

## **The Good News of Unitarian Universalism**

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
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*“What life have we, if we have not life together?  
There is no life not lived in community,  
and no community not lived in celebration and praise!”*  
— Charles A. Howe, UU Minister (1922 - 2010)

### **Opening Words**

Julie Ham

*Once there was a way to get back homeward.  
Once there was a way to get back home.*

These words from a Beatles song were running through my head last weekend, after a minor fire in my apartment building.

For a significant part of the next 24 hours or so, my apartment didn't quite feel like a safe place. And “home” is usually a place where we feel safe. And I needed to feel safe at home again.

My concept of “home” has changed over the years; especially after my parents moved to Florida. The homes of my childhood now belong to other families; as do the homes of my grandparents in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Now, there's only one place that remain has remained a constant in my life. As Billy Joel once wrote “home can be the Pennsylvania Turnpike”.

But home is not the address where you live. It can also be the home of a friend or loved one, a favorite vacation destination, or a beach beside the big, wide ocean.

Last week, after the fire, when home didn't feel quite so homey; I looked forward to the next morning, when I could come to UUCV and write my prayer of thanks in our Joys and Sorrows book and share my anxious and grateful thoughts with my UUCV family.

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It's not only this meetinghouse that makes UUCV our spiritual home. It's the smiling faces greeting us in welcome. It's shared laughter and the music we sing together. It's the comforting embrace of a friend.

And it's the support and encouragement we collectively give and receive as we each explore our individual spiritual paths,

Let us explore the home that is our UU faith as we worship together this morning.

### **Reading**

Hebrews 10:22-25

Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

### **Sermon<sup>2</sup>**

Duane Fickeisen

*Yes indeed, let our prayer be that this place is, and will forever be, a house of peace. And one of provocation. A place of comfort for the afflicted and of affliction for the comfortable. Here may we be transformed by the love of community and encouraged (given courage) and provoked to care for the world. Amen.*

Here is the gospel of Unitarian Universalism — our “good news,” the pathway we offer to salvation. It is not the same path that other faiths offer. It is not an amalgam of the best parts of other faiths nor is it what’s left after we have rejected all the parts of other faiths that we disagree with. Rather we offer a positive, life-affirming, ever-

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hopeful message and a specific pathway to spiritual health and wholeness. That's what salvation means — the thing that saves us from dis-ease and restores health and wholeness. That which salves the wounds of the spirit. We all need that. I need it. You need it.

There is a new book out by Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World — and Why Their Differences Matter*. He argues that each of the world's major religions posits a different spiritual problem and offers a solution (salvation) appropriate to the particular problem. It is wrong, he writes, to claim that God is the same in all religions.

A disclaimer: I have not read the book yet. I leafed through it, looked at the table of contents, read the jacket, and browsed the opening chapter while waiting for the laundry machines next door to the bookstore on our vacation. Later I read some reviews and took advantage of the Amazon "Look Inside" feature to read part of it.

I'm waiting for the paperback version to come out. But this much I do know about it: Prothero lays out his understanding of the problem each of the major world religions addresses and the solution it offers to that particular problem. And he shows how radically different the problems and solutions are from each other.

For example, the problem Christianity addresses is sin and the solution is salvation through the vicarious atonement of the crucifixion of Jesus.

In Islam, however, the problem is individual pride and the solution is submission to the will of God as required by the five pillars of Islam — acknowledgement that there is one and only one God, daily prayer, pilgrimage to Mecca, and generous support of the poor are among them, and during this month of Ramadan, Muslims fast and put particular emphasis on the required practices.

For Jews, the problem is exile and the solution is a return to God and to our true home. Observing rituals within the family home and gathering in the communal home coming for Friday evening services at sundown represent that return.

Meanwhile for Buddhism, the problem is suffering and the solution is enlightenment and an accompanying detachment from the desires which are understood to be the root of our suffering.

Confucianism addresses the problem of chaos by establishing social order as the solution. And Hinduism offers release as the solution to the problem of the otherwise endless cycle of reincarnation.

I'll stipulate that my brief synopsis of the analysis is overly simplistic and lacks nuance. It doesn't account for the wide range of differences within each of the world's religions, and yet it has a ring of truth.

It also does not explicitly acknowledge that we may face more than one spiritual problem. Perhaps we are troubled by exile, pride, *and* chaos, for example. But if we were able to find a solution to any one of those, it's likely that the others would be mitigated.

When I noticed Prothero's book and read his brief descriptions of the problem and solution offered by each of the world religions, I was first of all fascinated by his simple formulation and by how much sense it made to me as a first order explanation.

And I was immediately drawn to contemplate what problem we Unitarian Universalists address with our faith and the nature of the solution that we offer.

So here's what I think, at least at this moment.

I propose that the problem Unitarian Universalists address is a profound existential loneliness. That is, our loneliness is related to our individual existence and to the meaning of our lives. It is responsible for our desire to love and to be loved, and for our hunger for relationship and community.

Many of you have said you have come to this congregation in search of community. That it has felt like a homecoming to discover our congregation's hospitality and welcome.

We are, many of us, exiles from other religious faiths or seekers who have not yet found a faith that offers a solution to our spiritual problem. Many of us are outsiders, "not from around here" as they say, who have come to central Pennsylvania for jobs, for education, or to be near family members. Few of us were born here.

And only a small minority of us were born into families that belonged to a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and even some of them left our faith and then later returned. Often the stories that re-

turning birthright UUs tell are of coming home in a quest for community and connection. All that points to our loneliness.

Our fierce individualism is, I believe, both partly responsible for our loneliness and a learned response to isolation. Some of us speak with pride about the religion we have crafted for ourselves — a religious understanding that draws from many sources and is tailored to your own beliefs. Our open theology and lack of a creedal test of faith encourage that rugged religious individualism. But it comes at a high price, particularly if I am right that our underlying spiritual problem is isolation and loneliness. We have a profound need for community, for relationship, and for connection. To the extent that our individualism marginalizes us and supports resistance to authority and convention, it tends to keep us outside the embrace of community.

Paradoxically, our deep desire for community may work to keep us in what M. Scott Peck called pseudo-community. Let me explain that. Nearly all models of group dynamics suggest that when a group forms the primary task of its members has to do with inclusion — determining whether or not each will be welcomed and if we “fit” in the group. If the whole group is new or newish, we’re likely to gloss over differences, to be superficially polite to each other, and to avoid conflict. It often feels like we’re all cooperating and working toward common purposes from the same playbook. We will probably report that we like each other.

That’s what Peck meant by pseudo-community — the gathering where we feel welcome and expect, without having really tested it, that we think alike and are free of conflict.

Think for a moment about an experience you’ve had when you’ve entered a new group or perhaps started one. Maybe it was a neighborhood organization with goals of beautification and crime prevention or a parent’s group desiring to create a cooperative play group for you children, or gosh, even a new congregation as ours was a dozen or so years ago.

When you started out in that group, did you experience wondering if and how you might fit in? Whether or not you would be welcome? And did you and others seem to be trying to be polite and to spend more effort seeking similarities than looking for differences?

At that early stage of a group's development, the pseudo-community stage, we're still dancing around differences, and have not yet worked out the issues of power and influence.

The next phase in the life of a group is the one where conflicts erupt and things get messy and chaotic. Peck calls it chaos, another author names it storming. If the group can hang in there through the struggle to resolve the conflicts, hopefully in creative ways that result in win-win solutions and deepen understanding and regard for each other, this can be a very fruitful stage despite the chaos, and it is a necessary stage to go through if the group is to cohere and become truly effective.

If a group is able to navigate the conflict stage in healthy ways, it will emerge from the chaos much stronger and with an appreciation of difference. Its members will likely value conflict as a source of creativity and commitment. At that point a group is characterized by strong bonds of affection and appreciation for one another. It's not so much that the entire group has become homogenous as it is a celebration of the heterogeneity of the group. Groups at this stage welcome diversity and value difference. This is what Peck calls true community.

You can't get there without going through the stage of chaos according to many studies of group dynamics.

At our best as Unitarian Universalists, we strive for the level of intimacy and affection that embraces difference and rather than trying to quash heresy, we welcome free choice in matters of religion.

Some wag said that it isn't your church until you've been disappointed by it or been through a fight and decided to stay.

That's exactly what Peck is saying — unless you've gone through the chaos stage and emerged from it with deeper affection and commitment to difference and diversity, the experience of community is relatively shallow and fragile. But as we learn to use our power in the congregation effectively, to honor difference, and to join in a shared mission, the congregation becomes a place of affection and belonging, and it becomes ever so much more robust and enduring.

So what is the glue that holds us together, what forms the walls

of this home we come back to if it is not a creed and an insistence on common beliefs? What makes us stay after we've been disappointed?

Each side of our combined faith traditions offers a response.

The New England Unitarian churches, our direct ancestors, emerged from trinitarian liberal Christian congregational churches, which are now a part of the United Church of Christ. To understand them, we've got to go back almost 400 years to Dedham, Massachusetts, about 10 miles southwest of Boston.

Some of you have heard the story before, but it is worth hearing again, because it is such an essential part of understanding who we are as religious people and why we gather the way we do.

As the town was settled in 1637, the people of Dedham wanted to start a church, but they were uncertain about how to define it theologically. They probably were not explicit about the group dynamics I just described, but they recognized the value of staying in conversation and exploring differences.

So they agreed to meet every Thursday evening in each others' homes and to discuss a particular matter of faith each week. They set out some guidelines for discussion, which is a useful tool whenever you embark on discussions of matters of deep importance where there are likely to be significant differences. And they entered the conversations, apparently from the records we have, with the intention that is enshrined in our fourth principle: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

At the close of each meeting, the topic for the next week's gathering was decided and at each gathering the host was the first person to speak on the topic.

These weekly gatherings were in some ways the first example of the Small Group Ministry program. (Our congregation has seven covenanted small groups that meet monthly to discuss topics related to faith and spirituality with the intention of deep listening. They are not about debate or problem solving, but rather about hearing each other, seeking to understand differences, and giving participants the opportunity to reflect on experiences and shape meaning from them. If you want to know more or would like to join a group, please see me later.)

Well, at the end of that year, the folks in Dedham had experienced many fruitful discussions. They had grown fond of each other; forged important relationships among the group. And they still wanted to found a church, but recognized that they would never be able to agree on a creedal statement as the common reference point for their gathering. Instead they decided to gather in covenant with one another.

The covenant was a set of promises and guidelines to help them shape how they would relate to each other. It didn't require anyone to profess a particular faith stance. It did require everyone to agree to the terms of the covenant. And thus they began a heretical experiment in religious life that we have inherited.

The covenantal nature of the Dedham church became the model for congregationalism. When the Dedham church was a couple hundred years old, it split over the nature of Christ. Part of the congregation became Unitarian and part remained Trinitarian. In a fascinating court suit, both sides battled for ownership of the communion silver. The arguments offer a very interesting view of the nature of New England churches and their relationships to the town or parish. In the end, the court awarded ownership of the silver to the Unitarians, and they still have it.

So those early house small group conversations resulted in a church that is a direct ancestor of Unitarianism.

This congregation's covenant was adopted by congregational vote a few years ago. It outlines our expectations of each other. It says:

“To enable the life of this community, I will:

- Be an active participant and generous supporter;
- Interact with others openly and respectfully;
- Remain responsible for my spiritual growth and search for meaning;
- Seek to resolve differences with a loving and understanding attitude;
- Learn about and welcome the gifts and resources of others;

- Acknowledge the existence of boundaries of acceptable behavior and recognize that violations will not be tolerated.

We remember that all healthy, growing communities are dynamic and that change and evolution are inevitable in any system that is alive.”

So that covenant is an attempt to make explicit our promises and expectations of each other.

From the Unitarian side of our religious ancestry, we have inherited the form of our gathering — the covenanted community. The form of our gathering is so much more important than the beliefs about the nature of Jesus that were the theological grounding of Unitarianism, namely that he was fully human and not one of the three parts of God. That is, he like each of us, carried a spark of the divine, manifest in our inherent worth and dignity, but was not qualitatively different in nature than any of us. The nature of Jesus matters to some of us much more than others, but the covenantal nature of our religious community is essential to what we are as a faith.

But it isn't just from the Unitarian side of our ancestry that we have inherited the basis of strong community. The Universalists, too, contribute significantly to who we are as religious people.

From the Universalist side of our faith, we inherited the idea that salvation is available to each of us. No one is alienated from God's love, no one need be isolated from the embrace of the beloved. The official Universalist Church in America was unabashedly Christian. Whether its members were trinitarian or unitarian in Christology was less important than the affirmation of ultimate universal salvation.

Of course by salvation they meant that everyone would enjoy a return to the embrace of God in the afterlife — no one would be cast into Hell. But keep in mind the broader definition of salvation — that which heals our spiritual wounds and returns us to health and wholeness.

Like other Christian denominations, Universalists found the essential problem to be sin. Unlike other Christians whose salvation came through the substitutionary atonement by the suffering of Jesus on the cross, for Universalists, the solution was God's infinite love

and tender forgiveness that promised everyone would be saved. The idea that all are saved was manifest in an open communion service, where there were no creedal restrictions on who was welcome to take communion as a symbol of being a part of God's all-inclusive community.

That theology makes even more sense to me if the problem is an existential loneliness than if it is sin. The universal embrace of the spirit of love offers us hope and the path out of isolation and toward relationship and community. Ours is a faith that affirms a positive and loving force acting in this world. It offers us the possibility of finding meaning and of entering into the beloved community as full participants.

What would more effectively address isolation than a radical, all-inclusive welcome to community that bars no one from its embrace?

So here's my version of the problem and the solution we offer: The problem is that we suffer from profound existential loneliness. Unitarian Universalism aspires to offer a covenanted beloved community that is radically open and bars no one from its embrace. The covenanted community is our solution to loneliness.

Within that we strive to overcome our xenophobia, that is, our fear of the other; and to embrace diversity. We do not to seek a lowest or meanest common denominator, but to celebrate difference and to welcome it as a muse of creativity, learning, and loving.

We gather in covenant, not creed, to affirm the hope of a universal love. As we gather in our faith, let us provoke one another to love and good deeds. Out of our embrace of beauty and wonder around us, let us be inspired to be people of compassion and courage in the face of challenge.

We seek to welcome all who come in the quest for community and who agree to our covenant and support our mission to transform lives and care for the world.

That I propose is the essence of what we are about.

Welcome home to this beloved community.

May it be so. Can I get an "Amen?"