



O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie

Clay Nelson © 8 December 2019

Today we welcome you, Gerard, Tess and John, as our newest members. We are delighted, but it is only fair to warn you that challenges lie ahead for all those who sign the membership book. One of the biggest is explaining what the heck a Unitarian Universalist is.

Whenever I tell someone I'm a Unitarian Universalist, I'm inevitably met with one of three remarkably consistent responses. They are: "Cool, sometimes followed by, "me too." (which is the rarest response, especially in New Zealand). Next is, "Oh" or its silent manifestation, a slight head nod (which usually means the person has not any idea what that is and doesn't care or want to ask); and then there's the most common, "What's that?" "What's that?" comes in a few varieties. Sometimes it's just a plain, "What's that?" Other times people follow, "What's that?" with, "Is it like Scientology?" or "So, you are a Moonie, a member of the Unification Church?"

Now, I could...and have...attempted to respond to "What's that?" with a brief history lesson tracing the roots of our tradition to theologies dating back to the early decades of the Christian church, debated and fine-tuned in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation, and formalised as distinct denominations, the Universalists and the Unitarians, in the US in the late 18th and early 19th century until their merger in 1961 formed the Unitarian Universalist Association.

This is all well and fine. I mean, I like history and so do at least one or two of you here. But as hard as it is to believe, not everyone does. So besides the history answer to "What's that?" boring people, it doesn't really answer the question behind the question. "What's that?", in my experience, really means, "What do you believe?" We are after all talking about a religion and for most people religion equals belief. And indeed, most religions are defined by and organised around a common belief, often formalised and stated as a creed.

Unitarian Universalism however is not. Even our seven principles do not constitute, as is commonly thought, a creed or statement of belief. Rather, they are aspirational statements which form the basis of our association's covenant, a solemn promise we make to one another about how we will be together and in the world as we pursue paths of spiritual depth and growth. When it comes to defining Unitarian Universalism, the question is not one of belief, but of relationship.

This is why it is hard for someone to be a Unitarian Universalist (UU) who doesn't come to church, doesn't remain connected or participate in some way in the life of the community. Belief alone does not a Unitarian Universalist make. It's like learning to dance. You won't get too far without a dance partner to practise, learn and grow with. Indeed, one can hear this realisation behind the words of a woman named Jane Roper in an article she wrote entitled, "Why I finally joined a church".

Revealing early in the article that she has just joined a Unitarian Universalist church, Roper

writes of what she wants for her children, *“I want them to see a group of people can work together, give of their time and talents, and support each other through life’s joys and sorrows not because they’re family or even necessarily friends, but because they believe that it’s an important part of being human. I also want to expose them to good, old-fashioned community in a world where, increasingly, community happens only in virtual spaces.”* She continues, *“I’m a huge fan of blogs, Facebook and Twitter, but I don’t think there will ever be a substitute for sharing the same physical space with a group of people — having conversations, making music together, offering each other a handshake, a smile, or a word of sympathy.”*

Roper lifts up some of the best of what church has historically offered people and what is often hard to find in our own day; the very qualities, experiences and relationships that most inspire people to join and then support their church through attendance, volunteering, skill sharing and monetary giving, all of which are vital for a church to thrive and part of what it means to be a church member in most churches, including here. She essentially reminds us, that the holy, no matter how we individually define it, is made manifest in relationships.

Many a Sunday that has been in my experience of church. On those Sundays I leave feeling so uplifted, so connected to the source of life that anything seems possible and the weight of all my worries, great and small, silly and serious, are somehow lighter.

But not every Sunday leaves me spiritually high. If this is all we hope for or expect out of church, at some point we’re going to be let down.

It turns out, church is both a wonderfully and woefully human institution. Sometimes it takes a while to notice this. As Philip Appleman reminds us in his humorous poem, “O Karma, Dharma, pudding & pie”, our humanity is a complex mix of desires, beliefs, egos and aspirations. Therefore it’s wise for us to maintain a healthy sense of humour about ourselves and to remember that when we enter the church we don’t check our humanity at the door... and that’s okay.

As Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams noted, “Church is a place where you get to [practise] what it means to be human.”

Even the loftiest of ideals and noblest of efforts cannot shield us from the fact that sometimes people and the things they do and say get on our nerves. Stick around long enough and buttons will be pushed. Personalities will clash. People will say or do things that offend us or that we don’t agree with. And it is in these moments, far more than the good times, that your commitment to your spiritual growth — the practice of what it means to be human — which really lies at the heart of church membership, will be most tested.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky wrote, “In my dreams, I often make plans for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually face crucifixion if it were suddenly necessary. Yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone for two days together....In twenty-four hours I begin to hate the best of men [sic], one because he’s too long over his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose.... But it has always happened that the more I hate men [sic] individually the more I love humanity.”

Dostoyevsky, moved to a deep recognition of the human condition through his own difficult relationships, is moved toward greater compassion for humankind.

The challenge for any one of us, whether we're a new or long-time member, friend, first-time visitor or frequent visitor ... or even the minister ... is to remember and seek this transformative presence in our midst when church isn't everything we'd like or hope it to be.

All of you here today have or will have, if you continue to attend, experiences both rewarding and disappointing. Sometimes the sermon will inspire you, other times it will bore you or even make you mad. Sometimes you'll like the music, sometimes you won't. Not everyone, including you, will be at their best every time you're here. People will sometimes exchange hard words or be preoccupied with other things. But there will be many times people will be kind, generous, and attentive too.

You see, there are damn few saints among us, but most of us are saints in training ... human beings in relationship, discovering and practising what it means to be human, dancing a dance, often with two left feet. That means there will be sore toes from being stepped on along the way. But even so, Gerard, Tess and John, may we have this dance?