



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## What defines a Unitarian?

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As a frogophile, a lover of frogs, ecologically, biologically, evolutionarily, artistically, theologically and gastronomically I can empathise with Kermit that it is not easy being green. Frogs are incredibly diverse, for as Kermit surely knows, they aren't even always green. Some live in ponds, and others in deserts. Some live in trees and fly and some live at the bottom of Lake Titicaca, one of the world's deepest lakes. The Lake Titicaca frog has gills so they never come up for air. Most are born from eggs but then there is the fanged frog in Indonesia that gives birth to live tadpoles. And this only scratches the surface of their diversity. So philosophically, what is a frog? How does a frog know it is a frog? It can't trust the stereotype of being a wet, slimy, bug-eater that croaks on its lily pad throne dreaming of being an enchanted prince after being kissed by a lovely princess. Certainly, there is more to it than that?

Unitarians can identify. We have a complex history. We are ancient and new. We are unique yet have shared views with both Muslims and Jews and some Christians. Having no creed, our members hold diverse beliefs. We are found in remote parts of the world. We are Christian in our heritage but reject its dogma and are shunned by many of our cousins. Our faith evolves faster than a chameleon changes colours. So, what defines a Unitarian? In many congregations you will find progressive Christians, Humanists, Buddhists, pagans, seekers, and the occasional Hindu and Muslim. How can you know if you are one? We can only half trust the jokes told about us or we tell on ourselves. They portray a stereotype that is no more true than if you kiss enough frogs you will find your prince.

For instance, here is an oldie but goodie. You may be a Unitarian if

- you think socks are too formal for a Summer service
- you think the Holy Trinity is "reduce, reuse and recycle"
- when you watch Jaws you cheer for the shark ("Hey, sharks have to eat too!")
- you think "Whatever" is a valid theological point
- you think a Holy day of Obligation is your turn to bring treats for morning tea
- you know at least two people who are upset that trees had to die for your church to be built.

There are hundreds more where those came from, but I'll spare you... Well, okay. Maybe just one more.

At one Sunday morning service, in one of the big Unitarian churches in Boston, a man was making a ruckus in the back pew. After every sentence the minister spoke, he would shout, "Amen! Halleluiah!"

One of the ushers approached the man and spoke to him discreetly. "Sir, uh, we just don't do things like that in this church."

"But I got religion!"

“Well, you certainly didn’t get it here!”

This challenge about who or what is a Unitarian makes me sorry for our Unitarian children. Imagine your daughter is on the playground of our increasingly multicultural world and her Catholic and Muslim friends ask her about her faith. What does she believe? Does she have a playground-ready answer to their question? If so, she is doing better than the adult members of her congregation. We do better answering that question in a university or tertiary level seminar. And even then the answer is less than succinct. It reminds me of the minister of who was asked why he preached a 45-minute sermon. He said it was because he didn’t have enough time to prepare a 20-minute one.

But there is another reason why this question is difficult. If your child’s friends answered the same question about their own faiths, they would probably talk about a God who is revealed through a written scripture (the Torah, the New Testament, the Qur’an) and represented on earth by a prophet or messiah figure (Moses, Jesus, Mohammed).

Unitarians have none of these concrete and uniquely defining elements. Instead, our prevailing — dare I say orthodox? — view insists on our freedom to believe whatever we want.

This answer is not good enough, and it certainly doesn’t work on the playground. It’s as if our daughter’s friend asked, “Where do you live?” and she responded, “I’m free to live wherever I want.”

I personally don’t buy that a Unitarian can believe whatever he or she wants. I don’t think you will find many white supremacists, alt-right fascists, homophobic fundamentalists or neoliberal capitalists attending a Unitarian worship service. If you believe that it is okay to exploit the earth’s resources for profit, you are probably not a Unitarian. If you believe that people of colour or different ethnic background or sexual orientation or religion from yours are lesser human beings undeserving of respect, you are probably not a Unitarian. If you believe that the poor are responsible for their poverty you are probably not a Unitarian. If you don’t believe that the divine resides in every human being you may not be a Unitarian. If you don’t believe that the faith beliefs of other religions all point to the same mystery that is within, between and beyond us then you may not be a Unitarian.

The problem with my position is it defines us by what we are not. What we are against. Instead we need to define ourselves by what is positive, relevant and, if you will, play-ground friendly. That definition needs to go beyond being free-thinkers able to reject doctrine we find abhorrent. People who have suffered from more toxic forms of religion may come for that reason at first, but I doubt they will find that enough to stay. They will find something missing. People don’t go to a concert for what they won’t hear.

By relevant I mean it makes a difference in people’s lives in perceptible and meaningful ways and by play-ground friendly I mean precisely that. My seminary faculty were all influenced by theologian Karl Barth, whose major work *Dogmatics* was 14 volumes long. They told me he was once asked if he could summarise it in one sentence. He thought for a moment and sang, “Jesus loves me, this I know because the Bible tells me so.”

My orthodoxy as a Unitarian can be questioned as well because I challenge the idea that Unitarianism is not a religion. A religion has two distinctive elements: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. The feeling of awe emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine. This feeling becomes religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share. In theological terms, religion begins as transcendence, which is the part about God by whatever name we choose, and then leads to discipleship, which is the part about the discipline of faith.

When I worked with the Anglican church, the bishop was asked twice by my colleagues to charge me with heresy. So, having been there and done that, I'm not particularly concerned if Unitarians wish to accuse me of the same for suggesting that faith is a discipline. Unless our faith is mere intellectual affectation, however, the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind. What kind of practice? For Jews, the defining discipline is obedience: To be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God. For Christians, the defining discipline is love: To be a faithful Christian is to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself. For Muslims, the defining discipline is submission: To be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah.

And what of us? What should be our defining religious discipline? While obedience, love, and even submission each play a vital role in the life of faith, my current conviction is that our defining discipline should be gratitude. In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarians should be defined by gratitude.

Gratitude is not an easy discipline for liberals who bask in their independence. Unitarians are particularly drawn to the ideal of independence. Rejecting it isn't easy or it wouldn't be a discipline. But it is a deadly idea to our spiritual health. None of us is independent. We all live because we are dependent on what nature provides us, family and friends who nurture us, work that sustains us, and community that gives us meaning and purpose.

Gratitude meets religion's requirement to inspire awe and a sense of obligation. It is rooted in understanding that life is more than the sum of its parts.

In his book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson notes that the great physicist Richard Feynman once said that if you had to reduce scientific history to one important statement it would be this: "All things are made of atoms." Bryson explains that a billion of the atoms in your body probably once belonged to Shakespeare. A billion more each came from the Buddha and Joan of Arc and Genghis Khan. Nevertheless, for now, trillions of these atoms have somehow assembled themselves into you.

"Why atoms take this trouble is a bit of a puzzle," Bryson says. "Being you is not a gratifying experience at the atomic level. For all their devoted attention, your atoms do not actually care about you—indeed, they do not even know that you are there. They don't even know that they are there. They are mindless particles, after all, and not even themselves alive. (It is a slightly arresting notion that if you were to pick yourself apart with tweezers, one atom at a time, you would produce a mound of fine atomic dust, none of which had ever been alive but all of which had once been you.) Yet somehow for the period of your existence they will answer to a single overarching impulse: to keep you you."

What does this mean? The mound of atomic dust is not you. Rather, you are the relationships among the various protons, neutrons, and electrons that make up the dust. The twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead believed this principle applied to everything in the universe. Everything is constituted by its relationships to other things.

As Whitehead put it, “we are dependent on the universe for every detail of our experience.” This principle applies to everything whatsoever. Nothing — not people, not rocks, not galaxies — is what it is in isolation. The first principle of the universe is not independence, but its opposite: utter dependence. Everything that exists is made up of constituent parts that are borrowed from, shared with, and related to others outside it. As humans, we are dependent upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals who daily give their lives for our nourishment, the trees that reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, and the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. In every respect, we are utterly dependent.

The problem is not the truth of our dependence but our denial of it. There is no such thing as the self-made man or woman, but we like to think we are that person. We think our purpose and destiny are independent of others. We compare our possessions and accomplishments with theirs, and we resent what they have achieved that we have not. It is total fiction.

What can save us from this destructive myth is gratitude. It is religious virtue that reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves. That recognition inspires awe at the miracle of being alive. Awe leads to gratitude for all we are dependent on for us to be us.

As we glimpse our dependence upon other people and things, we also glimpse our duty to them. This sense of obligation leads to an ethic of gratitude, which takes our experience of awe in the present and works for a future in which all relationships are fair, constructive, and beautiful.

Put another way, the discipline of gratitude connects the present with the past, while the ethic of gratitude connects the present with the future.

The beauty of gratitude for Unitarians is that it includes all of us in our diversity. It respects our individuality while uniting us into a recognisable whole. The world will know us by our gratitude and will stop telling jokes like “How can you tell a Unitarian? You can’t. They already know it all.”