

“An Uncommon Denomination”

by the Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

When I was a kid, and John Kennedy was running for president, there was a lot of talk about his being Catholic, and people said, “If Kennedy gets elected, the Pope will move to the United States and take over the country.” There had never been a Catholic in the White House before, and there was a lot of fear. Well, shortly after he was elected, a woman in Kansas went to her local post office to buy some stamps. And when she asked for 50-cents’ worth of stamps, the clerk said, “What denomination?” And the woman said, “Well, I didn’t think it would ever come to that. Baptist.”

Well, today I’m going to talk to you about our denomination, Unitarian Universalism. Now, some people are surprised to hear that we’re part of a denomination. They think we’re far too unorganized to be part of organized religion. Well, we are pretty different from a lot of other churches – that’s why we call ourselves an uncommon denomination. But we are not just one congregation – there are about a thousand UU churches in the United States.

So what do we have in common – and what makes us uncommon?

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Well, for one thing, we don’t have a common theology. We don’t all agree on what God is (or even if there is one); we don’t all believe the same things about life after death; we don’t all follow the same prophet or teacher. (Some of us are Buddhist UUs; some of us are Christian. Some of us are Jewish UUs or Taoist or humanist UUs.) That makes us uncommon.

What we do share is a commitment to certain ethical principles – like the ones we recited in our covenant: affirming the worth and dignity of every person, loving your neighbor, working for a just world, taking care of the earth.

So we are uncommon in that we don’t have a common creed. We are common in our commitment to love. Or, as I heard a UU Christian put it once, “This is the only religion where I can change my theology, and I don’t have to change churches.” That’s why attending a UU church is kind of like going to an interfaith service every Sunday. And although it surprises some people that we can come together without believing the same things – we find it interesting and challenging.

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We’re rather like jazz music, which someone once described as “controlled chaos.” Each person is singing their own song – but somehow it sounds pretty good when you hear it all together. That’s a UU church.

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Another thing that makes us uncommon is that we’re not very fussy about who we let in here. (I mean, look around you! This is not fussy!)

I recently came across something by the poet Naomi Shihab Nye. It’s about an Arabian custom, and it goes like this:

*The Arabs used to say,
when a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days before asking who he is,
where he’s come from,
where he’s headed. That way,
he’ll have strength enough to answer.
Or by then
you’ll be such good friends you don’t care.*

That’s sort of how we feel about visitors – we don’t need to know your theology or your lifestyle or how many times you’ve been born. We’re glad to welcome you on the journey. And if, after a while, you want to tell us where you’re headed or where you’ve been, we’ll be glad to listen. And if not, we’ll be such good friends, we won’t care.

I don’t know how many of you watch the Simpsons on TV (or if you’d admit it if you do), but they had an episode where the kids are playing a game called “Billy Graham’s Bible Blaster.” The point of the game is to shoot people with Bibles and save them. So one of the kids shoots a heathen with a Bible and says, “I got him!” And his friend says, “No, you just winged him. Now he’s a Unitarian.”

We’ll, there’s room for all kinds of people and theologies here – and that makes us a little uncommon.

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Another way that we’re different from some other religions is that we don’t try very hard to get people to join us. And that’s partly because we don’t believe we have a monopoly on truth. We think truth can be found in many places and there’s no one way for everybody. Not even our way.

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Also, some of us have had the experience of a friend or relative trying to convert us, and we disliked it so much we never wanted to inflict it on anyone else. Do you know, that so few of us invite our friends to church, that when you take the whole population of UUs together, it turns out that the average UU invites a friend to church once every seventy years! That’s the average.

So if any of you are here because a friend brought you – know that you are very special. And it probably won’t happen again.

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The last thing that makes us uncommon is that we don’t think you need our religion to be saved or fulfilled or holy. We think you can do all those things without us. Of course, a church like ours can help you, but it’s neither necessary nor sufficient. So if you came here thinking we’d tell you you need us – we’re not going to do that.

I mention this because occasionally I meet people who say, “You Unitarian Universalists sound like a great bunch, and if I ever joined a church, it would probably be the Unitarians. But, you see, I don’t need a religion. I can be spiritual all by myself.”

Well, as Bart Simpson would say: Doh. Of course you don’t need a religion. And of course you can find holiness in a waterfall or a golf course. You don’t need a church to be spiritual. (And in fact, I would say: If you’re looking for something out of need, you’re probably not going to find what you want here.)

The Rev. Suzanne Meyer, who’s the minister at First Unitarian in St. Louis, writes about this consumer attitude in religion. She says, *Some people think that this congregation is like McDonald’s. Drive up to the window and order what you need. “Give me some spirituality, a side order of ethics, a little reassurance, and a small prayer -- and make it snappy!” In truth, [she says] [a UU] church is like your Mama’s kitchen – if you want something, you gotta get up and fix it yourself ... The operative question is not what can I get out of this, but what of myself can I give? Faith communities exist not to serve us, but to teach us how to serve.*

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Now, at this point you’re probably saying to yourself: If I don’t need the UUs to be saved or holy, and they don’t even claim to have the only truth – why should I consider joining them?

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You should consider joining us if you understand that although you can do a lot of things on your own, without an organization to back you up, there are some things that take a group to accomplish; and although there are many groups that accomplish good things, there are some things that only a group which calls itself religious can accomplish.

Let me tell you about a UU woman from Nebraska, whose son is gay. She speaks about a referendum that was held in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1982 – a referendum on a local gay-rights ordinance. She was not from Lincoln herself but from a neighboring town. However, she went into Lincoln one day to get a haircut. She says: *I went to the hairdresser’s – it was kind of a “Steel Magnolias” sort of hairdresser’s – and as I was getting my hair cut, people were talking about the referendum. They weren’t being nasty, but they were definitely being negative, and I was just sitting there...I said, “Well, I guess you guys are probably glad I don’t vote here, because I would definitely vote in favor of the referendum.”*

Well, there was a little pause – maybe a long pause, actually – while they sort of went, “Eeeyem, she really said that?” But then people started – not everybody, but probably the hairdresser herself was the first to speak up, and she said, “Well, I’ve got a cousin who’s a lesbian, and she babysits for my kids all the time, and they just love her.” And then other people started jumping in, and the whole tone of the conversation shifted a little bit.

There was no confrontation – just a little nudge, really. But I understood that if I’d just sat there and kept my mouth shut, it probably never would have happened. With nobody to challenge them, they would have gone on and on and on.” [Eileen Durgin-Clinchard, in the July/August 1994, issue of The World, pp. 25-26]

Now, that’s an example of one person making a difference – but consider what a difference our religion has made on this issue. The Episcopalians, as you know, are now struggling with ordaining a gay bishop and blessing gay unions – but they are doing this, at least partly, because we Universalists have paved the way. You see, it’s one thing when an individual speaks up for gay people (and it’s a good thing); and it’s one thing when a group or organization speaks up for gay people – a group is harder to ignore than one person. But a group that’s religious is even harder to ignore. Because then the other religions have to start thinking about it too.

You know, when we had a memorial service here for Laurel Clark last year, the pastor at First Presbyterian across the street – Randy Bush – spoke here and he said how grateful he was for our church. He said, “You Unitarian Universalists deal with the issues that all of us need to deal with – but you do it before the rest of us get to them. And you nudge us along to do the things we need to do, and I thank you for that.”

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So why join a church like this? Not because you need us to be spiritual – but because the world needs us to – as a former UUA president once put it – *teach the fragile art of hospitality, to revere both the critical mind and the generous heart; to prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness ...*” [the Rev. William Schulz]

We’re not the only ones doing this, of course, but we are one; and we’d be glad to have you join us, if you’d like to be a part of this interesting and challenging adventure.