

Unitarian Universalism, 50 Years On

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
May 22, 2011

Happy anniversary, my dear church!
Or I should say, happy almost-anniversary.
Can you believe, this congregation will be 100 years old
in less than two years?
Unitarians came to Stockton early on.
And on March 28, 1913, we became a church:
the First Unitarian Church of Stockton.
Think of that: 100 years!
We've had our ups and downs,
just like any long-term relationship is going to have.
We've known a lot of wonderful good times,
and we've been around long enough
to know disappointment and heartbreak too.
That's how it is when you dare to stick around.
We have persevered, here we are today,
and it's time to start planning an anniversary party, wouldn't you say?
A hundred years is worth a celebration!

We've still got a couple of years to get ready.
But as it happens, we are celebrating
yet another anniversary this month.
Notice our congregation started out as the First *Unitarian* Church.
But today our name is even more of a mouthful:
the First *Unitarian Universalist* Church of Stockton.

And that's because fifty years ago this month, in May of 1961,
the members of two different religions—
the Unitarians and the Universalists—
decided to merge and share everything they had
and become Unitarian Universalists—

a new religion, something that had never existed before.
The Unitarians had been around for about 150 years
in this country alone.
They're the ones who kept saying,
you don't have to give up your brain to be religious.
You can be a thinking person and a person of faith at the same time.
The Universalists were even older in this country.
Since before the American Revolution,
they'd been saying God loves everybody so much,
nobody is going to hell when they die.
Universal salvation: *everybody* is going to heaven, no exceptions.

(Let me just say, by the way:
those folks who believed the Rapture was coming yesterday—
I feel sorry for their disappointment, but the whole idea
is just so profoundly against our own faith tradition.
The idea that God would sweep just a few people up to heaven
while everybody else gets left behind to suffer—
that's just the opposite of our Universalist tradition.
So, me personally, I won't be looking for the Rapture any time soon.)

But to return to our story:
it's 1961, and the Unitarians and the Universalists
have just voted to merge.
(We have a few people in our congregation
who have members of this church since before the '60s.
Can I get a show of hands from everyone who was a Unitarian
or a Universalist at that time?
We honor you for your commitment!)

So why the merger?
In many ways it just made sense.
By this time the Unitarians and the Universalists
have realized they have a lot of values and beliefs in common.
Both traditions preach love and hope rather than fear and judgment.
They both respect science and the rational mind.

They both preach “deeds, not creeds”:
how you *live* is way more important than what you say you believe.
So these are two traditions that really fit together.
As Stephan Papa says, Unitarianism spoke to the head
and Universalism the heart. When they came together,
we could have both.¹

These are all good and positive reasons for the merger.
But, ironically, at the time, one of the strongest reasons was fear:
worry and fear and anxiety about how we would survive.
For years, both denominations had been dealing with
declining numbers. Our congregations were getting smaller.
Some were closing down entirely.
It was scary.
So the merger idea came about at least partly as a way to *survive*.

The Unitarians and Universalists of 50 years ago took a leap of faith
and created this new thing—Unitarian Universalism—
because they wanted to *live*.
They wanted to survive for many years into the future.
And they believed coming together would make them stronger.
They didn’t know what it would mean to be a Unitarian Universalist
because they—*we*—hadn’t had time to invent it yet.
We hadn’t had time to live into it.
We didn’t know yet what this new thing would become.
But we took that leap of faith.
The Universalists and Unitarians who voted for merger that day
were voting to allow their old identities to die
so that something new and powerful and beautiful could be born.
I thank them for their courage,
and I know you do too.
Because of them and their courage,
we are still here today.

¹ From Stephan Papa, “Celebrating 50 Years and the Future of Our Faith,” in *Association Sunday 2010 Organizing and Worship Resources*, posted online at http://www.uua.org/documents/stew-dev/assnsunday/2010/worship_resources.pdf.

And we need to remember this
because our congregation is facing the same kind of fears today.
We feel anxious about our future.
In the last year or so we've seen our numbers go down.
We've lost a lot of members
who have had to move away to find work.
The recession has hit us hard.
As a church and individually, many of us are struggling
to make things work with less money.
All this triggers fear. It's perfectly natural.

But I want you to have hope.
Fifty years ago, the Unitarians and Universalists
were facing tough times, just as we are today.
Fifty years ago, they were afraid their religions would die.
And it might have happened.
We might have just shriveled away
if we had refused to change when change was needed.
But no:
That's not what happened.
Back then, our fear opened us up
and prepared us to take a risk.
We dared to reach out to one another.
We laid down our old identities as people of faith
and took up this brand-new identity as Unitarian Universalists.
We said no to isolation and embraced community.
And it brought us *life*.

As this church lives into the next fifty years
of Unitarian Universalism,
the next *hundred* years of life as a congregation.
We need to know, first of all,
that we will not always be struggling.
We will not always be afraid.
Fifty years ago, the Universalists and the Unitarians
looked their fear in the eye.

With their future at stake,
they dared to welcome each other into their faith and their hearts.
They dared to say, *we are one people now.*

We are one body.

And so we have become, we people of the extremely long name,
Unitarian Universalism, that name which we keep and love
because it reminds us where we come from.

We did it as a faith.

And we can do it as a congregation.

Over the next fifty years, we need to keep asking ourselves:
who will we dare to welcome?

Who needs to hear our message?

Who do *we* need to bring new life inside these walls?

And an even bigger question:

What will this new life ask of us?

What will this new life ask of us?

Because we all know:

when you dare to let someone else into your life,
there's no such thing as staying the same.

We *will* be changed.

Our longtime married and partnered couples know this.

Our parents of children know this.

You let someone into your life and they change you.

You change them too.

And in the best relationships, the ones we really cherish,
we make each other stronger.

We make each other more alive, more beautiful,
more truly ourselves.

Now, for this to happen, in our most intimate relationships
and in our church communities,
we have two challenges to meet.

The first challenge is, we have to *know who we are.*

We have to know who we are,

and we have to be brave enough

to let other people see us clearly.
The second challenge is like a mirror image.
We have to know who we are,
but we also have to *be ready for our relationships to change us*.
We have to allow other people to teach us
everything we haven't learned yet.

First—we have to know who we are.
You know how, when you first make a new friend
or you start dating somebody,
you want them to like you?
You don't want to offend them,
and you're not really sure yet how they feel about certain things,
so you kind of hide your own opinions,
or you tone them down a little anyway,
because you want them to like you,
and in those early stages at least,
their liking you matters even more to you
than saying what you think?
Does that sound familiar to anybody?

When it comes to our church life,
I think something like that happened after the merger.
The Unitarians and the Universalists had “gotten married,”
as it were, and so much was at stake.
Everyone involved wanted it to succeed.
We needed this thing called Unitarian Universalism to work.
We needed it to be our spiritual home.

So we got cautious with each other.
We got a little nervous about talking about our beliefs.
We didn't want to offend each other.
We didn't want to rock the boat
and disrupt this fragile new beginning.
And so, collectively, we all got really shy
about saying in public exactly what we believe.

For years we have been *great* at saying what we *don't* believe, right?

But, as Jennifer Crow said in the reading today,
talking about what we *don't* believe is not enough.²

It's not enough for ourselves.

To walk this life with peace of mind and grace in our hearts,
we need to know what we believe and why we believe it.

We need to share our saving message of hope and love
for *all* people, not just a select few.

We need to proclaim our faith
that religion is for the heart *and* the head.

You don't have to check your mind when you walk in the door.

We need this for ourselves,

and we need it for all the people who don't know about us yet,
people who could be freed and transformed by our faith.

Each one of us needs to be able to say what we believe,
as members of this faith tradition

and as human beings who have experienced the holy.

Not always easy, but we can do it.

Know who we are. Share it with others.

And the second challenge:

allow ourselves to be changed.

We have to allow other people to teach us.

I'm thinking of all the changes our faith has been through
in the last 50 years.

One example: fifty years ago,

women made up less than 5% of our ministry.³

Today it's over 50%.

And it has changed us.

I'm one of the lucky ones—

the way we are now is all I've ever known.

² Jennifer Crow, "Our Question-Mark Faith," in *Reverend X: How Generation X Ministers Are Shaping Unitarian Universalism*, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press at All Souls, Tulsa, pp. 68-69.

³ Gretchen Woods, ed., "*Leaping from Our Spheres*": *The Impact of Women on Unitarian Universalist Ministry* (UUMA CENTER Committee), p. 25.

But time and time again I've heard older colleagues talk about how hard it was for those first few women, how our ministers' associations used to be competitive, unfriendly, ego-driven.

We've allowed ourselves to be changed, for the better.

Another example: fifty years ago, it was not safe to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered in our churches.

I have a colleague who started serving a UU congregation in the 1970s. For years he didn't dare come out to them as a gay man.

But now we as a faith work harder for LGBT equality than almost any other religious group I know.

We've allowed ourselves to be changed.

And we're not done yet.

Even in our congregations, it is still harder for our LGBT ministers to succeed than their straight peers.

We're not there yet.

But we are so much healthier than we were.

So what's next?

Who have we not yet welcomed as fully as we want to?

We know the answer.

We urgently need to learn how to welcome people of color, from non-European cultures—African-American people,

Latino/Latinas, Asian people,

the whole beautiful range of human beings

who make up our multicultural society today.

And let's hope it doesn't take another 50 years!

But change is going to be hard, and probably slower than we'd like.

Our congregations are so deeply Anglo,

Euro-centric in the way we worship,

the way we organize ourselves,

the way we run meetings even.

I don't think ours is an exception.

If we truly want to welcome the incredible diversity of people living in this community—Mexican people, Cambodian people, Hmong, Filipino, from children to our oldest adults, all the people who walk by our building every single day, we are going to have to allow ourselves to be changed. We are going to have to look at every aspect of how we do church together.

In our worship: What kind of music do we sing?
Do we have readings by people of all different backgrounds?
What about languages? Here in Stockton, if we don't have services in Spanish, we are automatically excluding a huge percentage of our neighbors. What about our committees, how we get things done? Can we take a look at all the hidden norms and assumptions we make about how things work here?
This is not the journey of a day or a month or a year. But can we take one step?
Can we open our doors a little bit wider today to everyone who isn't here yet?
And tomorrow wider still, and the next day, and the next?

Because our faith has the power to transform lives:
this faith that religion can speak to both heart and head,
this faith that every person is loved and saved;
this precious faith handed down to us
by people who were not afraid to reinvent themselves
to save what really mattered.

Now it's our turn.
Let's make the next 50 years count!

Amen.