

In the life of a Unitarian Universalist minister certain questions recur - recalcitrant, like waves upon the beach. This is because our religious tradition is unique.

Being free of creed, doctrine, and sacred text, we offer people a degree of theological freedom they will not find elsewhere. When people discover this freedom, there is the initial joy of not having notions of the Divine and personal morality thrust upon them. Though this joy is often followed by the realization that this freedom entails a unique set of challenges, which engender a flood of questions with which every Unitarian Universalist must struggle.

Since we have no creed, doctrine, or sacred text, what solace does Unitarian Universalism offer upon the death of a loved one? Since we make no appeal to a moral authority, where do we look for guidance when we face moral ambiguity? What do we tell a child who wants to know why we don't celebrate first Communion the way her Catholic friend does (said child wondering, are we a *real* religion?)

Questions like these recur – recalcitrant, as waves upon the beach. This is a good thing. It reminds me how profound an experience it is to be religiously free, after having spent one's life yoked to the creeds, doctrines, and sacred texts of other religions. And it reminds me that people need help finding their footing in the shifting sands of our free faith, while life's undertow tugs at them.

Whether one is new to Unitarian Universalism or has been a Unitarian Universalist for some time, *all of us* have had our struggles with the challenges this religion poses. In our more honest moments we must confess, when we faced loss, when we feel a sense of moral ambiguity, or when we struggle to answer our children's questions, our tradition *can seem* to leave us wanting.

This reminds me of a conversation I had in Divinity School. At that time, I was considering whether Unitarian Universalism made sense as a religious path for me. So, I queried a friend, herself a Unitarian Universalist. Her advice was: "If you're looking for something to help you sleep at night, try sleeping pills instead!"

She was right! Being a Unitarian Universalist is not a simple matter. Along with the gift of religious freedom come requirements that are difficult to meet: personal responsibility and existential courage; the willingness to remain *uncertain*. These requirements are difficult to meet because it is natural to seek their opposites in religion: dependence and certainty - elements that make up what Paul Tillich called the "Ground of Being."

For our purpose this morning, let's consider the "Ground of Being" to be that in which we humans "ground" ourselves: the set of beliefs and ideas we use to make us feel as though we belong in the universe.

When we Unitarian Universalists look to our tradition for a Ground of Being, we can feel disillusioned. This is because the Ground of Being depends upon the answers to life's ultimate questions: "Where do we come from?" "Where are we going?" "What is the meaning of life?" Unitarian Universalism doesn't provide any stock answers to these questions. "Religion" does that.

"Religion," in the traditional sense, provides a Ground of Being by prescribing beliefs and ideas that make us feel as though we belong in the universe. "Religion" tells us where we came from, where we are going, and what is the meaning of life. For instance, Judaism tells us God created us in God's own image, while Christianity tells us we are destined for a heavenly abode. And, there are many variations on the meaning of life, from Buddhism to Sufism.

"Religion" offers us what we might call "mythological answers to existential questions." For many people this provides a Ground of Being, a sense that one belongs in the universe.

Unitarian Universalism, however, is not a religion *in the traditional sense* – quite the opposite. Unitarian Universalism is the experience of *not* having mythological answers to existential questions. Its meaning does not depend upon knowing from whence we've come, where we are going, or what is the meaning of life. James Kavanaugh beautifully expresses this in his poem, *My Easy God Is Gone*.

*I have lost my easy God –
the one whose name I knew since childhood.*

*I knew his temper,
his sullen outrage,
his ritual of forgiveness.*

*I knew the strength of his arm,
the sound of his insistent voice.*

*His beard bristling,
his lips full and red with moisture
at the mustache,*

*His eyes clear and piercing,
too blue to understand all,*

*His face too wrinkled
to feel my childhood's pain...*

*Now he is gone
- my easy, stuffy God -
God, the father,
the master,
the motherwhiner,
the Dull, whoring God
who offered love
bought by an infant's fear.*

Unitarian Universalism is a “religion” that agrees with Nietzsche, who said:

Weariness that wants to reach the ultimate with one leap, with one fatal leap, a poor ignorant weariness that does not want to want anymore: this created all gods and after worlds.

As Unitarian Universalists we do not give in to the weariness of which Nietzsche speaks, seeking mythological answers existential questions. To be a Unitarian Universalist is to practice religion without a net, dancing upon the religious high wire with no Ground of Being beneath us to catch us if we fall. I am well acquainted with this experience.

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As a minister, I have sat with people in crisis many times: people thrust into existential dilemmas as they faced the prospect of their own mortality, having discerned the look in their doctor's eyes... or the death of a loved one, divorce, job loss... or simply found themselves caught in the spontaneous existential angst that can creep unaware upon us all. To this day I almost always have a moment's anxiety about whether someone in crisis will find my ministerial presence meaningful because I know that even those stalwart UUs, who profess not to need a Ground of Being, would *relish* having a believable mythological answer to their existential question when the rubber hits the existential road! Will an honest, heartfelt answer about the ambiguity of life suffice, or does this person require that I conjure up a mythological answer to her existential question?

I could relate *many* such stories but since I am in a more melancholic mood as I write this, I will hearken all the way back to the first time I found myself in this dilemma.

As a recent Unitarian Universalist convert, I was a ministerial student fulfilling my Clinical Pastoral Education requirement at Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor. I was in the heyday of my atheistic phase - practicing religion without a net - and was assigned to the Children's Oncology Ward.

One day I walked into the room of a young boy who had been diagnosed with leukemia. I had hardly introduced myself when his father said, "Here's someone you can ask all those questions you've been asking me." "Oh no!" I panicked, becoming tense and hoping the boy would not feel up to a theological discussion. I hadn't yet decided what I would say if put on the spot concerning my belief in God. I only knew that I couldn't be disingenuous. As luck would have it, the boy didn't feel like asking questions, so I escaped.

I made my way down the corridor and slipped into an empty room - or so I thought. Turns out that the bed that had been empty that morning had another little boy sitting on it. I smiled and said, "Hello." He looked at me, smiled, and threw up. Then he gathered himself together and apologized, "Sorry, this stuff makes me really sick." I told him not to worry since I hadn't eaten yet. This earned a chuckle and made starting the conversation easy. His name was Ryan. We talked about his life: hockey, school, and his best friend. When the conversation lulled and I began to leave, his mother said, "Ryan, maybe you could ask the chaplain those questions you were asking me yesterday." PARENTS! Again, I hoped the boy wouldn't be in the mood for a theological discussion, which seemed likely since he had turned his attention to counting the hairs that had fallen from his head to his bed sheet.

"What happens?" he asked in a soft voice. "What happens when?" I said. "What happens when you die?" I paused for a moment, then sat down on the edge of his bed. I didn't say anything for about a minute, which I suspect is a long time to wait for an answer to that question if you're a 12-year-old boy. I thought fast. "Maybe I could get away with feigning the Lord's Prayer!" But I couldn't remember how it went. So, I grabbed Ryan's hand, looked into his eyes and said, "Ryan, I don't know." He didn't flinch. "I don't know," I repeated. "But I do know this. I trust the universe. I trust that whatever happens will be OK, no matter what that is." We talked a while more. When I left, he seemed at peace with himself because on a deeper level, we both knew that the answers to his questions weren't important. What was important was my willingness to step out

on that religious high wire with him and dance without a net beneath us. Our easy god was gone.

I had no mythological answers to offer for Ryan's existential questions that day. As a Unitarian Universalist, I couldn't walk into the inner sanctum of another person's existential angst with ready made creed, doctrine, and sacred text in hand. All I had to offer was an honest, heartfelt answer about the ambiguity of life and a few notes to share from my journey. "I trust the universe." "I trust the universe." But that was enough, maybe even more than enough because when you get right down to it, there is more genuine religiosity in that phrase alone than any creed or doctrine we humans have ever conjured up.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, Unitarian Universalism is not a religion in the traditional sense. Unitarian Universalism is about a different type of religiosity, one that recognizes that the religious life is not merely about what we believe about the world. Rather, the religious life is about a way of **being** in the world. If there is *any* Ground of Being to discover, it is that *Being* is the ground. My Being and your Being is the Ground of Being - not creeds, doctrines, or sacred texts.

It is here that the Unitarian Universalist *experience* begins. On some level, it was this desire that brought each of us to this movement and that keeps each of us here. Everything else, all the "religion" that goes on in the meantime, is an attempt to express this experience.

What do I mean by this? Once we realize that we are our own Ground of Being, we understand that we alone determine the meaning of our lives. We understand that Unitarian Universalism *requires* us to be responsible for our own religious journeys. We do this in two ways. *It is when these two ways are lacking* that our tradition can be felt to leave us wanting.

First, recognizing that each of us is our own Ground of Being, Unitarian Universalism requires that we “seek out our own salvation”; that we discover for ourselves what will be the nature of our relationship to the universe. It requires that we discover our own ideas about God and morality. In short, Unitarian Universalism echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson’s sentiment:

Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? The sun shines also today. Let us demand our own works and law and worship.

The requirement to work out our own salvation is why Unitarian Universalism is based on covenant, not creed. This means we are a people that have covenanted together to support one another in our individual searches for truth and meaning, wherever those searches may lead. This is vital to our identity as a movement that both respects and demands personal autonomy in religious matters. In this regard, Unitarian Universalism is subjective, so much so that those who seek answers outside of themselves - mythological answers to existential questions - seldom understand us.

Second, from the realization that each of us is our own Ground of Being and that we are required to seek out our own salvation, comes the prophetic call to *live* according to our religious beliefs. This is why Unitarian Universalists have *always* been leaders in social justice, from Olympia Brown, mid-19th century women’s suffragist and one of the first women ever ordained by a denomination, to James Reeb, a Unitarian minister beaten to death while marching for civil rights in Selma, Alabama.

For Unitarian Universalists religion is twofold. It calls us to “seek out our own salvation” and to *live* according to our religious beliefs.

So what, if our easy God is gone? Perhaps we have something more. We have a faith that encourages us to cherish our doubts and light each other's way. We are part of a living tradition that offers us a way of being in the world that is unique, that is to be treasured, that is to be celebrated.

James Kavanaugh's poem ends like this:

Perhaps I have no God - what does it matter?
...I stand in the Heavens and on earth, I feel the breeze in my hair.
I can drink to the North Star and shout on a bar stool,
I can feel the teeth of a hangover, the joy of laziness,
The flush of my own rudeness, the surge of my own ineptitude.
And I can know my own gentleness as well, my wonder, my nobility.
I sense the call of creation, I feel its swelling in my hands.
I can lust and love, eat and drink, sleep and rise,
But my easy God is gone - and in his stead,
The mystery of loneliness and love!