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## Unitarian Universalism in Eight Words

by Karl Henzy

Five years ago, when my daughter was in middle school, I taught her RE class, and the excellent curriculum that year was called “Coming of Age.” The kids were encouraged to figure out for themselves whether they could identify with Unitarian Universalism as they entered young adulthood, and that meant, in part, articulating the meaning of UUism for them. One of the exercises was called “Unitarian Universalism in 25 Words or Less.”<sup>1</sup> It was a challenging and worthwhile puzzle to try and condense the core of our faith into so brief a statement. We’re often asked by outsiders and newcomers just what we believe. It would be useful to have something pithy to say, if instead of oversimplifying it could be a provocative starting point that would open up into further discussions and reflections. I took a shot at the exercise myself, and I found to my surprise that I could beat the 25 word limit. My version is just 8 words, with 4 key elements. Here’s what I came up with:

**Unitarian Universalism is wonder and care, shared open-endedly.**

As I say, the statement has four key components to its thesis; they are that, 1) we UUs are inspired and enlivened by **wonder**; 2) in the gap between our wonder and the world’s distress [sometimes our own distress], we are moved by **care**; 3) in **sharing** our wonder and care, which have so many different names and faces, we become a people and enjoy something that is more

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<sup>1</sup> Grammatically, it should be, “25 Words or Fewer,” but its not my title. I didn’t want to make a fuss about it in the sermon itself (that would have been pedantry), but as an English professor, I couldn’t let it alone either—hence this footnote.

than the sum of its parts; and 4) by sharing our wonder and care **open-endedly**, we sustain our faith as something ever fresh and new.

So there is my UUism in a nutshell, more or less. For the remainder of this sermon, I'd like to go into each of the four key components, one at a time.

## **Wonder**

The first key component of our faith, I believe, is **wonder**. One friend of mine, in this church, calls his wonder God. He is struck by the power and majesty of the natural world, which for him is the face of God. But what drives the thunder and lightning and moves the clouds is not different, for him, from the conscience in our hearts or the human capacity for love and self-sacrifice, as found in the Gospel stories. Natural forces, internally felt compunctions, and the human hand reaching out in compassionate touch, circulate for him as varying manifestations of one and the same wonder.

In a previous UU church, I knew a group of middle-aged women, mothers and wives, who were deeply involved in Goddess worship and earth-centered spirituality. In praying to the four directions, or singing hymns to Gaia, they were rediscovering their own sense of worth in a society that had relegated them to second-class citizens. They found wonder in their own bodies that have given birth to children, and in their capacity to nourish others and to foster communication and co-operation. They saw evidence of that wonder in themselves, in the men in their lives, in their children, and in thoughts of long past, quasi-legendary societies that valued harmony over conquest.

Another UU friend has a tendency to pooh pooh both God and the Goddesses. She is a scientist and an atheist, but she knows wonder as well. For her, the wonder is the extraordinary,

interlocking activity she sees under a microscope, taking place in a single cell. And the wonder is also the human mind that is capable of questioning and debunking, of thinking up ways to test hypotheses and to live free from the prejudices of false notions. For her these are enough; more than enough.

God, Gaia, the mitochondria of the cell, the logic of the human mind—these are some of the forms of wonder of the UUs I've known. There are many others, but inevitably, when UUs speak of their wonder, their eyes light up, and they shed an energy and a warmth on the rest of us. And there is room for all of them at a UU coffee hour. I do not see their passions and convictions as exclusive of each other, because, for me, there is a common element in their various inspirations, a conviction that there are things or presences in the world and within us that you cannot be complacent about. And when they are in the presence of these things, in the presence of their wonder, they are at their best, their most alive. Perhaps there is some connecting thread in all the various sources of their wonder, or perhaps the connection is just the passion that they feel, the wonder itself. As a UU, I don't try to solve this question; I simply say, to each UU that I meet, "tell me about your wonder."

## **Care**

The other side of UU wonder, and the second key element in UUism, is UU **care**. You can't love the earth with wanting to protect her. You can't be awed by the worth and dignity of every person without wanting to lift up the downtrodden. Care is the extension of wonder into an active relationship with the world around us.

Again, when I talk to outsiders and newcomers, I sometimes sense that they've gotten the impression that UUism is a sort of stupidly happy religion, oblivious of the dark side of

existence, and in denial about the human need for redemption from our failures. But we UUs are deeply concerned about the ongoing destruction caused by wars such as the one in Iraq, by genocidal violence such as that occurring in Darfur, by the environmental damage being inflicted all over the world, by the poverty and neglect in our own cities, including right here in Baltimore, and by the turmoil in our own hearts that is kin to those other, external turmoils. We care about these things, we do what we can, and we struggle to balance our wonder and our care, to keep alight the flame of our wonder, but to look as well into the darkness of our care.

Above all, we seek to turn our caring-about into a caring-for. I know a UU whose highest praise for friends is that they take care of each other. One of the most evident manifestations of this in our UU churches today is our welcoming congregations movement, in which gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered people are specifically acknowledged as full, equal, and equally valued members. There are other churches that do not close their doors to GLBT people, but, so far as I know, the general attitude is that they are accepted in spite of their "limitations." We do not usher people through our doors while turning our eyes from a central feature of their beings. Nor is it that our straight members are somehow doing something magnanimous in going to church with GLBT members. Gay and straight together, as the hymn says, we care for each other, we take care of each other, and in our care and our love we come to know our faith ever more fully and concretely.

## **Sharing**

The third key element in UUism is that our wonder and care are **shared**. Every religion, I imagine, involves an element of sharing. People come together on Sundays or perhaps Saturdays, they talk in coffee hour, they work together in fundraisers or on committees. But in

most other churches the ritual and the scripture define the religious experience, and the sharing is a sort of add on. In UUism, the shared experience, the specific personalities of the members, and the specific character of the church, are central, not peripheral. We affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations—it's our third principle. Being with each other is how we practice our faith, and that means something different everywhere you go.

Every UU church I've been a part of has been unique. The UU Fellowship of Newark, Delaware, on which I cut my UU teeth, is somewhat small and very grass roots. It sits between the nearby university on one side and DuPont Chemical Corporation on the other, and it takes its character out of the mix of people from those two worlds. I'll never forget one member, passed away some 10 years ago—Leo Robb. He was a retired chemical engineer, and he was using his freed-up time for passionate work in the peace organization, *Pacem in Terris*, and as a volunteer at the elementary school across the street from the church. I can still see him, in my mind, as he was when I went into the school one day to pick up my daughter. There was Leo, a giant of a man, about 6'5", 70 or so, with a long, chaotic grey beard, being mobbed by a couple of dozen elementary school kids, as if he were some kind of rock star, each kid waiting for his or her hug from "Mr. Leo."

Leo is UUism to me, and so is the little Newark church with its surrounding woods, so is Ferry Beach, the UU retreat center in Saco Bay, Maine, with its traditions of manic and nutty cafeteria songs, the kids gleefully banging on the tables; so is the Provincetown RI church, which I visited only once but which overwhelmed me with its very warm, very pink embrace; and so is this wonderful urban church, First Unitarian of Baltimore, with its grand and beautiful old building and its very fresh and new UU minds. What people say about the funny story that

doesn't produce laughs, "you had to be there," is uniquely true of the experience of UUism: you have to be there, sharing the faith with specific people, in specific places, to get it.

## **Open-Endedness**

Every religion, I suppose, incorporates elements of wonder, care, and sharing, but none that I've ever heard of does so in such an **open-ended** way. There's a well-known joke-game to play with fortune cookies. Read the fortune on the strip of paper aloud, and to whatever it says, attach the phrase, "in bed." Good things await you ... in bed. You will meet someone who will give you good advice ... in bed. A similar game could be played with UUism, only the phrase to attach to every statement would be, "for now." I'm getting my spiritual nourishment from neo-paganism ... for now. I think I might be a sort of Taoist UU ... for now. I'm interested in ritual ... for now.

That open-endedness is affirmed in what is literally our central principle, since it is the fourth, or middle principle, out of seven. "We affirm and promote the free and responsible *search* for truth and meaning." The search, the journey. For us, the mind that keeps growing and learning, that moves through ideas as a swimmer moves through water, is as religiously significant and meaningful as any symbol, pilgrimage site, or scripture.

I'm put in mind of one friend whom I met almost from my earliest time here at First Unitarian Baltimore. I cannot speak *for* him, and in describing how things have looked to me, I do not mean to say that he has grown while I have remained the same, enlightened from the beginning, for I have grown and changed over the same period of time. But I'm fascinated and inspired by other UU's journies.

My friend grew up nourished by the great black church tradition, and to this day, when he speaks, you can hear the sonorousness, the rich cadences, of a long line of black preachers. But my friend had to leave his former church. I don’t know why—perhaps there were aspects of his identity that his former church could not fully accept. I only know that he still loves the black church tradition, that he does not resent it or hate it, and that leaving it must have been at least somewhat difficult for him. He came to us, and I have listened to him express his views over our time here together, in small groups, in the pulpit, and one-to-one in coffee hour, for he is not stingy in sharing what he thinks, and I love that about him. But I have heard changes in his views, and behind those changes I sense a journey.

To me, and I stress the *to me*, my friend’s earliest pronouncements sometimes sounded dogmatic—they were delivered with such conviction that there seemed to be no space left for a “what about this,” or a “what about that”? In retrospect, though, I find I have to attach a little echo to those early pronouncements, an echoing “for now.” For I have recently heard him speak of the profound truths he has discerned in non-Christian world religions; and he talks now of the primacy of each person’s spiritual journey. My friend is listening, comparing, thinking, and periodically offering status reports, reports “for now,” as only he can deliver them. I only hope that my own growth has been as vigorous. But I know that it is the open-endedness of our faith that gives both my friend and me, and you, the space to keep moving, and that recognizes that movement as itself a fundamental feature of our spirituality.

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So there it is ... our religion in eight words, at least for me: *Unitarian Universalism is wonder and care, shared open-endedly*. If the statement works for you, I’m glad. If it doesn’t, I’m glad too, and I encourage you to think about *why* it doesn’t work, and to try the exercise,

"UUism in 25 Words or Less," for yourselves. I think you'll find that in the process you'll discover more for yourself what you believe, what matters to you, and after all, that process of self-discovery is the essence of our faith.