

Converting to Unitarian Universalism
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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The Rev. Judy Welles©; Bev Motich, Worship Associate

Invitation to Worship

Bev Motich

The day in November 1999 when I signed the membership book here at UUCV was one of the proudest moments in my life, because it was the first time I had ever joined a church. I had attended Main Line Unitarian as a teenager but spent most of my adult years never going to church.

The biggest challenge for me in joining UUCV was that I could not experience this with my whole family. My husband has never been in a church and was against the idea of participating in any organized religion. However, when our daughter reached the age of 10, we agreed that perhaps she should be exposed to some type of religious education to better understand and judge these ideas for herself. He agreed in principle with the UU faith, and so I looked for a congregation near our home. (Dillsburg with its six Lutheran churches, offered no choices in liberal religion.) When Bobbi Bassett told me that UUCV had just bought this building I resolved that we would try it. We attended for the first time the following month.

Although I pursued finding a church for the sake of my daughter, I was surprised to discover so many things here that nurtured me, too. Like many of you, I worked diligently to attend every service that first year, as if I were in training, afraid to miss a single minute of this new growth experience. With each week, I would learn something about myself, about how to treat others, about the world, and about becoming a UU. I found that each of the Seven Principles fit well with me, and I never had to cringe with embarrassment when hearing UU's talk about religion. Because I had never belonged to any other church, I didn't have to swallow any new ideas or compromise my beliefs to convert to Unitarian Universalism. Everything I read about the UU faith made sense to me. This may have been more work for some of you who were raised in other faiths and had other beliefs to contend with. But for me, coming to UUCV gave me the feeling that I was finally "home".

Of course I still struggle to balance my deep feelings for this Beloved Community with my husband's views against church. There are times when I wish he would come, just once, and feel the love I have known here or at least, just have some coffee and conversation. But we have worked toward acceptance of each other's different views and have negotiated a mutual truce. It doesn't stop me from participating in what I know to be the right choice for myself. And my daughter has now also come to the conclusion, completely on her own, that she will want to join this church at some point, too.

What challenges have you faced in becoming a Unitarian Universalist? Come, let us worship together.

First ReadingThe Conversion of Saul
Acts 22:6-12

When I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Then he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked “What am I to do, Lord?” The Lord said to me “Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there came to me, and standing beside me, he said “Brother Saul, regain your sight!” In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. Then he said “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.

Second ReadingDu, Nachbar Gott...
Rainer Maria Rilke

You, God who live next door—
If at times, through the long night, I trouble you
with my urgent knocking —
this is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.
I know you're all alone in that room.
If you should be thirsty, there's no one
to get you a glass of water.
I wait listening, always. Just give me a sign!
I'm right here.

As it happens, the wall between us
is very thin. Why couldn't a cry
from one of us
break it down? It would crumble easily,
it would barely make a sound.

Sermon

Converting to Unitarian Universalism

The Rev. Judy Welles

There was probably some aspect of saying “Yes” to life that brought you through these doors for the first time, some acknowledgement of the longing in your heart that made you put down the newspaper on Sunday morning, straighten your shoulders, and say “Today's the day.”

Perhaps for some of you here, *today* was that day. Welcome! We are delighted that you have come to be with us.

I love the hymn we just sang because it emphasizes the value of saying “Yes” to life, to truth, and to love. We Unitarian Universalists are a yes-saying group. We give a lot of credence to that still small voice within, that intuition that says “this is right for me,” that inner “yes.” In fact, although it’s difficult to generalize about the broad spectrum of religious beliefs among Unitarian Universalists, I think it’s safe to say that the most commonly held belief among us is that a person’s direct experience and inner knowing are the final authorities in religious and spiritual matters.

Of course we pay attention to scriptures from the various faith traditions which tell us of the truths that others have discovered before us, and which recount the wonderful stories and fables that give color and texture and flavor to the lessons they offer.

Of course we are interested in the wisdom of others who have thought long and hard — perhaps longer and harder than we have ourselves — about the deep religious questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?

Of course we pay attention to the teachings of science to explain some of life’s mysteries, and the teachings of the humanities to describe some of the inexplicable mysteries that we all live with.

But ultimately, we have to come up with the answers to those questions on our own, even while using all the resources that are available to us. Ultimately, it is the still small voice within that will determine your beliefs and your understandings of how the world works. No creedal statement of faith, no single source of religious authority outside of your own conscience, no religious community can limit or circumscribe or override your own inner knowing.

It has almost become a cliché among us that when people come to a UU church for the first time, many find themselves saying “I’ve been a Unitarian Universalist all along and I never knew it!” Well, clichés become clichés for a reason, and that is because they are repeated a lot. And the reason they’re repeated a lot is that they are true for so many people, and they explain a common experience. Many of you have told me about discovering this congregation in similar words: “I felt at home right away” or “I knew that I belonged here” or “I never knew there was a religion that matched my own beliefs so well.”

So this raises the questions for me: is it possible to “convert” to Unitarian Universalism? Is it necessary? If we were Unitarian Universalists all along, then what’s to convert to?

Here is where I start having fun with words.

Convert comes from the Latin *convertere*, which means “to turn around.” Now think about this for a moment. If you turn around, just turn around, then you are still standing in the same place, but you’re looking at a different view. So the word “convert” suggests a change of perspective but not of essence; a change of view, but not a change of location. So to convert doesn’t necessarily mean that you become a different person or that you find yourself in a different universe; it means that you are still who you were all along, but now you are seeing things differently.

Let me tell you something else about conversion and turning around. This is an interesting tidbit that I tell in our Roots & Branches class for potential newcomers, so some of you have heard it before, but some of you haven't...

Think for a moment about magic words. What are some magic words that you know? Do you remember *hocus pocus*? The derivation of *hocus pocus* as magic words is believed to come from the religious observance of the Catholic mass when the mass was offered in Latin and most of the people attending the mass were illiterate, probably back some time in 17th century.

At the high point of the mass, the priest would turn his back on the congregation, hold up the consecrated host (the wafer), and say "Hoc est corpus meum," quoting the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, "This is my body." At that moment, according to Catholic belief, the wafer actually becomes the body of Christ. This is known as the miracle of transubstantiation.

The worshippers, not understanding Latin and having a very unsophisticated grasp of metaphor, heard "hoc est corpus" as *hocus pocus*, the "magic words" that were spoken to invoke the miracle of transubstantiation.

Now what I find particularly interesting is the next part, which is less well substantiated academically, but still likely. And that is the idea that the term "hokey pokey" was derived from *hocus pocus*. Think about it. As this silly dance progresses, it mimics the act of conversion: first you put part of yourself in, then take it out, then try this with another body part and then another, putting in and taking out, trying it out, getting a feel for it. Then finally you make the commitment: you put your *whole self* in, you allow yourself to be shaken up, you turn yourself around, and that's what it's all about. You are transformed.

So I often myself nodding wisely when I see the bumper sticker slogan that says "What if the *hokey pokey* is what it's all about?" Because I think it is.

Allowing yourself to be transformed, allowing the conversion experience to happen, seeing things from a new perspective based on your personal trial and error and eventual recognition that you want to throw yourself into this new thing. That's conversion. That's what it's all about!

In the pieces that Bev and I read before the sermon, you hear about two different kinds of conversion experiences. First we have Saul of Tarsus, a Roman citizen and a Jew, who lived in what is now Turkey. As a Pharisee, he was an ardent defender of the Jewish faith who had done his best to stamp out Christianity in Jerusalem (remember that at the time, the Christians *were* Jewish). Now he was on his way to Damascus fortified with letters from the Sanhedrin (the legislature) permitting him to arrest all of the followers of Jesus that he could find in that city. No one would seem a less likely candidate for conversion to Christianity than Saul.

But Jesus came to him like a bolt out of the blue, knocking him from his horse, scaring the daylights out of him and his entourage, and striking him blind for three days. When he recovered, he was fully converted, and he spent the rest of his days as the Apostle Paul traveling throughout the Middle East and the Roman Empire, writing letters to the emerging Christian communities, and spreading the Good News. Without his ardor and energy, Christianity might never have made its mark on the world the way it has. His commitment was intense, fervent, and very effective.

On the other hand, we have the Rilke poem, where the poet is hesitantly seeking God, knowing how close God is and fully aware that at the slightest cry, the wall between him and

God would crumble without a sound. But it is up to him. God waits silently in the next room, barely making a sound. It is the seeker who must bring down the wall and make the connection.

It's pretty likely that among the converts here in this room, both types of experience are represented: the bolt from the blue (not necessarily something you were looking for, but it just happened *to* you) and the seeking, questioning, journeying, perhaps gradual awakening that the faith you sought was just on the other side of the thinnest of walls.

Now I'm fully aware that not all of us "converted" to become UU's. I'm a cradle UU, and in fact, Unitarianism goes back in my family for several generations. Others among us also were born into this faith and didn't have to convert at all. But for those who did make some kind of change to get here, I'd like to invite you to talk with one another during coffee hour and describe your experience of coming to Unitarian Universalism. Was it a surprise that you didn't expect, or was it something you sought out and pursued?

There are at least three parts to the process of conversion, whether it's to Unitarian Universalism, to another religious organization, or to any community of people that is organized around belief and behaviors. These three steps don't occur in the same order for everyone, though probably all three need to happen before a person feels really solidly affirmed and confirmed in their new faith. The three steps are belong, behave, and believe.

For example, you might need to feel that you are comfortable in the community first; you might need to feel that you belong there, that the people who are already there are not very different from you. As your feeling of comfort and familiarity increases, you pick up on the conventions of that community and you begin to behave like one of them. You figure out what the norms are, and you incorporate those norms into your own behavior. And then as you really settle in to and identify with that group, your relationships there and your activities there influence your thinking, and as your thoughts change, you begin to believe in a different way.

But it doesn't have to happen that way. Perhaps you get involved in some kind of social action first; you volunteer at the food bank, or start working for Habitat, or you get involved in a political campaign for a candidate whose values echo your own. In this case, behave would be the starting point, or perhaps the second point based on what you already believe. And as you get to know others who are "behaving" alongside you, you develop a kind of community to which you feel you belong. Or perhaps because you admire those people, you find out what other communities they belong to (like what church they attend, for example), and you realize that that's where you want to belong as well.

Now here's an interesting thing about Unitarian Universalism. *Most* of us are converts. Opinions vary about the percentage of us who were born into this faith, but it's probably somewhere around 10 to 20%. That means that 80 to 90% of us chose to become Unitarian Universalists and went through some kind of conversion experience (whether or not we would call it that).

In December of 2001, *The Christian Century* published an article¹ about the reasons that people became Unitarian Universalists, based on several surveys by academic institutions and one by the Unitarian Universalist Association itself. Most of us joined UU churches for one of two reasons. Either our beliefs didn't square with those of the churches where we found

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ourselves; or other churches refused to accept us as we were, perhaps because we were gay, or divorced, or an inter-racial or intercultural or interfaith couple.

What I find interesting about this is that people often come to us because of what they *already* believe, rather than coming into our midst and then having their beliefs change. This is why it's such a common experience for people to be Unitarian Universalists "without knowing it."

What this means is that you can join a UU church and not change at all. And I don't think that's such a good thing... Remember, we are about transformation here.

We are *all* about transformation here. Our mission statement says that our purpose is to transform lives and care for the world. So I also want to talk about conversion the easy way and conversion the hard way, because I hope to see you transformed.

As a creedless faith with a high tolerance for diversity, we make it pretty easy for people to be lazy Unitarian Universalists. We will take you as you are, we will respect where you have come on your journey so far, and we won't insist that you take a year's worth of classes or wholeheartedly accept any particular belief before you can sign the Membership Book. You make friends here, your children make friends here, the sermons are interesting, the coffee is good... It's a nice place to be on Sunday morning if there isn't anything better to do. That's conversion the easy way.

Conversion the hard way means that you make a commitment to be transformed. You are intentional about changing yourself and the way you interact with the world because *now* you are a Unitarian Universalist and *now* things are different. What this suggests to me is that you have made the decision to have a religious life. (Or maybe you made this decision before you got here, and that's why you came.)

Now I take very seriously the UU commitment to religious diversity. I am not saying that "a religious life" means that you have to believe in God or begin a regular practice of prayer or read scripture. What I mean is that you will live a life that is fully informed by your religious values. You will do the hard work of thinking through ambiguities or complex issues, you will make your decisions based on what you believe, and you will ask the ongoing "why?"

When I was working as a hospital chaplain, my supervisor would ask me "Why is that?" when I described how I felt about something I had encountered. After I answered, he would ask "And why is that?" and I would struggle to come up with a more profound answer, after which he would ask "And why is that?" I deeply appreciated his relentless insistence that I pursue the ongoing "whys" of my life, and that is what I want to encourage you to do.

It's tempting for me to just tell you how to be religious. But that would be my view, from where I stand, and it's your view that will work for you. However, I can tell you this about conversion: it doesn't happen all at once, despite the story of Saul being knocked from his horse by a bolt of light.

It happens with commitment and intention. It happens when you acknowledge and embrace your own history, the journey that brought you this far and influenced who you are at this moment of your life. It happens when you show up here week after week to be provoked, stimulated, excited and comforted. Yes, when you show up even after we've let you down or ticked you off — "disappointment pierced me through, still I kept on loving you."

It starts to happen when you think of this congregation as “we” instead of “they,” and continues when you become more adept at articulating your theology and explaining Unitarian Universalism to yourself and to others. It happens as you don’t give up on the hard questions: who am I, really? What is my life’s purpose? To what shall I give my heart and my loyalties? It happens as you learn to live with the ongoing “why.”

Living with the ongoing “why” is like going on a journey that has no end. When you think you have finally arrived, you realize that there is still somewhere else to go, a further destination calling you forward. If you convert, turning around so that you see things from a different perspective, that’s a first step. But don’t just stand there enjoying the view! Get going! Let’s be on our way!

Closing Words

Unto the Church Universal

Unto the church universal,
Which is the depository of all ancient wisdom,
And the school of all modern thought;
Which recognizes in all prophets a harmony,
In all scriptures a unity and through all dispensations a continuity;
Which abjures all that separates and divides
And always magnifies all that unifies and brings peace;
Which seeks truth in freedom, justice in love,
And individual discipline in social duty;
And which shall make of all sects, classes, nations, and races,
One beloved community;
Unto this church and unto all its members,
Known and unknown throughout the world,
We pledge the allegiance of our hands and hearts.