

Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading

from “Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist,” by Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, revised edition published in 1985:

The original edition of the book from which this reading is taken was published in 1964 with the title “Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist.” I can still picture that book on my parents’ bookshelf. It was one of the inspirations moving them to leave the Presbyterian church of their upbringing to join a Unitarian Church in 1961. And the author, Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, I got to know many years later; and standing here in the Old Ship Meeting House Jack delivered what is called the “Charge to the Minister” at my installation as your minister.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I dedicate my life to the creative religious behavior of seeking persons, who learn to live in close touch with their times, who refuse to be psychically numbed to its problems, and who undertake to resolve them both within themselves and in their activities in the world. I can best summarize what I believe our liberal religious enterprise is up to with this paraphrase of John Winthrop’s sermon to the Puritans approaching Massachusetts Bay in 1630 aboard the ship *Arabella*: We must love one another. We must bear one another’s burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our sisters and brothers. We must rejoice together, mourn together, labor, suffer, and overcome together.

Sermon

In a significant way, the answer to “Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist” is simple: It’s because my parents, partly inspired by that book from which Pat read, joined the Freeport Long Island Unitarian Church when I was eleven years old.

Similar – or parallel – in a way to why we at Old Ship are Unitarian Universalist. It’s because our third and fourth ministers, Ebenezer Gay and Henry Ware, moved the congregation away from Calvinism and in the more theologically liberal direction of Unitarianism. Further, it’s because in 1961 the American Unitarian Association consolidated with the Universalist Church of America to form the Unitarian Universalist Association... making Old Ship Unitarian Universalist.

But back to my religious journey: I didn’t have to remain a Unitarian Universalist just because my parents had joined the Freeport church. That was a choice I made as an adult.

Why? I suppose it has at least a little something to do with the old joke: Which way did the Unitarian Universalist go at a fork in the road, with a sign in one direction pointing to heaven and a sign the other way pointing to a discussion group about heaven...

You guessed it...

And maybe that’s because at least for many of us UUs, conversation *is* a kind of heaven. And not just an intellectual heaven – that would be sort of dry and eventually unsatisfying. No,

the best conversations engage both head and heart. Not only that, the best conversations connect us person to person, whole person to whole person. This means that agree or disagree, as heartfelt ideas are expressed around a circle, participants begin to feel increasingly that they are not just talking *to* one another, they are *part of* one another. This is what happened for me around seminar tables in philosophy classes at Haverford College; and it has happened for the past thirty-five years here in the parlor (or on Zoom) at Old Ship.

You see for me, a delight in “conversation about things that matter” as you’ve often heard me put it – it’s been my mantra from the very beginning of my ministry – is near the center of why I am a Unitarian Universalist, and grateful to be a Unitarian Universalist.

And of critical importance, these conversations about things that matter do not have pre-digested answers to life’s great questions. So, for example, we stand beneath the night sky, amidst the cosmos, and no one is telling us we have to squeeze it all into a particular salvation story or myth. Or we read an ancient text – Bible or Buddha, Koran or Confucius – and no one is telling us what it must mean or that we must accept and believe it all word for word.

All ways of affirming that we are a religion of the free mind.

And the news gets better! We are also a religion of the open heart. In that spirit, it wouldn’t be enough if the conversation stayed in the parlor or coffee hour; the best conversations change lives... and maybe help change the world. The best conversations in our congregations lead us to the rest of our lives to do our bit to make a difference, to help heal a hurting, too often unjust, world – often doing so together, in community. In words, these conversations about things that matter help us to lead lives that matter.

All of this echoing, as we heard in the reading, the Puritan leader John Winthrop, who enjoined his people to love each other, share burdens, mourn and rejoice together.

So yes, however else we might characterize Unitarian Universalism, we are a religion of the free mind *and* the open and generous heart, moving us into the wider world.

And note this: Unitarian Universalism was not just invented yesterday or last year or even last century. Our tradition has ancient roots – in some ways back to Socrates, certainly back to Jesus, and including the great religious thinkers, mystics, and social reformers in the Unitarian and Universalist lineage: such as William Ellery Channing, Hosea Ballou, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Emerson, Clara Barton, Julia Ward Howe, Whitney Young, Pete Seeger, Bill Schulz (who preached at my installation when he was president of the UUA and then went on to lead Amnesty International USA).

And in a broader sense, in the spirit of the second part of our UU Principles and Purposes, the living tradition which we share includes sources of wisdom found in all the religions, includes as well the insights of science, includes our own insights growing from our personal experiences of transcending mystery and wonder.

All of which adds to the reasons why I am a Unitarian Universalist, grateful to be part of this ancient tradition within which we are free to draw upon sources ancient and modern in our quest for meaning, for purpose, for solace, and for inspiration for the work of our hands.

Pretty darn good in my book.

And if we are indeed interested in helping to create a more just and peaceful world... well, though there is no way to measure how much of a difference any one of us or any modest size congregation or denomination makes... we should, in the spirit of Margaret Mead’s well-

known words, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Where else, after all, would change begin than with a small group?

Where else, for example, but at Highlander Folk School in the 1950s, training center for the likes of Rosa Parks?

Where else but in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s living room, in Thoreau’s cabin?

Where else but in Faneuil Hall in the company of Sam Adams and others?

Or looking quite a bit further into the past, where else but in the streets of Jerusalem two thousand years ago? Or twenty-five hundred years ago in the marketplace of Athens or the Deer Park where Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, gave his first sermon?

So... maybe... too... where else but here, in this community, and communities like it with which we are joined?

After all, in a world of impending climate disaster, in this time during which our nation’s fragile democracy is under threat, in which hard-won rights – voting rights, reproductive rights, marriage rights, trans and gay rights – are under threat... in these times during which reasoned debate has all but disappeared, what could matter more than a tradition that still affirms that reason freely exercised must be brought to bear on the great questions of our day?

Further, in a world sometimes so heartless, what could matter more than a tradition of open and overflowing heart, that reaches out to touch lives regardless of creed or belief or background, and that seeks to speak on behalf of those who too often have too little voice?

And in a world still wracked by violence and war and unsustainable ways of living, what could matter more than a tradition and a community of faith which lifts up the possibility of another way on our planet than war and violence; another way on our planet than unbridled and unsustainable exploitation of resources; another way rooted, as our seventh principle puts it, in the reality that we are part of an interdependent web of life?

I could go on.

But in short, what could matter more than seeking to nourish the spirit of each and all who walk through our doors and then together with others of like mind and heart to help heal the world?

I wouldn’t have committed my life to the Unitarian Universalist ministry and to Unitarian Universalism, for the past thirty-five years here with you, the congregation of First Parish in Hingham, Old Ship Church, if I didn’t believe that our faith mattered, or if believed that it had only personal meaning.

I will soon be passing the baton of ordained ministry here at Old Ship to another... but, to mix metaphors, I know that you will keep the flame of our faith lit and shining brightly for all to see as you walk together the paths of the next era in the life of this venerable congregation.

And though we might not have agreed with Puritan John Winthrop about much theologically, and our first minister, my ancestor, Peter Hobart didn’t agree with him about lots of other things... I expect we all do share Winthrop’s affirmation that “We must rejoice together, mourn together, labor, suffer, and overcome together.”

May it always be so.