

Finding Common Ground between Humanism, Activism, & Spirituality

Unitarian Universalists have a long history of finding things to fight over or at least to disagree about. Few groups have spent as much time in discussions or arguments as Unitarian Universalists. This is partly a generational thing, with older generations having lots more interest in arguments than younger generations who wonder why we can't all just get along? Many of you are probably familiar with the custom of having sermon talkback sessions? Those used to be held weekly in many UU congregations, with a few people ready to tear into anything the minister might have said in his or her sermon. Along with often being destructive to the minister, the tendency of a few people to dominate those talkbacks left a lot of people confused about the intentions of the congregation. I do like to hear responses to sermons, but I don't have a big need to have each of my ideas fully deconstructed. I will offer a response time when it seems appropriate and uplifting and when I think time will allow.

When I announced my intentions to address if not solve the longest lived and most destructive conflict within Unitarian Universalism, that between atheistic and agnostic rational humanists, activists for social justice, and those just interested in spiritual exploration, the universe started sending messages! Jane suggested that the answer was kindness. Kari suggested that the choir sing about love. And then Nichole found the image for the cover of the Order of Service. I surrendered!

I had been planning to craft a careful philosophical and theological argument about why we need to accept each other and work my way up to the importance of Respect, citing our UU Principles as needed. Instead, I think the universe was telling me, keep it simple silly, as a former parishioner once suggested! I think the point is that our common ground isn't the end result of an argument, but the premise, the beginning of who we are together.

Each Sunday, in my welcome, I talk about acceptance, inclusion, and diversity. This doesn't happen at the end of the service, but at the beginning. This is really where we start to show who we are and what we believe. It doesn't matter if we are scientific atheistic rational humanists, or spiritual neo-pagans, or banner-waving social activists, we are all welcome here so long as we do no harm to others and respect the differences that make our gatherings interesting!

Nobody said we were on the same journey or that we all were at the same place on our individual journeys, but often we find we have more in common than we might initially think. Greeting each other with welcoming kindness, respect, and love is really the most important thing that we have to offer. The philosophical and theological arguments, I mean discussions, may be fun for some UUs, but we all need love and we all deserve respect. Our 1st UU Principle reminds us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of each person, while the 2nd and 3rd promote justice, compassion, acceptance and spiritual growth.

When we gather for our Sunday worship services, we are coming in from a hard week of facing all the challenges of our lives, our work & family situations as well as the current insanity of our nation and world. Most of us really don't need anything more to fight about, rather we need a safe place to talk about our feelings with caring friends. Then later we might have energy to engage in some kind of activism with trusted friends, but mostly in these strange times, we need each other.

It certainly helps that we are open to various kinds of spiritual explorations and religious and philosophical beliefs, but that, too, is secondary to the beloved community that we build together. Most of us began our religious, philosophical, and spiritual journeys long before we discovered Unitarian Universalism and whether others are in a similar place on their journeys should not stop our explorations. If we can offer classes and groups that encourage your journeys, that is great, but we will not always be able to do that for every member or friend of 1st UU.

Similarly, if you are a scientist, expecting a rational approach to religion with a leaning toward humanism, atheism or agnosticism, we hope that you will find others with whom you may talk freely, but we may not always be able to offer exactly what you might be seeking in the way of philosophical or scientific discussion. We will always strive to be welcoming, accepting, and interested in your quest.

As a small congregation, we will at times be more successful in welcoming people with some beliefs than others, but it is our intent to be welcoming to all persons of goodwill. Whether others in the congregation find your scientific, philosophical, political, spiritual, or religious persuasions compelling is only incidental. Everyone who wants to join us is welcome here so long as they are respectful of the beliefs and persons of others. We each have our own struggles, so we each should do our best to practice kindness and offer friendship and love to all who gather here.

Our richest common ground is in our acceptance of others, our recognition that all persons are of sacred value and that we each have a role to play in this vast interdependent interconnected universe. Even if we disagree, we can respect and accept each other. Most of us have come to cherish the diversity and variety within our congregations because they offer us opportunities to learn and grow and make our groups even more interesting.

There will be times when those calling for an active outreach to address one or many societal evils will be more satisfied than those seeking enlightenment either through the wisdom of science or spirituality, but each of the others will be more satisfied at other times. I will try to address topics of interest to each of these groups over time, but I can really only promise that I will try to balance perspectives over time as I find I have things that I would like to say to each group. I will also encourage others to bring their own perspectives on days I am not preaching with the hope that these additional perspectives will help to provide even more balance.

Both sides of Unitarian Universalism came out of Judeo-Christian religious roots, but over time we have also been influenced by the sciences, humanism, Eastern and Pagan Religions, various philosophies, and many other beliefs and practices that have helped our members and friends understand and respond to the world. Sophia Lyon Fahs, 20th Century leader in Religious Education helped to develop programs of exploration and discovery for children and youth, leaving a rich heritage that still influences our movement today. Diversity is hardly new to us, so it is when we can enjoy the many different beliefs and practices in which our members and friends engage that we are most true to our core.

Our Common Ground is hardly in unanimity, but certainly in variety and diversity! So when we recognize that our core is in multiplicity it is easier to welcome in all comers, rich and poor, white and black, gay and straight, old and young, trans and cis, male and female, and well, everyone who might want to join us. And in recognizing our diversity and remembering all the times that we were not greeted well in other places, we make a special effort to treat each other with kindness, respect, and appreciation. For our Common Ground is in our love for humanity and all of life, for all beings large and small.

Perhaps it is due to our curiosity but we also tend to find more commonality in questioning than in any particular answer that might be offered. The questioning implicit in discovery and exploration often brings us together as we consider ideas big and small. There are jokes about UUs burning question marks on their lawns or gathering under the sign of the question mark! First UU Church of the Question Mark might be a most fitting name for a UU Church!

We do also help people find answers, but most answers that we would offer are provisional and subject to review and further refinement. Our UU Principles give lots of direction in formulating and articulating those things that we believe, but there remains a wide array of ways we can describe and live out our most important beliefs.

We also believe that our beliefs and practices cannot be described in any creed, that there must be freedom for growth and expansion throughout our lives as we live by discovery and exploration. As long as we live, our beliefs may continue to grow and change. We are not bound by any image of an unchanging universe with an unchanging deity. Rather, we tend to see change as good and ongoing in our lives and throughout the universe.

Unitarian Universalists tend to have a positive and hopeful attitude about most things, though certain recent political events have been more than a bit discouraging to many of us. Still we try to remain hopeful even in these challenging times. Through both difficult and good times, we know that the way that we treat each other is important and we see the benefit of the beloved community that we create. Kindness, love, and respect are ways that we show our appreciation and valuing for each other as well as modeling better behavior than we have often seen recently on the national political stage.

Though as a movement we have been described as humanist, activist, or believing anything we want spiritually or religiously, we actually tend to be pretty intentional about how we each describe ourselves. And though one of those choices tends to be our preferred description, there is nothing to prevent any of us from embracing Spirituality, Humanism, and Activism at the same time. They are really not mutually exclusive though we sometimes treat them as if they were. We each are free to choose whatever descriptions best fit our own reality, no matter how others might tend to characterize us. At least within Unitarian Universalism, we do not have to choose! We are free to be whatever we feel most called to be, so long as we do not harm others along the way.

We are all called however, to practice kindness, to reach out in love, and to show respect for others. When we can reach out and welcome others from that spirit, we will continue to speak and live from the core of our beliefs and principles! May it always be so!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!