

“Is There a Unitarian Universalist Theology?”
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What’s something that’s important to you about being a Unitarian Universalist?
(Diversity of belief, lack of a creed?)

It may be true that our theological diversity, our lack of a creed and a “test” for membership are what attracted us to UU’ism, but when you think about it, how can a community be built on the differences we have in common? We know that communities are bound together by similarities. The strongest communities are those which share core values and beliefs.

Our new fellowship building has been the occasion for strong community-building. This huge project has drawn us together like none I’ve even seen, but in listening to some of our old-time members it sounds like what’s happening now is reminiscent of the early days, with everyone pitching in to make the fellowship work. Somehow, just being in the new space, I can feel the fellowship, in the broad sense of the word. The community we talk about so often feels more tangible, somehow.

As you know, the topic I want to explore this morning has to do with a Unitarian Universalist theology. A good question for all writers and speakers to ask themselves as they put together what they’re going to say is, “Who cares?” It’s good to address this question right off the bat. So let’s get it out of the way. “Who cares whether or not there’s a UU theology that we hold in common?” In other words, “Why does it matter?”

Usually, this is a question I would keep to myself, but now I’ve put it out there, so for the next 15 minutes or so, you will probably keep repeating it to yourself. But that’s OK. It’s my job to try to answer the question of, “Who cares?” You can let me know later if I succeeded or not.

And maybe before we begin thinking any further about theology, a definition of terms would be a good idea. “Theo,” from the Greek “theos,” literally means “God.” Theology, though, has a broader meaning. It is any system of religious

beliefs and theory. Some people like to systematize things. So, if I figured out all of my beliefs and put them together into a system, I could dust off my hands and say, “Well, good –that’s done!” and crawl back into bed. I could.

If I did that, though, I would be saying that working out my system of beliefs –my theology – was simply an intellectual exercise. A theology that exists only in the mind or on paper is like a theory with no practical application –interesting, but ultimately useless.

“It matters what we believe,” Sophia Lyon Fahs said. It matters what we believe because it is our beliefs, our theology, that form our world view. And it is our view of the world and our place in it that determine how we live our lives.

As dissenters from tradition, Unitarians and Universalists often rallied behind what they did not agree with. It was their disagreements with the prevailing Protestant beliefs that led Unitarians and Universalists to clarify and articulate what, then, they DID believe.

The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, former president of Starr King School for the Ministry, believes that our search for a common theology needs to be understood as a search for “solidarity and obligation.” What is it that makes us want to stand together? What is it that makes us feel obliged to take action?

She identifies four core beliefs that we have rejected and which, in turn, have helped us to develop a common theology.

We do not believe that God is “the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens, such that there is no exercise of human freedom.” We may or may not believe that God exists, but we agree that there is “some measure of freedom accessible to every living being.” For us, freedom is an essential characteristic of life (Parker). Freedom allows us to make choices. Having the power to choose means we have the power of self-determination, of self-actualization.

We do not “hold to the view that there will be an ultimate separation of the saved from the damned by which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering.” We may or may not relate to the idea of salvation, but we agree that all people have inherent worth.

We do not “hold the view that there is one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places.” Well, unless we’re talking about Unitarian Universalism. No, not really. Not even Unitarian Universalism. We may be devoted to a particular religious practice, but we agree that revelation is ongoing. As Parker says, “The sacred impulse towards justice, compassion and equity moves in many times and places, in myriad ways that call to us and teach us.”

We do not hold the view that “salvation is to be found beyond this world –in some life after death or a world other than this world.” We may have different views of the world, but we agree that it’s the here and now that matter, and that is proper focus of our time and attention. “One world at a time,” as Thoreau said.

Our personal theology creates moral imperatives. It influences not just how we see the world and how we think, but it calls us to action. If there is power in a personal theology, there is collective power in a shared theology.

If you or I believe in the right of freedom, there are things we can do as individuals to promote and protect freedom, whether we’re talking about freedom of speech, the freedom to vote for the candidate of one’s choice, or the freedom to walk down the street. But if we gather together in a community of like believers, our power to create positive change is multiplied.

If you or I believe in the inherent worth of all people, that belief will influence how we each relate to others. There are things we can do as individuals to mitigate instances where the worth of a person or a group of people has been denied. But if we are part of a religious community which holds this belief in common, then we are called as a group to create justice where justice does not exist. If we work together to seek justice for those who are oppressed, our power is multiplied many times over.

If you or I believe that truth continues to be revealed at any time and in any place, we know that we may each grow in wisdom as long as we are open to hearing new truth and coming to new understandings. We might think of consciousness-raising over the past 50 or 60 years with regard to what it means to be a woman in our society, or a person of color, or a gay or bisexual person, or a transgender

or intersex person. If we have raised our own consciousness, it's one thing, but if we gather as a community that shares these new understandings, it gives us that much more power to apply our revelations to our work in the larger world.

The same thing is true with our belief that it's the here and now that matter. As individuals, that belief may translate into actions that result in some positive change. How much more power we have when we work together as a community united in belief and purpose.

Freedom, inherent worth, ongoing revelation and the focus on the here and now: It's somewhat artificial to talk about these four aspects of our common theology as if they were separate, stand-alone concepts. Because they are more like strands in a cord that are all woven together. It's the understanding of the right and necessity of freedom combined with our understanding of people's inherent worth combined with our growing understanding of the nature of all things combined with our understanding that it is what we do in THIS life that matters. They all flow together to create a life-revering, life-promoting, and life-sustaining theology.

It is our common theology that causes us to stand together for what we believe. It is our theology that points to something larger than just ourselves as individuals. We become a part of all the forces on the earth that honor life, promote life and sustain life.

I am so grateful and so excited that we are creating for ourselves a space that will nurture and sustain us. When I see members of our community cleaning, spackling and repairing the roof, the walls, the floors of our new space, it feels as if we are healing ourselves. I think we're healing from constant drain of struggling to simply survive. We can all feel the high level of energy we have now, yes?

Our passion as a community has been re-ignited. We're not just passionate about having a new building. I have the sense that we've also regained our passion for being Unitarian Universalists —and that we once again recognize the power we have as a community to make the world a better place. Life-revering, life-promoting, life-sustaining. Our theology gives us the power to make a difference. Our theology calls us to action. How will we use the energy of this religious community to honor life, promote life and sustain life?