...and we are definitely not called to be safe. Yes, we strive to celebrate every individual’s journey and worth, and we come together to create communities where those who have been hurt or isolated are welcomed and held in care. But we do not do that by being safe. We do not do that by following traditional social norms. We come together to be radical. Unitarian Universalists are heretics of love.

This image of Unitarian Universalists as heretics of love, which to me is the perfect image of our tradition, was inspired by a group discussion in which I participated nearly two years ago. It was at the UUA’s Multicultural Leadership School, during a meeting with our denomination’s president, Rev. Peter Morales. We were discussing the UU “elevator speech,” that previously alluded to four-sentence explanation of our faith. When we asked Peter Morales what his response to the sometimes dread-inducing question of “What do Unitarian Universalists believe?” would be, he gave us a single sentence. His answer has stuck with me since that muggy August day in Boston- “What we love is more important than what we believe.” All I could think in that moment was “Amen.”

But wait, you might say, how is that an answer? Doesn’t it just lead to the inevitable follow-up question of “Ok...well what do you love?” Absolutely! But I find that question to be far more exciting and informative, not to mention appropriate, to answer than the original one. The way that I see it, as Unitarian Universalists, we love whatever is in need of love. Such a response may seem overly simplified or even trite at first, but its full complexity is realized when we look at what we mean by “love.” To borrow from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., love in our

tradition is not limited to “a sentimental or affectionate sense.” Love is a powerful force that goes beyond acceptance or admiration, to a proactive effort to cultivate necessary understanding and change. As heretics of love, we are called to bring about that understanding and change through acts of solidarity with the most marginalized members of society. As heretics of love, we are called to say yes to the oppressed, by challenging systems and practices that have been maintained throughout history as a means of keeping the privileged in power. Love in our tradition, love in religion in general, is not simply open arms at the church doors or a shared celebration of a joyous occasion. Love in Unitarian Universalism is linked arms at the statehouse gates, it is our acknowledgment of and our sharing in another’s pain. Love is what motivates and follows the recognition that to do nothing in response to injustice is to contribute to its continuation. As Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh says “To participate in oppressive and unjust social systems is to widen the gap between rich and poor and thereby aggravate the situation of social injustice.” He writes that “for us to be a healthy civilization, everyone must be born with an equal right to education, work, food, shelter, world citizenship, and the ability to circulate freely and settle on any part of the Earth. Political and economic systems that deny one person these rights harm the whole human family.” As heretics of love, we do not simply believe in the inherently equal nature of these rights; we continue to work towards a society in which everyone has the equal opportunity to exercise them. Our heretical love calls us to honor our interconnected existence by recognizing that only systemic approaches to injustice can bring about the change necessary to save all of humanity.

Our history as a faith tradition is filled with exemplars of this kind of ceaselessly active love. Women and men who were the prophetic forbearers of Unitarian Universalism created a pulse of justice for our living tradition that beats even stronger today. Take for example Margaret Fuller, a Unitarian who sought to empower women in American society by emphasizing the equality of all people before God. Later on in her life, her love took her to Italy, where she became such an active force in the revolutionary struggle to end oppressive poverty, that her own freedom was threatened. Or consider Benjamin Rush, an 18th century Universalist who believed that social action was an essential element of his faith. He stood for the end of slavery, as well as the need for just change in many areas that are still of importance today, including prison reform and solidarity with the poor. Our more recent history demonstrates a commitment to loving the oppressed through various forms of action and protest. Many here may know the story of the Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister who was among the several murdered in a civil rights protest in Selma, Alabama. Others may recall the General Assembly vote of 1996 in which delegates overwhelmingly supported a call for the legalization of same-sex marriages. Just last year, thousands of Unitarian Universalists descended upon tent city in Phoenix, Arizona to bear witness to the inhumane treatment of the thousands of people whose dignity and rights were so severely violated by an otherizing and fear-based immigration system. Today we are still a part of that very real fight, voicing our demands for policy reforms and participating in fasts to demonstrate solidarity with our human family across all borders.

Perhaps more salient than ever in recent weeks is our call to love in response to the deeply ingrained forms of racism in today’s society. In the wake of a painful and horrifically “legally sound” verdict, which let a man go free after he for no reason other than his own prejudice proceeded to follow and shoot to death an innocent and unarmed black teenage boy, we must be willing to be heretics of love. We must be willing to say loudly for all to hear that we will no

longer stand for a system that turns people into criminals solely based on the color of their skin. We must take on our role as lovers of the oppressed in this nation, those whose lives are threatened simply by walking home, by giving of ourselves and recognizing that the injustice of racism is a plague that impacts every person of every color.

There is another piece to love that is naturally engaged if we are to truly live out our role as heretics of love. It is easy for us to say yes to the oppressed. It is easy for us to show compassion for and commitment to those who are victims of injustice, those whose dignity is denied by systems that were built to keep them powerless. But what about the oppressor? What about those who are in a place of privilege, the people and groups whose actions are what perpetuate those systems so that they, consciously or unconsciously, can reap the benefits of holding another down? The simple answer is that we love the oppressors too. Love is the strength to stay in relationship with people whose words or deeds are laced with ignorance, hatred, or pain, because doing so is the only way to reignite their spark of inherent good. Love is not simply the willingness to say yes to the oppressed. It is also the ability to say yes to the oppressor... by saying no. Despite initial impressions, that idea is not a contradiction, nor is saying “no” incongruent to our universalist faith tradition. Rather, saying the “no of love” is an essential piece of who we are and what we do. You see, when we say “no” in love, we are not rejecting the person. We are rejecting the actions or words that have caused suffering, humiliation, and injustice; we are rejecting the violation of that person’s inherent goodness. The “no of love” is a “yes” because it acknowledges the capacity, and necessity, for change. Our “no” to the oppressor is a “yes” because it demonstrates our refusal to settle for anything less than universal unity, and our commitment to ignite every individual’s spark of good.

It is important that we recall the heretical love that drives our “no” to the oppressor if we are to truly create systemic change. Without recalling that our reason for saying no is to bring about change that affirms that individual’s or group’s innate capacity for good, we will only continue the cycle of oppression by demonizing, rather than break the cycle by staying in relationship. It is those efforts in which several of our principles can be powerful reminders of our call to be heretics of love. Consider what does it mean to be heretical when we seek to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person? What does it mean to be heretical when we seek justice, equity and compassion in human relations? How do we demonstrate acceptance of one another and encourage spiritual growth in our congregations? All of these principles speak of a process that emphasizes our roots in universal love. All of these principles require a committed effort on our part to be with one another, to affirm one another, even in those moments when it would be “cleaner” to turn away. Do we only accept those parts of ourselves that fit the “good person” box? Do we only love people when they act in ways that build up? When we turn away from or deny the oppressor’s humanity and inherent capacity for good, we deny the power of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. We remember the inherent worth and dignity of all because we know that there will be moments when people will make mistakes, sometimes painful ones. We are called to affirm justice, equity, and compassion in all relations because we know that those who act in hurtful ways are likely experiencing significant pain, even if they do not realize it themselves. We demonstrate acceptance and encourage spiritual growth because we know that it is in our nature to make mistakes, but we will only try again if we are held in love by those around us. Our Unitarian tradition teaches us that we have an innate capacity for good and that we are built for love. Unfortunately, our history also demonstrates that we have several less than

stellar qualities, that we will think and do things that do not always match that potential. Yet, our Universalist tradition teaches us that we are still worthy of love. When we look at these two sides of our tradition, it paints not just a beautiful picture of who we are and can be, but also calls us to love in a way that brings about change. So it stands that when we love whatever is need of love, we endeavor to do what must be done to save our world from the divisive systems and attitudes that breed fear, discrimination, inequality, and violence. We freely give of ourselves in service of those who do not have a choice except to fight, and we say no to the oppressive status quo, because we believe we can do better.

It is this heretical love that drives our commitment to social justice. As feminist theologian Carter Heyward writes, “to love is to topple unjust structures, bringing down the principalities and powers of domination and control at all levels of human social relations.” To be a heretic of love requires not only coming to the aid of those who are most aggrieved by injustice, but also challenging those who are responsible for creating it, with an affirmation of the inherent good and worth within all people driving both acts. In the words of Rev. Richard Gilbert, we “live under a prophetic imperative to act in love for justice,” and “need to be equally skilled in comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” Our heretical love of whatever is in need of love calls us to engage in social justice initiatives that move beyond working within current structures to working to create new, more equitable structures through systemic change. It may be a difficult and seemingly endless task to work for such institutional transformation, but that is precisely why this work is where our heretical love is needed the most.

When we recognize the heretical love that is inherent to our faith, that is the driving force behind our social justice efforts, we begin to understand that social justice is the most important religious ritual in our tradition. As a religious ritual, social justice embodies what is at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Action, more specifically, love in action. Social justice driven by love is the religious ritual that serves as a common thread, and binds together the many pieces of our faith tradition and our diverse predecessors in history. Its relevance to our faith leads me to see it as our most important religious ritual. As such, it is a form of worship that reminds us of Unitarian Universalism’s nature as a missional faith. And while our living tradition has the ritual of social justice evolving to take many forms, as it can and should, its effects are forever consistent and relevant. Social justice is the religious ritual that helps us to remember and honor, to do and to be what we love.

May it be so.