

Born Again Unitarian Universalist – written and delivered by Rev Debra Faulk
Unitarian Church of Calgary, April 18th, 2010

Opening Reading: by Rev. Lynn Ungar

It seems to me that the gospel that I have to offer, which I think applies to UUism in general as much as anything does, is that no one is alone, that our lives are intimately intertwined in an "interdependent web: from which no being is excluded (in traditional terms, "universal salvation.") I believe that God is found, or created, in all of the points of connection. The God of these connections unfolds in our stories, in our sharing our lives with one another, and through works of justice which "affirm and promote" those connections. This "God of the Network" is not a supernatural, all-powerful entity with ability to override free will, but neither is the individual everything, with no divinity to call us beyond our narrow selves.

Part of the good news of this cosmology (if that's what it is) is that it means there is no way to be abandoned by God, only a possibility of denying the divine through denying our connectedness. Even in recognizing our personal and social brokenness, the ways in which so many connections within and outside the self have been severed, it is still possible to find affirmation of the divine and the possibilities of healing through the symbols of the myriad creative interdependencies of nature and through the stories of those who have chosen to re-weave the web of connection in their own lives.

I guess what I think UUism has to offer overall is a theology of wholeness, an affirmation of unity -- no split between mind, body and spirit, no chasm between thought and emotion, no divide between humans and the rest of nature, or between living beings and God. I think our name can be reinterpreted to stand up very well as an expression of this cosmology -- Unitarian, for the unity within and among us; Universalist, for the universal inclusion in/of the divine.

Rev. Lynn Ungar is currently the Minister of Lifespan Learning with the Church of the Larger Fellowship. She wrote this piece in response to a request from a colleague who was doing a week long exploration of "What is Our Good News" at a UU family camp on the west coast. He asked for reflections on our UU gospel and this was Lynn's.

Born Again Unitarian Universalist – Rev. Debra Faulk

Born again Unitarian Universalist – now what does that mean - Born again is a term used primarily in the Evangelical or Pentecostal branch of Protestant Christianity, where it is associated with salvation and conversion, hardly language we would use in UU circles.

There is another intention to the idea of born again, for just as the earth is reborn every spring we too experience cycles in our lives, we too have moments of spiritual rebirth. Used in this context it includes those transcending personal experiences — from which we emerge feeling new, different somehow than we were the moment before the experience.

These can be profound epiphanies, or a subtle new awareness. We may not apply the term salvation yet those moments of ahah do have a salvific quality, serve as salve for the soul, remind us of the presence of grace and deepen our feeling of connection, our faith and hope is renewed, is born again anew.

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These feelings of awe and renewal are as universal as loss and suffering, joy and fulfillment.

I am born again and again as I live out our Unitarian values, as I look upon the world with eyes that seek both justice and beauty, ears that hear the music and the cries of pain, drink deeply from the chalice of life, as I touch and am touched. Born again when reason impels my curiosity, compassion fuels my courage; born again in the realization of what is possible when the vision expressed in our principles is incarnated in the world.

I had privilege of attending 2002 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Quebec City, historic as probably the last one that will ever be held in Canada.

The opening ceremony at GA is a gala affair. In Quebec City it began with the lighting of the chalice with words in both French and English, a welcome from the First Nations people on whose traditional territory the conference was being held and a Quebecoise/Acadian musical group. This I only heard about for I was gathered with about 800 other banner carriers.

What happened in that room as we waited was one of the most moving and affirming moments of the conference and was an epiphany, a born again experience.

As we gathered people were greeting each other, admiring banners, seeing old friends, figuring out what to do with purses, trying to put the carrying poles together, organized chaos.

Then a tragedy, a gentleman collapsed. There was the brief bystander gawking, then the call for a doctor and a few responds. As soon as the severity of the situation was realized it was like a drop of detergent in a sink of greasy water as people moved in unison to the edges of the room, granting complete courtesy.

A hush fell on the room, the paramedics arrived and were there for a significant time having to revive and then stabilize their patient before he could be move. Then as they wheeled him out a low resounding song began, "Spirit of Life, come unto me,"

It was a sung prayer of healing and hope that spontaneously welled up from a deep place of shared compassion. There was so much respect, solidarity and love being extended, many were moved to tears.

For all the excitement, differing points of view, personal pains and celebrations, we were, in that moment united by a connection of heart, that rarely has the opportunity for such public expression. The song was heard we were later told through those unconscious ears. He said we sang him back and he was born again. You sing this every Sunday and this is part of the meaning it has for me.

Then there was the Canadian Unitarian Council Annual Meeting and conference in Hamilton when, at the opening ceremony, youth wove through the attendees with the Rainbow banner inspired and created by the Calgary youth. What an amazing blessing to be present and then, the spontaneous call during the closing plenary session for a free will offering so that the creators of the banner could be holding it up on parliament hill the day of the vote to legalize same sex marriage, a born again moment to be sure.

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It was a year ago Monday that my mom died unexpectedly, though she was not well so it was not a total surprise. When I returned to Toronto the congregation I am now serving held a memorial service for her, for me. They did this to hold me in my loss and share their condolences with me though none of them knew my mom. What an act of compassion, I was born again in the love of that community.

Three vignettes from my lived experience of the renewing power of this faith; three of my many born again experiences. I long for more of such public expression of our deep concern, for expressions of what we are passionate about, for public moments of witness.

What we stand for is so clearly articulated in the principles and purposes we affirm, the worth and dignity of each individual, the ongoing search for meaning, the demand to express our faith through acts of justice and compassion and recognition of the interconnectedness of all.

These are values that can transform the world yet far too often we speak them only to ourselves, do not shout them for others to hear, we quietly go about enacting them in our lives and the work we do in the wider community for they shape who we are. At least this has been my usual experience – yesterday I did hear Greg, though not shouting, with an amplified voice, speaking the gift of this Unitarian community during his performance at the Calgary Tower climb.

The person sitting beside you is an activist for UU's work for environmental concerns, social justice and political reform. We do this work as individuals, rubbing shoulders with others for whom seeking community may be a contributing factor to their volunteering. The human spirit longs for connection and finds fulfillment in community. We have connection, commitment and community to offer!

Membership in this church is both simple and difficult, simple because we have no set creed, maintaining an open door to those who feel at home with us, those who would uphold the principles we affirm. It is difficult because it challenges us to make a personal commitment to become part of a religious community that is searching for truth, struggling for justice and attempting to live in love.

We are being called to share our understanding of what religious community, beloved community, can and must be if we are to be agents of transformation in a world broken and needing healing.

We may not have absolute answers to the great questions of life however we are an exciting bunch of unique individuals who continue to ask and debate those questions, arriving often at more questions than definitive answers.

We are living communities built through the sharing of insights and celebrations, struggles and challenges, aspirations and actions. This is the stuff that binds people together beyond all personal diversity. This is the meaning of religion – to bind together.

There are many ways in which each and every one of us put our Unitarian Universalist values into action. We are all individuals and ultimately our actions are motivated by our personal conscience, yet there is a reason we gather in community.

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Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed says:

“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

As social structure breaks down, as seems to be happening now, individuals search for group identification, youth form gangs, there are single bars, gay clubs and all kinds of organizations espousing a particular perspective, The Raging Grannies, Green Peace... . People are seeking community and we have community to offer.

Those of us who have embraced this faith have each said "that person is UU they just don't know it or that person would have been a Unitarian Universalist if they had known about us". A child asked me once if Jesus was a Unitarian. So why do we not let people know about us.

Our denomination has something to offer to all those who are not aware that there is an alternative to creedal religion or complete abstinence from anything at all resembling a church. All those who believe intellectual freedom must be sacrificed to be part of a religious community deserve an invitation.

I am Unitarian Universalist to my core, to that place of personal responsibility and consciousness that enables me to act. And these actions are guided by the principles of this faith. This does not mean that all I am is UU or that I will remain this way forever, though that is a probability, because diversity, growth and opportunity to change are fundamental to our denomination. If my beliefs or understanding change I do not have to leave this beloved community, I am born again to it and in it.

When someone new asks me what I do and I respond I am a minister (of religion, I learned to clarify ‘of religion’ when doing my internship in Ottawa where there were all kinds of other ‘ministers’ wandering around). The presuppositions held by the other are often evident in the body language, the timid OH, the long pause and the then shortened conversation. Sometimes this is useful.

I used to find myself defending and or justifying my religion as not like other religions. Now though I use Unitarian Universalist as a noun in my life, "I am a Unitarian Universalist Minister." People respond more often with a question as to what UUism is rather than withdrawal from all communication. I feel strengthened by my declaration, born again.

In fact it took me a number of years to come out of the closet with my deeply held personal call to ministry, even within UU circles. What is it about being a member of this denomination that has many of us less than willing to make clear statements of our religious affiliation? Certainly some of our members are victims of church abuse at other

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times in their lives and evangelism or proselytizing may have been part of the memory. If this is the case than being able to speak openly would be a sign of healing.

This is not my situation having been raised a Unitarian, however I am aware of and sensitive to the church abuse suffered by others. There is a cultural perception of all churches being views similarly, as institutions requiring conformity to prescribed doctrines and the loss of individuality that needs be challenged.

I consider my self a Born again UU, when I finally began to follow my call to ministry, something I knew I had to do since age 13 and finally started at age 35, it was a sort of rebirth. I also consider my self a Unitarian Universalist evangelist. I am willing to speak about our good news, name myself UU, be a voice of reason and hope in the wider community. I have a knowing that the principles that this denomination espouses are guidelines for peace and restoration of wholeness need on this planet. I invite each and every one of us to share our good news.

The more intently I share and consistently I live my UU faith the deeper my understanding of the responsibility and contribution of each individual. I say I am a born again UU, indeed born again and again and again with a renewal of strength and purpose to seek justice and enact love in the world. May it be so.