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So Just What do we Unitarian Universalists Stand For?

“Come Build a Land.” This has always been my favorite UU hymn. “We’ll build a land where we bind up the broken. We’ll build a land where the captives go free.” We’ll build a land together “where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever-flowing stream.” Are we building that land? This fall, on my Sundays here, and in Sonora, and in Douglas Flat, we have begun a discussion about what Unitarian Universalists believe? who we are in the world? and what we can do to make our voices more effective?

As I wrote in the November Catalyst, Ronda – our president – and I visited an inmate in the state prison at Jamestown a couple of weeks ago. He had contacted us because he felt oppressed by the heavy Christian evangelism in the prison; he wanted to explore ideas on his own; and somehow he came to hear about Unitarian Universalism. The very first thing he said to us was “Your message is just what I was looking for. How come I never heard of you before, and why aren’t you a much bigger denomination?” Why indeed? We live in a very troubling time – a time when our fears are constantly played upon, a time when we are told that to protect ourselves we must hate and fear “others.” That it’s fine for me to protect what I’ve got and to let you fend for yourself. So, are we really building that land? And why aren’t our numbers greater – if, as many of us believe our message can help to save the world in these leaden times?

Just what do we stand for? It isn’t as simple a question to answer as it is for many religious and spiritual traditions. It’s easy to be militant if you have a very fixed set of beliefs. Especially if you believe that your faith is the only one that’s right and that everyone else is wrong. And if you believe that only you and your fellow believers will be saved, will go to heaven, are God’s chosen people and so forth. Instead, we believe that many faith traditions contain nuggets of truth, provide comfort and religious experience for their followers, and contain teachings and practices that may be useful to us. It’s harder to be militant when your stance admits the potential validity of diverse religious paths.

One of the hallmarks of being a UU, of course, is that we are committed to the use of reason – in our religion and in the world generally. “Unitarianism” goes all the way back to the 4th Century of the common era – a time when Christians were just beginning to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity: a tripartite Godhead that included Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a manifestation of God but he was also fully human; he was said to be coexistent and coeternal with God, despite also having been fully human. And why did this thinking come about? In my opinion, it was a response to the theological dilemma that early Christians faced. Many people had begun to pray to Jesus as if Jesus were God. But early Christians, coming as they did out of the Jewish traditions, were monotheistic, rejecting various “pagan” religions. If you prayed to Jesus, weren’t you making Jesus a God too? The solution, and a clever one it was, was to hold that there was only one God, but that it consisted of three parts, of which Jesus was one. But, there were some Christians who said – wait a minute, that really doesn’t make

sense, how can Jesus be all of those things? One such person was a man named Arius, a bishop in Alexandria.

Arius was voted down, and Trinitarianism prevailed, but throughout the centuries there would be those who rejected the concept of the Trinity because it violated their sense of reason. Such people were often regarded as heretics! During the reformation, Unitarian thinking surfaced in various parts of Europe – in Poland, in England, and in Transylvania, which is now part of Romania, but was then an independent kingdom. Michael Servetus, a Spanish doctor, was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva for daring to write and publish a book arguing that the Trinity made no sense.

In this country, Unitarianism arose within the Congregationalist churches of New England. It was a reaction to Calvinist thinking, and it relied heavily on applying reason to theology. Unitarians didn't seek to break away – mostly they were pushed out, because the Congregationalists refused to associate with pastors who preached Unitarianism. Unitarianism was originally a pejorative term applied by Congregationalist leaders. Among Unitarian leaders of the early 19th Century were Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Parker. All were thought to be heretical in their thinking by more traditional Christians.

Another religious movement -- Universalism –also had its origins In early 18th and 19th Century America. While Unitarians tended to come from elite New England families and to be associated with Harvard Divinity School, Universalists arose out of rural towns in central New England, and their ministers tended to have little formal education and to begin preaching in their teens. Their numbers included Hosea Ballou and Thomas Starr King, who would later move to California and gain fame as minister of First Unitarian in San Francisco. (It was also common for ministers to move back and forth between Unitarian and Universalist congregations). So, what made them Universalists? They believed in universal salvation, in opposition to the Calvinist doctrine of "election" and its idea that some would be "saved" but many would instead burn in hell. And this thinking also had its roots in very early Christianity. Universalists trace their roots all the way back to Origen, an important theologian, also in Alexandria, during the Third Century of the common era.

What is the implication of believing that everyone is saved? Just as a commitment to reason underlay Unitarian thinking, Universalism was based on seeing the common humanity of all people. While Unitarianism has often been a faith of the head – Universalism has always been much more a faith of the heart. Think about the implications of believing that all are saved. A Universalist approach would see us all as brothers and sisters. They would see Jews, Christians, and Muslims as all being children of Abraham.

And out of these two strands – Unitarianism and Universalism – have grown a number of characteristics of we are today. UUs have always been leaders in movements to maintain separation of church and state, another product of the Radical Reformation in Europe. Unitarians founded the International Assn for Religious Freedom in 1900. That organization continues to this day, bringing together representatives of many religious traditions.

Our commitment to reason as an element of our faith underlies our belief in human potential – in the ability of human beings to bring out the best in themselves, to rise to creative heights, to realize our potential for good. It also leads us to support

scientific thinking. UUs have typically been strong supporters of teaching evolutionary theory in our schools and to resist efforts to teach creationism or intelligent design as science. At the same time, we typically recognize that belief in evolution does not require atheism. Many UUs see no inconsistency between evolutionary theory and belief in some sort of sacred power or spirit existing in the cosmos along with us.

Unitarians and Universalists have never imposed any sort of doctrinal test – either for individual members or congregations. Unlike Christian denominations, we don't have creeds, in which we recite what we believe. How many of you remember reciting the Apostle's creed in church? Going to a Methodist Church with my parents, I had to recite it every Sunday. I still know it by heart, and it is one of the few things I decline to participate in when I visit a service in another church. Saying those words – which I began to question early in my life – still grate on me. We do have our Seven Principles, but these are very broad and inclusive, and we don't require anyone to subscribe to them as a prerequisite of membership. (You can find the seven principles in the front of our hymnal). They are a useful guide to the foundations of UU beliefs, along with our statement of the sources for our tradition, but they tend to emphasize reason and openness to other traditions.

In our opening words, I like to say that we as a congregation welcome all who come with “open minds and warm hearts.” Unitarian Universalists believe strongly in being welcoming and in being inclusive. By this we mean that we include people who come to us from many different religious traditions, from all aspects of the political spectrum, of all races and ethnicities, and so on. We have welcomed women and gay people when other denominations were struggling with these issues. We began ordaining women almost 150 years ago. Olympia Brown was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1863. During the latter part of the 19th Century, a group of women ministers, known as the Iowa Sisterhood, helped to spread Unitarianism throughout what was then our frontier. And today, more than half our ministers are women.

Similarly, UUs have been in the forefront of the movement for full rights for Gay, Lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people. We have been ordaining openly gay and lesbian ministers for at least 25 years. Our congregations have been performing holy union ceremonies for same sex couples for many years, despite the fact that such unions are not recognized legally by more than a couple of states. The issue is before the courts right now, of course, in California. In downtown Boston, our denominational headquarters face the Massachusetts statehouse, and people entering and leaving it see our large banner that reads “Marriage is a civil right.” Here in California, our UU Legislative Ministry has been in the forefront of the movement for marriage equality, along with many other important legislative issues.

Out of our deep commitment to reason and to the community of all people has come our UU commitment to social justice. In Reformation Europe, this often took the form of the struggle for religious freedom and tolerance. Our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors came to this country seeking religious freedom (although they didn't always practice it once they got here). Many Unitarians and Universalists were active in the movement to abolish slavery, including people such as Emerson and Theodore Parker. During the Vietnam War, many of our congregations offered sanctuary and counseling to draft resisters. In some cases, this divided our congregations. Those of you who remember the Pentagon Papers may not remember that the Board of Trustees of the

denomination voted to publish the entire text of the papers through our publishing arm, Beacon Press. This was a courageous decision to make in those troubled times, but it met with virtually unanimous approval from UU congregations throughout the country.

Clearly, our congregations encompass many different sets of beliefs. Our strength is that we can welcome these diverse theologies; we can be together in community, despite our varying beliefs. And isn't this a message that the world needs to hear right now? I would argue that this is a message that can save the world. The great Transylvanian Unitarian minister, Francis David wrote: "In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. We do not need to think alike to love alike." Our world is rapidly coming apart in the turbulence of sectarian hatred, fear, and violence. Western civilization and Muslim world, Israelis and Palestinians, Sunnis and Shiites, Americans and Iraqis. Everywhere we look, the message is one of fear – we are good but those "others" are evil and must be defeated. We are being inundated with messages based on fear.

Yet all the world's great religions teach us something quite different. They teach us that we must love the "other." That we must love our neighbor and we must love the stranger, that we must love our enemies. And the way to do this, I believe, is to resist believing that we are good and they are evil; that what we believe is the only way to salvation and that everyone else is wrong. We need to learn to see the humanity of the other – that we all have the same hopes, dreams, aspirations, needs. That we all want to be safe and secure, to raise our families in peace and abundance. "We don't need to think alike to love alike." Isn't this our message? On Sunday, we come together from many different traditions and many different beliefs. And we support each other in our individual striving for spiritual growth, for knowledge. Francis David went on to say,

The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness. Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice. We must accept God's truth in this lifetime. Salvation must be accomplished here on earth.

So, I lift up that question again. Are we building that land that we envision – a land of peace and justice; of equity and compassion? Our message has the power to save us in this fearful time. We are a movement that stands on twin pillars drawn from our long, proud tradition – reason and compassion. Our commitment to reason leads us to question dogma, to believe only those things that we have tested with our intellect, to resist any effort to tell us what to believe; to accept that other traditions may also have something of value to say. Our commitment to salvation for all people leads us to be welcoming, inclusive, compassionate; to believe that we are all sisters and brothers; to stand against fear-mongering, and against war, killing, and violence.

So let's take that message and share with a world that needs it badly.

- Together, let's build a land of compassion and caring for the weakest and poorest among us.
- Together, let's build a land where we truly bind up the broken.
- Together, let's build a land that stands for compassion and not for killing.
- Together, let's build a land where justice rolls down like waters, and peace like an ever-flowing stream.

May it be so. Blessed be! and Amen!