

“The Core of Our Faith”

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton

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What do we believe?

What is so central to our identity that we must proclaim it,
whatever the risk?

I was really startled when I read David Bumbaugh’s essay,
the source of our reading today,
claiming that Unitarian Universalists are in fact *less* diverse
in our beliefs than many other religious groups.¹

How could this be, when we pride ourselves on our diversity of belief
and freedom of conscience?

I’m not going to talk about how much diversity of belief there is
in other faiths today—I don’t have the knowledge to do that well—
but I do want to talk about *us*,

because I think the challenge he puts to us is so important:

What is it that we believe?

What is the message at the core of our faith
which has transformed our lives

and which we know in our hearts this world needs?

I think we as Unitarian Universalists
can answer that critical question—what do we believe?—
not in full, for all time, for every person,
but with a whole lot more specificity
than we usually dare to put out there.

Now, let me pause and say right away that our tradition
has always affirmed the right of conscience—
the right and responsibility of every person

¹ David E. Bumbaugh, “The Marketing of Liberal Religion,” published online at
http://meadville.edu/journal/v9_Bumbaugh_MarketingLiberalReligion.pdf.

to follow their own conscience in matters of right and wrong.
We have always affirmed freedom of belief,
the freedom of every person in our congregations
to seek the truth in matters of religion
and believe what they cannot help but believe to be true.
As one Unitarian Universalist has said, this is the only church I know
where, if you change your beliefs,
you don't have to change your church!

In many religious communities,
what holds people together is common beliefs.
In the free church, what holds us together is *covenant*—
the promises we make to one another to walk together in fellowship.
Any person who wants to be a part of this community
is welcome to join this covenant.
We have no creed, no beliefs that you have to affirm to be one of us.
There are *behaviors* that the community cannot safely tolerate,
and we reserve the right to exclude someone based on their behavior,
but *never* based on their beliefs.

On the other hand, this freedom of belief that we cherish
doesn't mean that we have no common beliefs. I think we do.
To name one obvious one, we believe in freedom of belief!
We agree on the importance of religious freedom,
and that in itself *is* a belief.
Certainly not everyone agrees with us.

In fact, I would argue that we agree on a whole lot more
than we usually think. My personal theory is,
there are only a couple of areas of religious belief
where we disagree obviously and substantially.
First of all, we do disagree about how to understand and name
the power that has created and sustained the universe.
Some of us believe there is some sort of conscious power at work.
We might call that power God or Goddess.
Others of us don't believe the power at work in the universe

is conscious. We speak of natural forces and laws,
but not of divine beings.
Still others of us resist coming down on one side or the other,
God or no God, dwelling instead
in a place of uncertainty and unknowing
where we may or may not feel at ease.

Honestly, this is one of the things I love most about our faith.
I love our openness to so many different guesses
and speculations and intuitions
about the biggest mystery there is.
Though we have to remember: we are hardly alone
in our resistance to defining this reality
behind everything we see and feel and experience.
I loved the story we shared today by a Jewish rabbi.²
She uses God-language, but I hope we can all relate
to her wonderful story about how impossible it is
to find just one name for this power which she calls God.
Her story reminds me also of the Islamic teaching
that Allah can be known by 99 different names,
all of them different, none of them complete.

I also think of the Buddhist tradition and its insistence
that there really are no words that can describe
the ultimate reality behind everything.
Or the Christian mystical tradition
which speaks of the God beyond God.
The mystics say beyond all our language
and our human ideas about this being we call God,
beyond all religious doctrine,
there is a presence, an energy,
that cannot be described, only experienced.

In my own personal formulation of what our faith is all about,

² Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God's Name* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994).

I love that we have put this same kind of profound hesitation about language, this same radical un-knowing at the heart of our faith.

It's honest. To me, it's freeing.

The very same thing is true about the second matter of belief where I think we disagree: what happens when we die.

Some of us believe when our physical bodies die, our consciousness dies as well.

Others of us believe our consciousness will go on in some form, though probably most of us don't have a clear idea what that form might be.

None of us living today can really know what's going to happen, though we're all going to find out—or not!—one day.

Meanwhile we live with our uncertainty and our disagreement.

So: God or not-God, or somewhere in between.

Some kind of life after death, or simply ceasing to be.

These are big religious questions, maybe the biggest of all.

We really do disagree about them,

and so in honesty, in freedom and integrity,

we have allowed a radical openness and uncertainty to blossom at the heart of our faith.

And yet, I think there is a whole lot most of us *do* agree on, beliefs that *do* bind us together, which we take for granted as part of who we are.

How about this:

I think most of us agree

that every person has inherent worth and dignity.

We agree that people have a great capacity for good, though every person is also capable of evil.

Now, you personally might or might not believe those things. I'm not saying you have to.

You have the right to your own beliefs,
which no one can take away from you.
What I'm trying to do is put words
to the places where *most* of us agree,
to create a sort of portrait of who we are,
a snapshot of reality rather than a dictate to comply.
So, what I'm saying is that I think most of us *could* affirm
that people have dignity and are worthy of respect.
In theological language, that's what we call a *doctrine of human nature*.
We have one and it is very important to us. For many of us,
that belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person
shapes our entire value system,
from how we treat people one-on-one
to the kinds of social policies we work for.

How about our beliefs about reason and knowledge and truth?
I think most of us could agree with our Unitarian ancestors
that human reason is a critical tool in the search for religious truth.
We agree that every person has the right and responsibility
to use their experience, their reason,
their conscience, and their intuition
to figure out what they believe.
We agree that truth comes to us from many sources—
from science, from art and literature,
from the teachings of world religions, from our daily living—
and none of us is capable of grasping *the* truth for all time.
Yet we agree that truth is one,
and that all religions point to different aspects of the same reality.
These are theological ideas too.
Not every religion shares them.

And they matter to our common life.
Imagine if we *didn't* agree
that everyone should be free to use their reason and their conscience,
and that religious truth can be found in many places
far beyond the pages of the Bible?

If we didn't agree on those things,
how could we have a common religious life?
How could we worship together here as we do
and have it make any sense?

I also think we have common beliefs
about why religious communities matter,
and what it means to live a good life.
Most of us, I think, would agree that the purpose of a church
is to support, encourage, and challenge its members
in their spiritual and ethical lives,
and to make a positive difference in the world
by relieving suffering where we can
and working for justice and peace throughout our society.
We agree that the way we live our lives
matters much more than what we say we believe.
We agree that living a good life
means growing and loving and serving the world.

And, whatever we believe
about the power that created this world,
and what will happen when we die,
I think most of us would agree,
in the spirit of our ancestors
who preached universal salvation for every person,
that every being is precious
and no one should be outside our circle of love and care.³

Those are religious beliefs that I think we share.
Without a common vision shaped by those common beliefs,
beliefs about what is fair and right and loving and true,
I don't think this church
could ever have been able to work in our very own community

³ This section on beliefs we hold in common was inspired by *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, a report by the Commission on Appraisal of the UUA (Boston: UUA, 2005), pp. 156–57, and David E. Bumbaugh, “The Marketing of Liberal Religion,” published online at http://meadville.edu/journal/v9_Bumbaugh_MarketingLiberalReligion.pdf.

for freedom from all kinds of oppression,
for environmental sanity, for art and beauty.

My own sense is that *covenant*,
those promises we make to walk together,
will always be what binds us together most firmly.
Covenant is what frees us to disagree
on very important matters of belief
and still be one community.

But in my own understanding—and you may disagree—
in my understanding, one of our covenantal responsibilities
as members of this liberal congregation
is to engage with the tradition of *belief* that we have inherited.
This faith we share did not begin with you or me.
It has a history that began hundreds of years before us
and will continue long after us.
We are the temporary custodians of this faith
which has endured through time and, with our care, will continue.

In my view, we have a responsibility to the tradition
as part of our covenant not only with *these* people
who are here right here, right now,
but with everyone who has come before us in this faith
and everyone who will come after us.
I think we have a responsibility to learn what our ancestors believed,
what mattered to them, what they found to be true,
what they were willing to sacrifice for their beliefs.
We also have a responsibility, and may it be a delightful one,
to learn what our fellow congregants believe here and now,
because we too are part of this living tradition.
As individuals, we have the responsibility
to test our own beliefs in the light of history and community.
Because we all have a responsibility
to pass on this liberal faith tradition,
which is much bigger than us alone, to our children

and all the generations that will follow them.

Our way is to lift up and celebrate our freedom of conscience
and freedom of belief,
and I believe with all my heart we are right to do that,
but remember we speak also
of a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning.
I think we are all responsible for engaging with the tradition,
looking within and also beyond ourselves
to find a fresh relationship to this tradition of faith that we share.
Because our faith is not just
whatever each of us makes up for ourselves.
The tradition has its own integrity.
Throughout our history it has been shaped by
the best wisdom of each person,
the searching and striving of each individual.
Each of us has a contribution to make to our collective faith.
The tradition is always changing and stretching and growing.
But it is bigger than any one individual or congregation.

It matters to me, and I think to you too,
that our beliefs live on in this world.
It matters to me that there is a religious home not only for us,
but for all people who believe in freedom of conscience,
people who resist the easy urge to say for all time
what God is or is not,
people who believe no one has a monopoly on the truth,
people who are willing to work for justice in this world,
people who believe everyone deserves respect and compassion
no matter who they are,
people committed to loving their neighbors
no matter how hard it gets.

This is *our* home, here and now. This is our faith and our church.
But it is not only ours. It belongs to whoever needs it.
It always will.

So let us care for and honor this beloved faith
by *daring* to proclaim what we believe,
what we stand for,
what we are working and living for.
With our care and courage,
our doors will be proudly, boldly open to all who believe as we do.
With our strength and commitment,
we may yet make real the world of our dreams.

So may it be.
Amen.