

“Can There Be Any Day But This?”

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This week I received e-mail from a person asking about Unitarian Universalism. The person confessed to some skepticism about our movement, and then asked the following questions.

Is it true that some of your members are atheists, or that it is possible for your members to be atheists and still belong to your church? Also, someone I know attended a funeral for one of your deceased members, and he told me it seemed very depressing to him because you did not mention any hope for an afterlife of any kind. Do some of your members not believe in an afterlife? What if a particular deceased member did believe in Heaven or some form of afterlife? Do you talk about it in the funeral service in that case?

Although this inquiry came from a person in Terre Haute with regard the Terre Haute UU congregation, the questions might as easily be asked in reference to any UU Congregation. In light of the fact that we nearly always have visitors in our services, and others who have only been attending a short while, I think we should occasionally address such inquiries about this unusual association of believers known as Unitarian Universalists. One of our national, self-proclaimed identities is that of the “Uncommon Denomination.” So what is so uncommon about us?

The answer to the first question above is one of the uncommon factors so many find astounding. “Is it true that some of your members are atheists or that it is possible for your members to be atheists and still belong to your church?” Yes, it is true that some of our members are atheists. Now, I would submit that the percentage of those persons who declare themselves atheists is probably lower today than it was 30 or 40 years ago, but there are still atheists amongst us, and I hope to God they stay.

There are also theists amongst us of varying sorts. There are deists, in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, who believed in the strong probability of a supreme being, a first cause, or prime mover, but not in a personal god. And there are those for whom god is personally involved in our lives as in the teachings of Christianity, Judaism or Islam. There are also Buddhists, Hindus, Sufis and various practitioners of earth-based, pagan and New Age spiritualities who affiliate with Unitarian Universalism.

I do not intend to give a history of how the Unitarians and the Universalists, both of Christian origin, came to be who we are today. I recommend that those interested in such an overview enroll in our exploring UU class.

I simply want to affirm the fact that we are indeed a diverse community of believers who hold no creed to be a test of membership, but rather affirm some basic principles which give meaning to our coming together to worship, to live, and to join in the struggle for justice.

The writer of the email also asked about our understanding of the afterlife or lack thereof. Evidently a friend had attended a memorial service of a UU member and had found the experience depressing because there was no mention of an afterlife. Here again our diversity is evident. I suspect that there are as many different beliefs about the afterlife as there are members in this community. Do I believe in an afterlife? I believe that life is eternal. I don't know anything about what happens after death, and I don't spend a great deal of time worrying about it.

I do know that none of us can say which of us is closer to finding out. Death is common to all of life, and the timing appears random. Although, as I continue to advance in age, I recognize that I have less time here than I have already had, and thus can expect that significant step into “no place” or “some place” to take place at some time in the next three decades. I am not in any hurry for it to happen, but I have learned to live in such a way as to not feel cheated if it happened sooner rather than later.

That reminds me of an old story about the three young children sitting on the street corner one Sunday morning when a bus pulled up that had “Heaven Bound” in the destination slot on the front. A preacher jumped out of the bus and asked the children to get aboard. Two of them boarded the bus, but the third just sat there. The preacher asked, “Young man, don’t you want to go to heaven?” The boy said, “Uh I don’t think so.” The preacher was astounded. “You mean to tell me that you don’t want to go to heaven when you die?” “Oh sure,” said the boy, “I want to go to heaven when I die, I thought your were loading up the bus to go right now.”

Again, although I believe life to be eternal, I am not in any hurry to find out what it is like after death, although to be honest, the depictions of heaven prevalent in modern American Christianity and the clientele thereof hold no charm for me.

I also believe that resurrection is common to life and is a natural process. I am becoming more and more comfortable with the idea of past lives and re-incarnation, but such beliefs do not really have a profound impact on the way I choose to live. I believe that the life I am living now is the life for which I am responsible, and it is in the living of this life that I find hope rather than in the prospect of an afterlife.

The questions in the above email, and any honest questions of those who wish to understand UUism, are worthy of responses. Such questions however, often carry with them a sense of incredulity that we Unitarian Universalists can call ourselves a church given that we do not require confessions of faith in God nor provide a host of answers to unanswerable questions.

I submit that there are answerable questions with which religious persons might do well to grapple with in our day, in our time, in our nation. I will get to a few of those questions in a bit, but first I would point out that we do utilize much of the Christian heritage in the life and worship of our UU community. A perfect example is the beautiful piece by our choir this morning. The poetry of the 17th century metaphysical Christian poet George Herbert set to music by Vaughn Williams. The words are the closing stanzas of a poem titled “Easter,” and of course express the poet’s faith that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were of eternal significance. It may, or may not surprise you to learn that I agree with that assessment.

I believe that every life, and every death and every resurrection is of eternal significance. And I firmly believe that the life, death, and spiritual resurrection of that revolutionary Jew of the first century of the Common Era has proven to be of eternal significance. By spiritual resurrection, I mean the fleshing out of his teachings in the lives of those persons who understood the liberating power of unconditional love to cast out fear. That was the “truth that set them free.” It was not a truth to be confined in the pages of a holy book or the walls of a holy church. Rather it was a truth found in the heart of a living, loving community.

What does it mean to be a religious community in this day? I believe that religious thought arises out of the questions implied by the existential circumstance in which we find ourselves. What are the questions with which you grapple? I suggest that most of us do not spend a great deal of time asking where we are going to go when we die. I don’t think early Christians spent an inordinate of time with that one either. I believe they were struggling with questions much more pertinent to their existence. The life of that community provides ample evidence of the questions. The Christian communities of the early church

obviously strove to answer questions about how they should live in response to unconditional love under the conditions of estrangement, alienation and oppression.

What are some of the questions, which confront us today? Perhaps they can be framed in some traditional language. What do we mean by heaven and hell? What would it mean to live in a heavenly place? What would hell look like?

Let's put it in a different frame of reference. Different in both time and space. What does America look like to you? The early Christians took a look at the conditions in which they lived and determined that it was hell. It was bondage, it was out of balance, and it was unjust. They set about to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth, and their vision of that kingdom has absolutely nothing in common with the theocratic visions of the fundamentalist of our day be they Islamic, Christian, Jewish or any other sect of the "You are either for us or against us" mentality.

I want to ask a few religious questions this morning. These are questions implied in the existential circumstance in which we, as Americans, find ourselves. They are the kind of questions that come to mind every time I listen to the news.

Are we Americans willing to become one great gated community of consumers? There are serious proposals to build a great wall separating us from our neighbors to the south. I listened to a fear-mongering congressman last week saying that the illegal immigrants are coming to take our jobs, destroy our communities and kill our families! I think some of these people want America to be a walled nation. Perhaps we should put golden gates on the wall and change our name to the United States of Heaven.

There are many religious questions for this one eternal day: What is our responsibility to the poor, the dispossessed, and the imprisoned? What will America be for our grandchildren? What is the religious significance in the fact that a person working full time on minimum wage cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment at market rates anywhere in America? What is the religious significance of the fact that a fulltime minimum wage worker earns \$10,500 a year, while the CEO of Wal-Mart earns \$3,500 an hour, the CEO of Halliburton earns \$8,300 an hour, and the CEO of Exxon Mobil earns about \$13,700 an hour?

Every religious tradition calls for adherents to care for the poor and the oppressed. How is it that religion has become the fortress of the rich?

As we look at our society today, as we consider the culture of America, can we honestly say that this is a culture for which we will send our sons and daughters to die, or perhaps even more telling, to kill another parent's child? This question resounds in my mind and soul with every report of the death of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. It resounds in my mind and soul with every death of another Iraqi child of any age.

It seems to me that these are the questions with which persons of religious and/or human values should struggle in our day. Instead we hear insipid ranting on questions irrelevant to the existential sufferings of our day. The current furor over the DaVinci Code movie is an example of the irrelevance of modern religiosity. This fictional movie has been condemned by the Papacy and by fundamentalist Christianity, and banned in Islamic countries, because it is said to denigrate the person of Jesus and might turn people away from the truth. I ask you, what is greater offense to the message of Jesus, a fictional movie, or the fact that the leading democracy, the self-proclaimed bastion of Christian morality, the United States of America persists in a perpetual state of war?

What are the issues to which Jesus would speak today? Given the evidence of his message, I believe that peace, justice, equal rights, and respect for the dignity and worth of all of life would sum it up. I believe that the religious question, the human question, the answerable question that we must address in the 21st century is “What are we doing about the least in the kingdom?”

“Can there be any day but this?” I agree with George Herbert’s answer, “There is but one, and that one ever.”

Every day is a resurrection day. Every day has the promise of new life. In this glorious season of flowers, may we begin to understand what it means to be liberal religious people. It is not summed up by saying; “You are free to believe whatever you want.” It is not summed up by saying; “We are open to all faiths, and accepting of all persons,” although I hope that is true. Being a religious people in this age means striving with courage to speak truth to power, to uplift the downtrodden, to work for a more equitable, just society in which all the children have a place at the table.

Our claim to be a liberal religious community, to be a church, is dependent upon our willingness to do just that. Furthermore, our claim to be a human community is dependent upon our struggle to be in a right relationship with all our relatives in this wondrous web of life.

Can there be any day but this? This is the day of salvation and it is forever. This is the eternal Now. How will we live in it? I leave you with the words of e e cummings. May all of our ears awake and our eyes be opened to the realization that hope lies in our having the “courage to be” in this eternal day.

i thank You God for most this amazing

by e e cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)