

## The Anything Goes Religion?

Readings: 'The Afterlife' by Billy Collins  
'Instructions' by Sheri Hostetler  
'Pray for Peace' by Ellen Bass

About six years ago, I went to the dentist. I don't like going to the dentist. I know I'm not alone in this. While some people, like my husband, love dental visits, I am not among them. I hate the drills and the needles, having other people's fingers in my mouth, learning that I have cavities, and the small talk. I know that dentist office small talk is supposed to put me at ease, but it never seems to do that for me.

But six years ago, I had dental insurance for the first time in a long time and so scheduled an appointment for a deep clean of my teeth. As the dental hygienist walked me from the waiting room to the dental chair, she asked me about myself. I answered. I spoke of how I was in seminary, preparing to be a minister. "Oh," she said. "My friend's father is a Unitarian minister, up in Albany." "Really?" I responded, excited that she had even heard of us. "That's my denomination!" "Yeah?" she said, nonplussed. "*Anything* goes with you Unitarians." Have you heard someone say something like this, that anything goes with us? That Unitarian Universalists can believe anything? Have you said something like this yourself? It can be a convenient shorthand for the theological diversity among us – an easy way to answer "so what do you Unitarian Universalists believe?" It might be easy to say, but it's not true.

This shorthand does us a disservice; it sells us short. That day at the dental office, I didn't think that *anything* goes with us, but I didn't want to have a theological discussion. Have you ever had moments like this? Times when you want to speak up about your faith but don't feel comfortable? At the dentist that day, I didn't know the dental hygienist. Soon, she would be bringing out the sharp tools. Soon I would be injected with Novocain so she could do that deep clean of my teeth. Changing her mind about my religion was more than I wanted to tackle in my anxious state. I wanted to keep the mood light. I just wanted to get through the cleaning. "Not everything goes in Unitarian Universalism." I said. "But we are more open than some churches." And we proceeded with the dental cleaning. Partway through, when she had a collection of sharp tools in my mouth and half my jaw was numb, she muttered, "Anything goes with those Unitarians." I didn't say anything. I probably would not have been able to form intelligible words had I wanted to. Still, I wish I would have said something.

Had I had that moment to live over, had I been able to press a cosmic pause button, take the tools out of my mouth and regain control of my numbed jaw, this is what I would have said. I would have told her that in fact, not *anything* goes with those Unitarians. We are a theologically diverse church, but we are not a church where people can believe *anything* they want. We are a church without a creed, which makes us different than what most people expect when they think about church. We did not ask Kirsten, Deb, Rachel Ann, Amy and Allegra to agree with a statement of belief before they could join this church. We asked them to sign our Bond of Union, which is about how we live together, not what we believe. I'm going to read the Bond of Union again, because I think it's important for our members to remember the promises they made when joining this church

Earnestly desiring to develop in ourselves and in the world honest, reverent thought, faithfulness to our highest conception of right living, the spirit of love and service to all people, and allegiance towards all the interests of morality and religion, as interpreted by the growing thought and purest lives of humanity:

We join ourselves together hoping to help one another in all good things and advance the cause of pure and practical religion in the community. We base our union upon no creed test but upon the purpose herein expressed and welcome all who wish to join us to help establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world.

There is no call to shared belief, only shared action. As Unitarian Universalists, we strive not for a shared right belief—orthodoxy—but a shared practice—orthopraxy. We join ourselves together hoping to help one another in all good things and establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world. We believe that courageous love has the power to transform ourselves and transform the world.

That said, I think it's important for us all to remember that every congregation of every tradition is theologically diverse. We sometimes think our diversity of belief makes us special. It doesn't. There are always theists and atheists, skeptics and agnostics, and people who aren't quite sure what they believe in every religious community. They might come to church out of family tradition or because they like the music or because of the love and support they feel in the community. What sets us apart as Unitarian Universalists is that we name—and celebrate—the diversity of belief within our community. We offer opportunities to seek the truth following many traditions. We offer Buddhist meditation gatherings, full moon drum circles, and workshops on Christian contemplative practices to help people search for truth and meaning and give them the tools to live lives of integrity. Those of us who pray might pray to Jesus or Inanna, the bus driver or The Great Whale, Sojourner Truth or Shakespeare.

The closest we get to shared belief is our seven principles – excerpts of which are on the wall right there, but they are not a creed. They are from the Unitarian Universalist Association's bylaws and each congregation affirms them. They are shared ethical commitments, aspirations for how we are with one another and in the larger world. Even believing in the same principles does not guarantee uniformity of belief.

Take our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Even if we all believe this, it does not mean that we believe the same thing. Some among us believe that our inherent worth derives from a good and loving god making us in god's image. Everyone carries that divinely-given worth within us and that should be respected. Others are more pragmatic about this principle. They know that affirming everyone's worth and dignity makes them kinder and more loving to those around them. The fact that this belief makes them better is reason enough to believe it. Still others, those who find their truths in science and nature, might affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people because the odds against each of our existence are staggering, because our existence is miraculous. Forest Church, who served as the Senior Minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Manhattan until his death in 2009 said when he knew death was near,

"[T]he miracle... springs from living in the first place. The odds against our being here in the first place are infinitesimal. You have to go back not just to the right egg and the right sperm of your biological parents. You have to go back all the way through history. None of our grandparents or great-grandparents died before puberty. If you go back to the eleventh or twelfth century, most of us have some 2.5 million ancestors, all of whom made it and connected at the right time. For those of us with a European heritage, none of our ancestors died before puberty in the Great Plague, whose mighty scythe cut down half the continent's children. Then go back beyond that to our prehuman ancestors and the urparamonium, and then back farther to the pinball of stars all the way to the big bang. We're kinetically and genetically connected to everything that preceded us. The universe was pregnant with us when it was born."<sup>1</sup>

The universe was pregnant with us when it was born. Does that not call all of us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

As we all know, our congregation is full of theological diversity. But does that mean that we can believe *anything* we want? No! Having freedom of belief doesn't mean that you can believe just any old thing. We are called us to carefully examine what we think is true and how those understandings impact how we live in this world. Our beliefs must help us make sense of the world and call us to lives of integrity.

Unitarian Universalists believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Free *and* responsible. There is tension in those words. Freedom means an open and expansive search for truth, exploring many sources and many ideas, open to whatever catches our interest. This freedom might make us say sometimes that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything we want. But freedom is just the beginning of our search, not the end. As Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "Freedom is a footbridge, not a dwelling place. Freedom ... is the fruitful zero .... It is the run before the jump, the tuning of the violin." Freedom is where we begin our search. It's the tuning of our violin before we embark on our theological concertos. But it is not the concerto itself.

Our beliefs must also be shaped by responsibility. Our beliefs do not exist in a vacuum. They need to serve us – and those around us. Rev. Jaco ten Hove, my childhood minister, always told me that we Unitarian Universalists don't believe what we want to, we believe what we must. Want and must. Those are another pair of words with tension between them. Want is inward-looking. It's all about us, our desires, what makes us feel good. Want can be selfish, irresponsible even. There are a lot of beliefs that I want to be true, but that doesn't make them true. For a search for truth to be responsible, we must constantly ask, "does this reflect the world as I see it?"

For example, when I ponder one of the biggest questions we all live with—why do bad things happen to good people—I want a simple answer. I wish I could believe that everything happens for a reason. I've spoken to you before about how I don't believe that, but sometimes I wish I could. I want to believe in a universe that is fair and just. I want to believe that if I am good enough, I can escape disaster, disease, and destruction. I want to believe that if I am good enough, I can protect myself and those I love from suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Church, Forest. *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2009. page 176.

But we all know that that isn't true. The world shows that to us again and again. We all know that suffering comes for us all, no matter what. There is no escape. We all know that the universe has large amounts of randomness and indifference in it. I cannot, with any integrity, believe that everything happens for a reason, even though there is part of me that wants to.

Instead, I believe what I must. Must is not about desire, but about reality. Must is where the responsibility enters our free search for truth. Must recognizes that what feels good is not always what's best for us or those around us. Must asks if our beliefs can hold up when tested against the realities of the world. Must knows that we are not isolated beings, but connected to the larger world. Must knows we do not believe only for ourselves, but for our community.

We believe what we must. We believe what fills our lives with meaning. We believe what makes sense to us in our unique circumstances. We believe what makes us better people. We do not believe just anything; We believe what we need to to treat those around us with kindness. We believe what we need to to make ethical decisions. We believe what we need to to be the loving, thoughtful people that the world is calling out for, that the world so desperately needs. Because we are responsible in our believing we recognize that our beliefs make the most sense for us right now, but that our search is not over. These beliefs might change as our lives change, as we learn new things, but we accept that. We know that they serve us now, but that truth continues to be revealed.

We also know that our beliefs are not the only valid beliefs. There are many ways to find meaning in this world and we recognize that. All of our violins are playing different melodies but they blend together beautifully. This does not mean we accept all beliefs. This does not mean that anything goes with we Unitarian Universalists. Some beliefs are out of tune and destroy the beautiful music we are trying to make together. That word responsible is important here too. What does it mean for belief to be responsible? A responsible belief promotes human flourishing. A responsible belief is congruent with our principles. Ideologies rooted in the superiority of one group over another, ideologies of white supremacy, xenophobia or hatred for groups of people because of their racial, religious, or gender identities or sexual orientation are not responsible beliefs. They are not in keeping with our principles or in harmony with the Bond of Union that all members sign. There are no room for those beliefs in Unitarian Universalism.

A belief worth having is one that makes the believer a better person, with a more meaningful life, who interacts thoughtfully with the world around him or her or them. A belief worth having is one that motivates us to work for justice, equality and sustainability. And many beliefs do this. In their best forms, all of the world's wisdom traditions do this, as can idiosyncratic individual belief systems that don't fit neatly within any of the world's wisdom traditions.

The question is, since clearly not everything goes, how do we decide what goes? We see how that belief is lived, how it affects the believer and those around him or her or them. That is what helps us decide if a belief is responsible, if it blends with our Unitarian Universalist melodies. Now, I've been your minister since last August. Some of you have told me about your belief system, but most of you haven't. As I look around this room. I can't say which version of the afterlife most of you subscribe to. , I can't say who believes in a higher power of some sort. But I am learning how you live – how your faith informs your actions within and beyond these walls. I watch you strive to respect the inherent worth of all people and

the interdependent web of all existence. I watch you live lives of justice, equity, and compassion. I watch you not always succeed in these goals, but remain committed to them. The lives of integrity lived by so many of you bear witness to the fact that your search for truth and meaning has been free and responsible, that your beliefs reflect the world as it is and inspire you to work to make it better.

This would have been a lot to say to the dental hygienist that day. It would have taken up the entire appointment and I never would have had my teeth cleaned. But I could have said something more. I should have told her, "Not just *anything* goes at Unitarian churches. We are a community of diverse believers. We believe in each person's right to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We also believe that the only beliefs worth having are ones that promote human flourishing, love and justice. We don't believe what we want; we believe what we must."

So on this day that we welcome new members into our congregation, may we all commit and recommit ourselves to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

May we balance what we wish we could believe with the realities around us.

May our beliefs inspire us to action, to work together to establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.