



## Unitarian Universalism Through the Lens of Three Generations

12 May 2024. © Sonja Carlson

I would like to start off today by telling a story. From there, I will describe some of my own experiences growing up a UU. Then, I will analyze our Seven Principles and explain thoughts others have had about UUism as they have told me. I will end by explaining my own creed. But first, as I said, a story.

In 1949, Richard Marcus met Muriel Happel at a college party at Harvard University. They fell in love, got married, and had two wonderful little girls. However, they had a problem. Richard was a Reformist Jew from an Orthodox family. Muriel, on the other hand, was Protestant, and unwilling to convert; The Marcus' reaction to the refusal certainly did not encourage her to change her mind. They wanted a religious community in which they could raise their children to appreciate faith systems and make their own choices with their spirituality. They learned about the Unitarian Universalist church in Buffalo, NY, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

A few years later, my mother, Lesley, was born, becoming the first in the Marcus family to be born a UU. I asked my mother to explain what UUism means to her. Her response was thus:

“Along with the values and lessons of my family, the UU principles, learning in RE about and respect for different faith traditions, and being part of many living, committed, and curious congregations helped me form my own values of community, connection, and purpose that guide me every day.

I am part of a shared community in every aspect of my being, extending from family and friends to the people, flora, and fauna around me, and throughout the world. We are connected by our shared space and resources, and equally importantly by the need for balance for our common existence. This interconnected web was solidified for me at a young age when my 7th grade Earth Science teacher told us, ‘Atoms from the dinosaurs are part of the corn flakes we eat to start our day.’

My purpose is to give what I can every day toward the greater good of my community, to listen, learn, support, enjoy, share, and love to play my part in the giant circle of life.”

Lesley’s commitment to UUism has been lifelong, though with some ups and downs when it comes to actual attendance. Then, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1994, she was sent on a blind date by her friend with this coffee cart guy, Eric Carlson. Within a month, each had decided the other was going to be the one they spent the rest of their lives with. For my mother, this meant, that fall, bringing him to church with her. Now, Eric’s parents are congregationalist Christian, but they were not very religious when my father and his brother were growing up. At least, not in such a way that instilled Christianity into him. What this means is that, when he was told Lesley went to church every Sunday, in conjunction with a misunderstanding of Unitarian Universalism as the Unity church, Eric thought he’d fallen in love with a devout Christian. That ended just around the time he first heard a UU sermon. The topic? Dr. Suess’s *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*. (A book, my sister noted upon hearing this story, UU’s seem to be mildly obsessed with.) Eric found himself enjoying the community and acceptance of the All Soul’s Church in Washington, D.C.

Fast forward ten years (six of them in Eastern Europe), two children, one “Bulldozer Revolution”, and one newly founded company later, my family moved to Silver Spring, MD, just a 10 minute (or half an hour, depending on traffic) drive from Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church in Bethesda. I loved growing up a UU; especially at that church. At the beginning of each Religious Education class, we’d sing to light the chalice, combining two of my favorite things (singing and fire). And for the last 15-20 minutes of class, we’d go to Chapel. Our own smaller sanctuary in which all the kids could gather and have our own service, most often led by Reverend Susan Archer, before we joined the adults for coffee hour.

The RE Program taught me so much about our world. In Haunting House, when I was seven, I learned about the concepts of birth and death. Stepping Stones, when I was 12, we learned about all sorts of different religions, Judaism, Buddhism, Hindu, Islam, and more, which included going to the various places of worship and learning from their worship leaders. That lead into Coming of Age, during which each child spends the year deciding what parts of all of that we each like, support, and believe. At the end of the year, the kids have the option to speak their creed in front of the congregation. Our Whole Lives, or OWL, comes next, as the most comprehensive sex and gender education anyone could ever want.

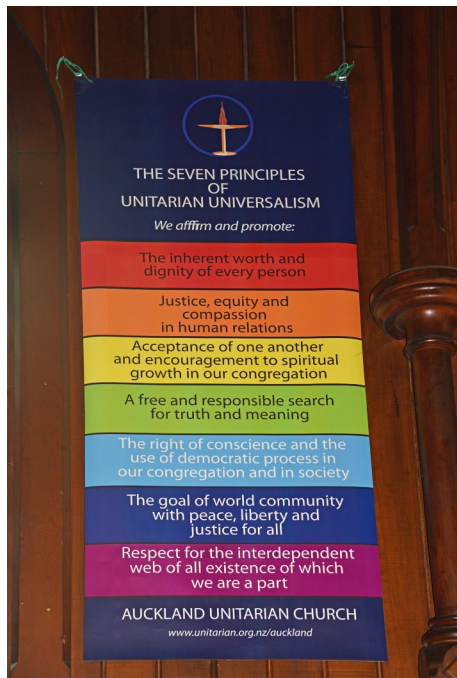
When I was twelve, my family moved away from D.C. Actually, we moved about 40 minutes from where my mom grew up, and our home church is the UU Church of Buffalo again. That is where I was a part of the youth group for three years, spending many Sunday mornings talking with my peers, each of us teaching the others and having in-depth conversations about complex problems, in a way that we didn't necessarily get to in our homes, schools, or jobs. It was a time to dedicate to having proper conversations with peers.

I have gotten some weird looks when I tell people I'm a UU. In fact, one person asked if I was in a cult just last week. UUism is new, it's odd, and it isn't very popular or well-known. Often, the person I'm talking to has no idea what I'm talking about. I tell them this:

Unitarian Universalism is a religion where you can believe whatever you want to believe, so long as you respect the beliefs of others as well. I tell them that, even within my own family, we do not believe the same thing. My sister is a monotheist, believing in one, capital-G God. My mom believes in an energy connecting everything, and my dad in a force that guides the way. And I have described myself as a polytheist, believing in, but not worshiping, the ancient gods. I was in Youth Group with a witch, and remember that Hindu temple I said I visited? We were given the tour by our own Minister, Reverend Abhi Prakash Janamanchi, from the UU church. He was, and is, both the Senior Called Minister of the UU and a practicing Hindu, with neither community or religion being sacrificed for the other.

Our religion is based around the seven principles you can see hanging on the right wall.

We believe in:



- (1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- (2) Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.
- (3) Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
- (4) A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
- (5) The right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.
- (6) The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and
- (7) Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

What I love about those principles is that none of them say anything specific. They are all broad, open to interpretation, and based upon respect for ourself and others. They also create a cone. We start with respecting each human individual, recognizing their inherent worth and dignity the way we wish it to be recognized in ourselves. We then keep widening the scope of that respect. We don't only recognize another's dignity; we treat them with it. Then, we don't just treat them with dignity, but their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs as well. From there we move beyond the individual to the group; the conscience and democratic responsibility we have ranges from our congregations to our society. Then, we go to the whole world and trying to make it a better place for everyone. Finally, we end with respecting and acknowledging the whole of existence. That we are all connected, humans, animals, other organisms, and everything else.

You may have noticed, though, that that only makes up six of the principles. The fourth breaks the pattern. Or, you could say, creates the pattern. For millennia, humans from cultures all over the world have ascribed power to the numbers three and seven. As UUs, we have seven principles. But you could also see us as having three, three, and one principles. The first three relate to other individuals and our interactions with them. The latter three relate to how we respond in large groups, all the way up to existence. The fourth, however, is the only one that relates to the self. It is our personal, free, and responsible search for truth that creates our community. We question ourselves and each other. We are constantly looking to expand our view of the world, through the scientific, mystical, spiritual, or any other way we find. We help each other on our own journey's, walking together down a path that twists and turns, in which each traveler may come and go as they please, building our own views of the realities of life.

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, one of the definitions of 'religion' is "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith." The other definitions all require a shared God or gods. But that is not what religion is about, for us. In my experience, UUism is about the community. The community, whether it is as small as only the people in this church, or as large as an entire country, community is our cause, our most basic belief. To help others, however we can, and to be helped in return. Not because it is a transaction, but because we can rely on each other.

Since starting University, I have gone to church without my family for the first time. The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, VT gave me a sense of community and

belonging that I was lacking for most of my first year. Though it, I have made friends that I have breakfast with weekly before church. We had a great Developmental Minister, Reverend Patricia Hart, who actually was introduced to UUism at the All Souls Church in D.C. around the time my parents were there and was the Interim Minister for two years at the UU church in my father's hometown.

This past Northern Hemisphere fall, our new minister, Reverend Karen G. Johnson, introduced a concept during the Water Gathering. She said the water we gathered was blessed. I was concerned, because I personally don't believe in a deity that could bless, until she elaborated. The water is blessed not by some higher power, but by us as a community. The power of our community blessed the water that would be used in ceremonies for the rest of the year, spreading that blessing as it goes. That reminded me of something my mom has said. One of her favorite parts of church, when she feels the most connected to everyone else, is when we sing. She says she pictures the sound coming from each mouth, spreading around and up, combining into one voice in the eaves of the church, held there and soaked into the wood, joining everyone who has, does, and will sing together as one.

In preparing for this speech, I asked a few people what they like about Unitarian Universalism. After all, most UUs joined from other religions, with or without maintaining those prior beliefs. A few common traits stood out to me. The first was acceptance. No one is arguing how or how not to be a UU. No one is arguing how or how not to live. No matter who you are or what you do, you will receive unconditional acceptance within our community. I am sure, now that I've said that, most of you are thinking "well, what about blank" or "maybe except for blank". Answer me this, though. Whatever you have just thought of, would it truly be enough to make you not welcome someone that wanted to be here? If it's a problem, would it be so much you wouldn't want to help?

Another common trait was the principles, which I already spoke about. Our core values do not require you believe in something or someone. There are no ceremonies, traditions, or routines we have to complete. We are a very 'live and let live' community, with a basis in respect for each other's choices. Our values also do not require a lack of belief in anything. You can believe in capital-G God, ancient gods, nature as a deity, or a flying spaghetti monster. The world is open to you to explore, explain, and observe as you see fit.

Now, before I go, my family moved just before my Coming of Age year. We did not properly start going to church again until I was in Youth Group. As such, I never got to speak my creed. I would like to do so now.

1. Respect
2. Community
3. Each person trying to make the world a better place
4. Energy of the universe (flame connects)
5. Souls and spirits
6. Magic

Unitarian Universalism has given me the knowledge and freedom to feel secure in the world. It has given me community, acceptance, and routine nearly 8,600 miles, or 13,900 kilometers, away from everything I know and love. That is what Unitarian Universalism means to me.