

“Question Authority!”

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Questions from Children

What do you tell your friends when they ask what it means to be UU?

This is a great question and this is how I answer it:

Being *Unitarian* means we love to learn and use our minds,
and we believe people are basically good inside.
Being *Universalist* means we believe everyone on earth is one big family,
and we work for peace and justice for everybody.
Being *UU* means we love our own religion,
but we know we don't have *all* the answers,
and that's why we love to learn about other religions too.

Why do we put flowers on the chancel?

Well, one reason is that they're just beautiful and they remind us of the beauty of being alive. But beyond that, I didn't know, so I emailed my minister buddies and this is what they told me: About 150 years ago, Catholic churches had flowers on Sunday but Protestant churches didn't. The Protestants liked their churches to look very plain, and that included the Unitarians. But one day someone in a Unitarian church in Boston brought in a beautiful bunch of flowers. The minister of that church, Theodore Parker, thought the flowers were so pretty, he put them right up front in his church so that everyone could enjoy them. The tradition spread, and now it's totally normal for just about all churches, not only UU but *all* kinds of churches, to have flowers.

Why do we do a flower ceremony?

Years ago, a man named Norbert Capek, from Czechoslovakia, came to study in this country—actually at the school where I went to study to be a minister. While he was here, he became a Unitarian, and he went back to Czechoslovakia and started a Unitarian church there. He created the flower ceremony for his church, and it was just like the one we do here each spring—everyone brings a flower and takes a different flower home with them. He wanted the ceremony to show that we accept one another, just as we accept all the flowers. And when we bring our flower and take a different flower, it shows that we both give and receive. That’s still true here and that’s why we do the flower ceremony each year—our own special UU tradition.

Why don't churches have a mascot?

Like for a sports team, right?
It’s true we don’t have a mascot like that,
but a lot of us wear jewelry with a flaming chalice on it—
like, I have a chalice necklace, and a picture of the chalice on my stole.
So maybe if we *did* have a mascot,
it would be a dancing chalice!
We could call it “Charlie the Chalice,”
or how about “Alice the Chalice”?
She could have a flaming wig,
but we probably wouldn’t want the fire to be real,
or we might burn everything up, and that wouldn’t be good!

Will there be Kids in a Box this year?

Last year a lot of you made really cool houses out of cardboard
and slept out in them for one night,
to raise money for homeless people.
I asked Tory, our Director of Religious Education,
if we were going to do that again, and this is what she said:
We’re not going to make the houses at church this year,

but if you want to make your own house at home,
we can definitely get a group together from church
and meet up and do the sleepover together.
So, if you want to do it, tell your parents and tell Tory!

Questions from Adults

A distinctive UU approach to theology

Does Unitarian Universalism have a theology? If theology means the study of God and things divine, and we don't talk about God or the divine, how do we talk about having a theology? (Follow-up: what is our mission? Does clear theology lead directly to mission?)

First: What is theology?

The etymology of the word means “talking about the gods,”
but even in the most conservative Christian traditions,
theology has always included questions like
“What are human beings like?”
and “How are we supposed to live?”

These are questions that our liberal tradition is very much engaged with.

So...historically Unitarian and Universalist theology is very coherent
and actually pretty easy to explain. I told the children:

Being *Unitarian* means we love to learn and use our minds,
and we believe people are basically good inside.

This is the core of Unitarianism
as it evolved in the early 19th century in this country.
Just like the name sounds, Unitarians rejected the idea of the Trinity.
They believed Jesus was a great man and a great teacher,
but not a god.

The Unitarians were also really excited

about the power of the human mind.
They believed people were born good,
and that people could and should work on their moral character
and make themselves better people.
They believed religion should be rational.
They rejected any religious doctrines
that weren't compatible with scientific knowledge.
They honored the Bible but didn't read it literally.
And all these ideas
are still part of *our* theology as Unitarian Universalists.
In this church, that side of our heritage comes out very clearly
in our mission “to nurture individual spiritual and ethical growth.”

I also told our children,

Being *Universalist* means we believe everyone on earth
is one big family,
and we work for peace and justice for everybody.

Now, the 19th-century Universalists were called Universalists
because they believed in *universal salvation*.
They didn't believe in hell;
they believed everyone would be saved after death.
Some of us still believe that.
Others of us have translated this idea of universal salvation
into the humanistic idea that everyone on earth is part of the same
human family, with one shared destiny—
and that our mission is to bring about universal peace and justice
here and now.

Whether or not God is a meaningful idea to us,
that Universalist core is still very much a part of our theology
as Unitarian Universalists.
Again, in this church, it leads directly to our mission
to be inclusive of all people,

and to be a voice of conscience in the greater community.

By the way, starting at the end of August, I'm going to be leading a class and giving a sermon series on classics of Unitarian Universalist theology, so you'll be hearing a lot more about this stuff over the next few months.

The details will be in the August newsletter.

How we do things in our church

You had a number of questions about how we do things in our church, which also has a lot to do with our theology.

What if you have a concern but don't like to get up in front of all those people and say what it is?

One of the purposes of our Joys & Concerns time is to be a space for the voices of many people in the congregation, not just the minister.

But... Joys & Concerns is a lot more comfortable for extroverts. If you let me know on Sunday morning before the service, I would be glad to light a candle for you, sharing your concern, and either sharing your name or keeping you anonymous.

What do you think of the book & movie The Moses Code, and could we see it here?

So this is a two-part question.

I haven't read the book or seen the movie.

So I took a look at a synopsis.

My understanding is, the premise is the author has discovered a secret way to solve all the world's promises that has been lost for thousands of years.

Without knowing more, I'm skeptical.

I think books and films like this reflect a longing for spiritual deepening which I deeply respect and honor—
I'm not sure of the value of the specific answers here.

That said—
if you have an idea for a program or an educational event
you want to bring to the church,
we have an Adult Religious Education Task Force
that meets monthly after church.
You're welcome to come and tell us about your idea—
we'd like to hear it!

Why do we interrupt the spirit of worship every week with the "Greeting One Another"? Wouldn't it be better at the very beginning or very end of the service?

Another good question!
Did anyone see the article about early Christian churches
in the latest *UU World* magazine?
In this article, the authors talked about
the history of greeting one another in Christian churches.
Typically the formal greeting one another
happened right before communion,
and if you've been to other churches
you'll remember this is usually still the case.

I have a hypothesis about what might have happened in our church.
I don't know if this is right and I would love to be corrected afterwards.
But maybe when we stopped taking communion,
people wanted to keep greeting your neighbor in the service,
only there wasn't an obvious place for it any more.
Our Worship Associates are going to discuss this next month.
Maybe we'll try moving it to a new place!

But I offer you a challenge:
The question asked,

“Why do we interrupt the spirit of worship with Greeting One Another?”
And I would ask, what is the spirit of worship?
Is it always quiet and reflective?
Or is there room for worship to be lively and loud, even noisy?
And how does this fit with our mission to be “inclusive of all people”?
We’ll keep talking, and thanks for the question.

Could comics like Garfield be used to teach UU principles and ideas?

Sure, why not? I like comics!
No problem.
Though I can’t quite see Garfield himself as a model UU....

Relating to our neighbors

What do I say when people say negative things about my atheism? I believe in Christ’s teaching, but not God.

Yes, this is a hard one!
It’s hard when our neighbors and friends don’t give us the respect that we try to give them.
Some people are probably very threatened when people challenge their understanding of what God is.
It’s hard to have a good conversation when you’re afraid.
Personally I think it helps to be very grounded in your own spirituality, to really know who *you* are and what *you* believe.
I try not to look for other people to validate my beliefs.
If I feel I need that from someone else, it probably means I am having some kind of doubts or questions about things I thought I was sure about, and I have to go back to my own spiritual practice and sit with that internally.
And when I have interfaith conversations

with people I know believe differently,
I try to remember their belief is just as real to them
as mine is to me,
and also I hold on to my faith
that we really are talking about the same reality,
just with different words and ideas that fit our different experiences.

How are we different from mainstream churches?

We are bound together by a covenant, not a statement of belief.
Listen to our Words of Affirmation:

To dwell together in peace,
seek knowledge in freedom,
serve humanity in fellowship,
and cherish the earth and its creatures:
this do we covenant each with the other.

This is a series of promises—a covenant—not a statement of belief.

There are certain theological ideas
that have always been important to us—
faith that there is a kernel of good in every person;
the use of reason;
freedom of thought and freedom of conscience.
Theologically we are a big tent,
precisely because we *have* always valued freedom of thought.
As someone once said, we may be
“the only church where if I change my theology,
I don’t have to change my church.”
My colleague Alice Blair Wesley puts it like this:
in the liberal church, we support each other in believing
what we cannot help believing at any particular time,
and we support each other in doubt

when we cannot yet find what we believe.¹

In that sense we are different from churches that unite around a common statement of belief.

But in many ways we are so similar to other churches.

My interfaith colleagues have the same commitment to working in the community and serving the world... trying to live good lives...

trying to find answers to the big questions about life, just like we are.

We never want to cut ourselves off from our neighbors just because we do theology a little differently.

Why are traditional (Catholic/Orthodox) Christian calendars so tied to the moon (e.g., Easter & Lent)? Is the Jewish calendar also tied to the moon? Why?

Actually, the reason Easter is based on a lunar calendar is *because* the Jewish calendar is lunar.

Jesus died during the Jewish Passover holiday.

The dates of Passover have always been according to a lunar calendar—and there’s no official “why” for that, except that people in different cultures all over the world have used the cycles of the moon to divide the year into months.

You always have to do some adjusting because the cycles of the moon don’t exactly correspond with a solar year, and different calendars do that differently, but the idea of a lunar calendar seems to be a natural human thing.

So Passover is set based on the Jewish lunar calendar, and the earliest Christians wanted to celebrate Easter right around Passover also, in keeping with the Easter story. In the 4th century,

¹ Alice Blair Wesley, “In the Beginning,” in Walter P. Herz, *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), p. 4.

Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the Christian leadership was looking to distance themselves from Judaism, partly out of anti-Semitism. The Council of Nicea (as in the Nicene Creed) came up with a new way of dating Easter, but one that was still based on the moon, because that was something that still felt important to a lot of Christians at that time. So that's why Western Christians celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox.² Phew!

Do you feel that the orthodox (Dogmatic) churches will ever resolve their differences with science as to evolution? Do you feel that the scientific-minded will ever resolve issues about a "conscious universe" at all levels and see anything beyond dumb, blind chance?

I'm not sure what the questioner meant by "orthodox (Dogmatic) churches," but I'm guessing they're asking about fundamentalist churches that teach a literal interpretation of the Bible—? Well...for most mainline churches, evolution is not a problem, because they're not reading the Bible as literally true. The idea of reading the Bible as a *literal* record of history is very recent and is really a reaction against the rise of the scientific method. As people fell in love with the scientific method some 200 years ago, we started to believe everything could be quantified and labeled true or false, so either *stories* were literally true or they were false. When you're interacting with religious stories—myths, legends—true and false are very un-helpful categories. But the infatuation with the scientific method meant

² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computus> and <http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/godsreligion/a/aa040200.htm>.

that culturally it became easy to forget
there was any other way to understand a story.
Reading the Bible literally is one predictable response to the scientific
method—basically saying, OK, we follow science in believing that
anything is either true or false, and therefore that the words in the Bible
are either true or false, literally true or false, and we believe they are
true, end of story.

What will happen from here, I don't know!

But the way forward has to be for our culture to re-discover
that science is not the only legitimate path of knowledge.

We know from history that the knowledge and wisdom
that is mainstream within any culture
are always changing.

When Copernicus said planets revolve around the sun,
it was revolutionary, completely shocking;
now, it's just something people know and accept.

So I think over the years a new understanding of science and religion
informing one another will develop, and new controversies...
and we never quite know what it's going to look like until it happens.

More about Unitarian Universalist theology & spirituality

*What does Unitarian Universalism have to say about why we suffer and the
problem of evil?*

Such a good question.

Historically, Universalism offered an answer that provided a lot of
comfort. Universalists believed everyone, without fail, would go to
heaven when they died. They would have eternal life and peace and joy
in the presence of God, and so whatever suffering they experienced on
earth was going to be made right. They didn't claim to know *why* we
suffer, but they trusted God was going to put it right.
For some of us this is still part of our faith.

Unitarians, historically, were very interested in self-improvement—they believed the job of a religious person was to continually strive to improve their character, and so they tried to view the suffering *they* experienced as a teacher, or a challenge to be overcome. And this idea of suffering as teacher is still part of who we are as people of faith.

Given our potpourri approach to spirituality, is it possible for UUs to gain the depth of more traditional religions?

I think there's another question underneath here, which is: what is spiritual depth and how do we get it? In just about every religious tradition, there's a great variety of spiritual paths and practices that develop within the tradition. The key is for individuals to choose one or a few practices available to them through their tradition and stick with them.

Within Unitarian Universalism, we've tended to focus most on those practices that support our commitment to responsible freedom. We believe in freedom of conscience, and that carries with it a responsibility to develop our inner conscience, our inner sense of right and wrong. We might support that through practices that develop our self-awareness—meditation or journaling, or watching ourselves as we interact with other people and practicing speaking more truthfully. Scholarship is also a spiritual practice for many UUs as we seek to understand the world and our place in it so that we can act in a way that creates justice.

And service—directly helping out where we see a need we can fill—
is an extremely important spiritual practice for many of us.
So, yes, I would say there are tremendous spiritual resources
in our tradition,
and spiritual depth is something that develops in us over time
if we practice faithfully.

What is the meaning of life?

Ha! I'll bite.

Or at least I'll say what *I* think gives life meaning.

I'm convinced that if we allow ourselves to participate fully
in a community of thoughtful people,
so that our perspective on the world
is wider than just our one little brain—

and *if* we commit to an ongoing practice
of fearless honesty with ourselves
about what is important to us,
and what we feel we should be doing with our time and energy—

and *if* we commit to acting responsibly and ethically
on those conclusions about what we should be doing,
wherever they lead—

again, I'm talking about a spiritual path of responsible freedom—

we will find ourselves living a life that is meaningful
and we will not wish for another.
That's what I think.

And let's end with what *you* think—
I'd like to read some of your responses to my question:
What does spiritual maturity look like?

Being able to learn about and appreciate the religious paths of others without losing sight of one's own path.

To feel and see the presence of God.

To try to live life consistent with the love and desire flowing from God.

Anger subdued

Walking the talk

Solemn In

Dancing Out

Wild Eyed Fire

Shuttling the Low Lands

Laughing out Loud

A spiritually mature person is one who thinks of others first, how he or she can help better the world.

A spiritually mature person is aware of the underlying cohesiveness, order, lawfulness, and wonder of the universe. She seeks to connect with this essence through practices that help clear the mind and to respond kindly to others. It is both with introspection and relationship that we touch the divine.

Amen.