

“God Talk”

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Have you ever been in a situation where somebody asks you,
“What do Unitarian Universalists believe?”
It’s good to have an answer ready, an elevator speech.
Sometimes it helps if the elevator is in a tall building.

Suppose the speaker is curious about Unitarian Universalism as a category of religion.
They may assume that any religion can be described by its beliefs, that is to say,
certain statements about God.
What they’re asking you is, which of those statements do Unitarian Universalists
believe?

That’s one way to describe a faith community.
In our case, it’s not the best way.
If Unitarian Universalism “works”, it’s not because
we all believe certain statements about God, but because we are committed to
certain deeply-held values such as freedom and interdependence, love and justice.
We most often describe these values by our Seven Principles, seven ways of speaking
about the highest good, which some of us have a name for, and some don't.

Nearly 500 years ago, Francis David said, “we need not think alike to love alike”.
The implication is that we *do* need to love alike.
This insight and this commitment have sustained us for many centuries.

What also sustains us to recognize that we often *don't* think alike.
We don't just accept this fact.
Ours is one of the few faith traditions that truly *embraces* multiple approaches
to life’s big questions, and the different answers that follow.

In a 2010 article, Peter Morales called for a religion “beyond belief”, which should be grounded in “what we love, not what we think”.

He asks us,

What do we love so much that we are moved to tears?

... What gives us peace beyond understanding?

... What do we care about so deeply that we willingly, enthusiastically devote our lives to it?

With questions like these, Morales draws our attention directly to what Unitarian Universalism is about, or can be about.

Still, it matters what we think, as well as what we love.

We have been formed by the traditions we were raised in,
by the stories our families told.

We have struggled with the challenges life throws at us.

We have inherited, and sometimes created, answers that ring true for us.

These answers are less than perfect, and they may change over time,
but they are part of us.

They’re some of the many gifts we bring to the common life.

In our tradition, especially, it’s important to speak about our respective beliefs,
and learn from each other.

If we’re not willing to do this, or if we don’t have the language to do it, then we won’t be able to reflect as a community on what we’re doing and why.

Some congregations actively shun the use of certain words – not only the word “God” and its variants, but other churchy-sounding words such as Faith; Covenant; Mission; Prayer.

They may avoid the taboo word, or put a disclaimer on it, or provide a long list of synonyms.

Somebody left a cartoon on my desk – a familiar scene from the Wild West, two gunmen facing each other on a dusty street at high noon, ready to draw their weapons.

One man says to the other, “say your prayers, liturgies, tefillah, daily salat, sacred mantra, ritual incantation, or the secular affirmation of your choice, varmint!”

In my opinion, nobody here is a varmint; and a little bit of God-talk can be a good thing. Religious language is imprecise, it’s shot through with associations good and bad, and it’s necessary if we wish to communicate at all.

There’s a familiar saying that sums up my approach to God-talk: *Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.*

(Incidentally, the baby on the front cover of the order of service is my baby sister, Amy. She’s now a grandmother, but once she could sit comfortably in a plastic washtub in the kitchen sink.

And she’s telling you, *don’t throw me out with the bathwater!*)

The “baby” here stands for the beliefs we’ve formed so far, based on the questions we’ve asked and the answers we’ve found.

Like all babies, this one is fascinating and demanding.

She fills us with joy and hope.

Sometimes she keeps us awake when we’d rather be sleeping.

We can cherish our beliefs and speak about them, while treating them as *provisional*.

Our beliefs are like our clothing. We need them.

But as we continue to grow up, we regularly outgrow them.

This doesn’t mean that we outgrow the need for the clothes, or the beliefs.

We have to find ones that fit us, in our dealings with the world, as we continue to grow.

Picture the chambered nautilus, in our poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes.

The animal's body grows too large to fit the shell he has built so far.

So he adds a new room to his house, and moves into it.

He seals off the old room forever; but all the old rooms are still there,
and the result is a beautiful spiral.

Beliefs can be like this – very often we come around again, to beliefs we once held,
but in the context of a bigger reality we've come to understand.

We can cherish our beliefs, and speak about them, even as we recognize that they are
provisional and *partial*.

We only see parts of the truth, and we may see different parts,
through our own eyes and our own understanding.

A wise person once said “The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline
of wonder”.

We can cherish our beliefs, even as we recognize that they are provisional, and partial,
and *indirect*.

To adopt an image from a Zen saying, our religious language is like a finger pointing at
the moon.

It *points* to a light that shines in the darkness.

To confuse the finger with the moon, or to focus only on the finger, is to miss the point
completely.

When we speak about the mystery, if we choose to speak at all, we are speaking in
metaphor.

This is more than a decoration to liven up speech.

It provides a way to speak about the unknown and the unfamiliar, in terms of familiar
things we do know.

Even if it's a simple image, there's a story behind it.

A tree survives the winter.

It's weathered the wind and ice and snow, losing some branches in the process.

Still the tree is very much alive, ready to respond to the sun and the warmth of spring.

Much of the tree is actually dead.

The heartwood, which no longer carries water from roots to branches, continues to hold the tree up.

The bark, constantly cracking under the pressures of wind and new growth, protects the part which is actively alive.

There's a thin layer of living tissue, between bark and wood, which exists to transport nourishment to all parts of the tree, and continues to create new wood and new bark.

Metaphors can be stories – the story of a human life, or the ongoing life of a community.

As a community of faith, we tell and remember stories, and these stories are often a form of God-talk.

They point indirectly to what matters most, whether we have a name for it or not.

Part of my work as an interim minister is to help you reclaim your story.

You've done some important work already in updating your congregational history for the Bicentennial celebration.

As I've been reading this, and reflecting on it, some aspects of the story take on the quality of God-talk.

Consider the bark on your tree, this physical building, and all it's been through.

It's survived fires, lightning strikes, and even a hurricane that destroyed a neighboring church.

It's been jacked up, added onto, and parts of it rebuilt.

This bark, this outer shell is not the living part.

But it's the visible part.

And it's provided a physical home for a spiritual community, as the generations have come and gone.

Consider the roots and the soil.

This church was founded soon after the town split over political differences, as well as practicality.

It was founded as a free church, dissenting from the Standing Order established by the Puritans.

It stood in solidarity with other free churches, including the Baptists and Methodists, over the years.

Consider the seed, which is Universalism.

You were founded as a Universalist church, one of the first in New England, and carried this identity into the twentieth century.

I'd like to leave you with this question, and see what comes out of it: how does this Universalist heritage influence your common life?

What does Universalism mean to you, today?

Is it part of the thin layer of living tissue that gives you nourishment and new growth, even now?

I'm not speaking of Universalism as a concept, but in the way it's been lived out, over generations.

Universalism was always a religion of the people: workers, farmers, builders, merchants, circuit-riding preachers.

People with capable hands and open hearts, bringing a message of hope and not hell.

From the beginning you've shared your hospitality and your gifts to build up the community and its public life.

Stories like these point in the direction of Love, by whatever name we choose to call it.

So may it be.