

Who Are We?
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from “The Free Mind” by Rev. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842)

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith: Which opens itself to light from whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.

I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances... : Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.

I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion: Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering: Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God’s children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.

from an essay by Rev. Rebecca Parker (contemporary UU minister)

The communion that is the given reality of our lives can be broken. Our relationality can be twisted into dominance and submission, exploitation and fragmentation. Ecosystems can be destroyed. Just and sustaining community that enables individual lives to flourish can be fractured. We can lose touch with one another, with ourselves, and with the body of this earth.

But communion can be restored. That which hinders life can be addressed and sometimes overcome. Working in cooperation with the mysterious presence that upholds and heals life, we can turn our hands to efforts to restore communion. Success is never a given, but the very act of addressing life with tenderness is itself a repair of communion. It matters that our tender fingertips be engaged in acts of meticulous mercy in the world.

As we look towards the future of Unitarian Universalism in the United States this is the theology and the practice we need: attentive focus on the ways beautiful life is at risk in our world, and meticulous mercy directed towards freeing life from that which hinders it.

Sermon

“Who *are* we?”

Are we “sinners in the hands of an angry God?” Or are we children of God all destined for heaven?

Is our eternal fate predestined from birth? Or do we hold our fates in our own hands?

Well, these questions use words that for some of us might not even carry much meaning at all anymore, or that we would feel we need to radically translate.

But these were the sorts of questions that gave rise to divisions in early New England religion that helped to give birth to both the Unitarians and the Universalists as they grew away from Puritan and Calvinist roots. And here we are centuries later in a Puritan founded Unitarian Universalist church!

So – who are we as Unitarian Universalists today? And do we have any sort of shared idea as to who we think we are as human beings?

When my parents joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation (coincidentally just about the time of the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America in 1961) the word that most appealed to me (as I approached early adolescence) does not appear in those questions I shared at the very outset.

That missing word? Freedom! That’s what sounded great to me about Unitarian Universalism, the freedom to believe whatever you wanted. No creed, no hard and fast beliefs to which everyone had to adhere. I could, for example, believe in God... or not. I could believe in heaven and hell... or not. And so on! How liberating! Especially for an almost teenager.

In the first reading, from one of the most important leaders of early American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, we heard the word “free” over and over again. And we still to this day affirm freedom of belief as central to our UU religious way of life. “Deeds not creeds” we say.

This said though... it is *not* actually the case that we UUs say you can believe whatever you darn well feel like, sort of on a whim. Rather, we are meant to come to our beliefs and affirmations through, as our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle puts it, the “free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning.” Ah: “responsible” paired with the word “free.” So it is more like this: We are free to believe what our free and responsible search brings us to feel we *must* believe.

So yes, “freedom of belief” remains a signature defining affirmation for “who we are” as Unitarian Universalists. But it is not all that we are.

Backing up a few steps historically:

Who we are as Unitarian Universalists has always been related to who we, Unitarians and Universalists, have thought human beings are.

And to begin with, the responsible freedom of belief is both a value that Unitarians and Universalists have long held dear, and is therefore, in our view, related to who we think human beings are.

Our own Rev. Ebenezer Gay, who served as our minister here for sixty-nine years during the 18th century, was one of the New England religious leaders who led the way towards what became the Unitarianism of the next generation and the next (Channing's and Emerson's and Margaret Fuller's and others). And Gay affirmed that we humans had the inborn ability to think through religious questions for ourselves, and he affirmed that we had the inborn moral capacity to develop in virtue and goodness. In other words, humans: *not* inherently sinful and evil, but capable of free thought and goodness.

As for the early Universalists? They believed that a loving God (and they couldn't bring themselves to conceive of God as anything other than loving) would welcome all souls into heaven, perhaps after some purifying work, but all souls eventually welcome. Opponents said that the doctrine of universal salvation would encourage license; since there would be no motivation to be good, you could have all the nasty fun you wanted without fear of eternal damnation. But the Universalists asserted that the example of God's love and the example of the love manifested in the life of Jesus would encourage often sinful and erring humans to be better, kinder, more loving, discovering in the process that "being good" was in fact the happier way to live.

Well, these are just a few hints as to who we were in the early years of American Unitarianism and Universalism, but they also serve as hints as to who we still are as Unitarian Universalists: affirming, paraphrasing some of our stated Principles, the worth and dignity of each person, the value of freedom, and the importance of good works, of seeking justice in the context of the interdependent web of life of which we are a part.

This said (and a bit drily said), the second reading, from contemporary UU minister, Rebecca Parker, suggests additional and a little more poetic warmer nuance for today's Unitarian Universalism.

Yes, we do still believe in individual freedom, but we are learning to give more weight to community – even "communion" to use Parker's word – and on the many ways in which we must work together (and not by any means only with Unitarian Universalists) in order to sustain "beautiful life" through "meticulous mercy". Parker didn't use the word love, but she could have. And whether as a Unitarian Universalist these days you believe in God or not, it is fair to say that the Universalist affirmation of a loving God still lives in our UU lives in the form of universal love. And clearly what the world needs now, to quote the wisdom of Hal David, is more love, sweet love.

Look, we UUs, like anyone paying attention, know that human beings are capable of terrible evil, but we know too that we are also capable of great good, and we further know that our individual flourishing is not possible without the flourishing of human life and of all life.

I said as much last week when I asserted that the future well-being of life on earth is dependent in good measure on more and more of us coming to realize that we are not

only individuals, but that we are part of the larger life, larger Self, larger body of the world.

Well, *all* of this is a mouthful.

But it's a mouthful that has made me proud to be part of this religious movement we call Unitarian Universalism, still a UU after well over fifty years, and still with you here after over thirty years.

More importantly, it's a mouthful, or several mouthfuls, that to my mind offers hope for our shared future, a future dependent upon, in Channing's language, setting no bounds to our love, a future dependent upon, in Rebecca Parker's language, meticulous mercy towards freeing life from all that hinders it.

Further, fortunately it is not only Unitarian Universalists who share such affirmations and who are moved to live accordingly.

For example: Everyone – millions! – who came together around the planet in the Global Climate Strike on Friday, at least intuitively it seems to me, understands that each life matters *and* that only by coming together and working together can we ensure a better life for all.

Closer to home:

Whether or not we feel we receive comfort and solace from God, however we might understand God, we all know by experience the healing power of gathering in community – communion – at difficult times, most assuredly in the midst of grief. This itself says a great deal about who we are as Unitarian Universalists *and* as human beings. For however much we lift up the value of individual freedom, we know also that we need each other, and that we can and must heal and help each other, often just by our presence, just showing up – whether to a rally or to the side of a friend in need or to a memorial service. I've certainly experienced this healing in community; I'm pretty sure you all have too.

Who are we as human beings, UU or otherwise? Well, it seems to me that whatever and whomever else we are or with what group we might identify ourselves, we are individuals woven into the fabric of all life. This means that daily we have the ability and the choice – the freedom – as to whether and how we will contribute to the love and kindness of that fabric.

If this isn't a message that the world needs now, then I'm not sure what is. And it is a message that we Unitarian Universalists are, along with others, well-suited to offer to our neighbors whether near or far.

So may it be.

Who Are We?
Reflections by Davalene Cooper
First Parish in Hingham, The Old Ship Church
September 22, 2019

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious faith. Thus, it seems this would be an important part of who we are? What does it mean to be a liberal religious faith? The Rev. Curtis Reese, a former Baptist who became an influential Unitarian minister in the early 1900s, stated:

The basic content behind religious liberalism is spiritual freedom. Out of this basic content has come the conviction of the supremacy of reason, of the primary worth of character, and of the immediate access of man to spiritual source...the method of religious liberalism has always been that of reflection, not authority.

We see from Ken's sermon the importance of freedom, or of what has become our fourth principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And we also see in our principles the importance of the individual (the inherent worth and dignity of each person) and the importance of community (interdependent web of all existence). Our principles also affirm the importance of democratic processes in both our congregations and our larger society.

What does all of this mean in practice? It has always seemed to me that it means we are open to the experiences of each of us in answering the important question of what makes for a life of meaning, and that we support one another on that journey of self-discovery. It also seems that we must be able to accept that others might view the world and religious questions differently.

It also seems that we must differentiate religious liberalism from political liberalism. What is political liberalism? There are many definitions, but at its heart, political liberalism believes in the capacity of government to correct or cure social, economic, and moral problems. I admit this is a simplistic definition, but my time is limited!

My concern is that our Unitarian Universalist faith community may not make the distinction between religious liberalism and political liberalism today? How open are we to the experience of those with whom we disagree—either spiritually or politically? How can we live in community together if we disagree on fundamental issues of religion or politics?

For example, can one be a Unitarian Universalist and be pro-life? What if one's path to truth and meaning leads one to believe that life begins at conception and should not be ended except in very limited circumstance? Can one be a Unitarian Universalist and believe that government should not be funding program to feed those who are hungry? What if one believes that it is the responsibility of churches and non-profits to feed the hungry, rather than government? I guess my question comes down to can one be a Unitarian Universalist, believe and act for social justice as I believe our faith calls us to act, and be politically conservative. I think that is possible, because the call for social justice comes from our heart—and our faith is a heart-opening faith. But that call for social justice does not necessarily require a specific political perspective to do the work or support the work.

I have a friend who believes every woman should have the right to choose whether or not to bear a child, and that every state should protect that right in its laws. And this friend also believes that our U.S. Constitution has no right to privacy that

protects a woman's right to choose. This is not an unreasonable position as a matter of constitutional law, but would we welcome my friend in our UU Community?

As part of exploring this question of who we are, and to at least raise the question of how open we are to those who hold different views on the issues of our time—political or theological, I want to present a snapshot in time of who we are as Unitarian Universalist at this time. First, a cautionary note that statistics are always capable of being in error, and there are a lot of studies that track issues of religious identify. When it comes to UUs, the numbers are small, which means the stats could be off a bit. But nonetheless, we can learn something about who we are from them. These stats are taken from several surveys on religion in America, dating from 2008—2016.

1. First, the estimated number of UUs in the U.S. is 586,000, but almost half of those who identify as UUs are not members of a congregation.
2. Sixty percent of us are scattered almost equally in the Northeast, Midwest, and South, but 40% of us are in the West.
3. About 64% of us are women.
4. Our median age is 44, and nearly half of us are over 55.
5. 75% of us are white. 15% Hispanic, and 6% black.
6. We are highly educated, about 25% of us have graduated from college, and another 43% of us have post-graduate degrees.
7. We are generally affluent as compared to both the U.S. more generally, and to other faiths. 72% of us own our own home. 96% of us have health insurance.
8. We vote! 90% of us are registered to vote; the national average is 76%.
9. We are more likely to identify as Democrats. About 30% of us are independents, 3% Republican and 57% Democrat.
10. In 2016—70% identified as politically liberal, while 6% identified as politically conservative. We are said to be the most politically progressive religious group in the U.S.
11. We are less religious and far more secular in our view of religion. Only 37% of us identify as religious or somewhat religious. As opposed to 75% of the overall adult population.
12. In answer to the question does God exist, one fifth of UUs did not answer the questions. For the other 4/5, 72% answered yes, but of those, 40% do not believe God performs miracles. And only 60% of those believe that God helps them.

13. One study concluded that UUs were more skeptical in their religious worldview, as compared to other faiths. But UUs themselves tend to differ quite a bit among themselves on the fundamentals of religious faith. We hold a variety of theological positions.
14. About half of us were either born or raised with another religion before choosing to become a UU. 25% Mainline Christian (Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, UCC), 20% were Catholic, and 20% were Baptist.
15. About half of UUs are in mixed-religion relationships. The two greatest categories are Jewish and none.
16. And lastly, a 2016 Study found that 14% of us are LGBTQ.

What does this snapshot tell us about Unitarian Universalism? Are we a religiously liberal faith or have we moved, are we moving, to a politically liberal faith? And why might that matter? And I want to know why so many identified UUs do not come to church?

Ultimately, my question is how do we create the “beloved community” where all are welcomed and accepted for their entire selves and for all of the gifts they bring to our circle of community? How might we be welcoming to all of our diversity and differences? Should we have a “Bring a Republican to church day?”

Again, these are questions I have been asking myself as I ponder the question of who are we—and how do we accept those who think differently from some of us, or even most of us?

Thank you for listening.