



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Celebrating the Search for Truth and Meaning

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By a show of hands, how many of you are lifelong UUs? And now, how many found Unitarian Universalism as adults?

It looks like the majority of you became UUs as adults. According to the Unitarian Universalist Association, this is not unique to Neighborhood Church, but – as we are a growing faith – it is common across Unitarian Universalism. It's also the case for my awesome wife, Delphine, and me. This month marks our 10th anniversary both as a Unitarian Universalists and as members of Neighborhood Church.

Soon after we were married in 2002 we decided that we wanted to put down roots in a church community. We'd both grown up in families that were active in their churches, and that was what we wanted for the family we planned to start. But we had some big hurdles we needed to get over. Besides the fact that we weren't the same faith (she was Lutheran and I was Catholic), our search was complicated by the fact that neither of us felt a particularly strong connection to the basic tenants of our faiths. We had each been drifting away from the religions of our childhoods and the simple act of attending services to check out churches of those faiths seemed to dredge up old internal conflicts within each of us.

Hoping to find a faith community we could feel comfortable with, we sought the advice of that wise faith counselor, Google. In fairly short order we stumbled upon something on beliefnet.com called the Belief-O-Matic. It pledged: "Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic® knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic® will tell you what religion (if any) you practice . . . or ought to consider practicing." We thought, "Sure, why not."

When we compared our results we were surprised to see that at the top of my list and second from the top on her list was something called Unitarian Universalism. I turned to Delphine and said, "What's that?" I am embarrassed now to say that I had never even heard of it before.

Frequently in their description of UUism, Beliefnet used the words diverse beliefs. So, we thought that the faith might just have room for a couple of people who weren't quite sure where they fit anymore.

On our first visit to Neighborhood, we immediately liked the natural setting of the campus, the warmth of the people at the Welcome Table, and the feeling of fellowship on the patio. Our first impression was that this was a community that we might like very much to be a part of.

I have a very distinct memory of sitting down in this Sanctuary for the first time, turning over the Order of Service (it still looks pretty much the same), and discovering the Seven Principles. The Fourth Principle leapt out at me, "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

It was like a revelation. It was as if someone said to me, "You know all of those questions that you've been pondering about faith for most of your life? It's okay to ask them here. In fact, it's encouraged!" I was hooked.

Long story short, we came for the community; we stayed for "the search for truth and meaning." And our lives have been the better for it.

One of the exciting things about the Fourth Principle is that the search transforms faith from something static into something active. Faith, I came to learn, is a journey. Though admittedly it took me time to be able to completely wrap my head around the concept of the faith journey. As many of you might attest who found this faith as adults, when you are born into a creedal religion like Catholicism, faith is not a journey – it's a destination. And you arrived there at baptism. And you are expected to stay put.

Catholicism has entire chunks of dogma dedicated to doing just that. I remember when I was in the second grade at St. Mary's Catholic School in Assumption, Ohio, my classmates and I went through the Rite of First Communion. For several weeks leading up to the big event, they put us through what was essentially Communion Boot Camp. I was struggling to understand how a small round wafer, through a short ceremony performed by our priest, became Jesus' flesh. It struck me as both fascinating and gross, and I couldn't help but marvel at the otherworldliness of the event. During a quiet moment I approached my teacher, Sister Virginia, and quietly asked, "Does the host REALLY become the body of Christ? Like, REALLY?" All that I was looking for was some sort of reassurance that this was not a slight of hand trick, and that the transformation was in fact the real deal. A simple "yes" would have sufficed.

Sister Virginia looked at me over the top of her horn rimmed glasses, frowned deeply, sighed and then stood up and said loudly for the entire class to hear, "Children, we have a Doubting Thomas among us! He wants to know if the body of Christ is real." Then, she walked back over to me and continued for all to hear, "Perhaps you would like to put your hand into Jesus' side, or place your finger into the nail holes in his hands and feet!" Turning back to the class, she drove her point home with, "And do we know what happens to Doubting Thomases children? If they do not repent for their insolence then they are certain to go straight to Hell."

From that encounter I learned two things: One – Don't ask questions; Two – Nuns are mean.

When I was new to Unitarian Universalism, beginning my faith journey meant revisiting many uncomfortable memories like that one from my childhood to try to separate what might be truth from that which I had simply been afraid to question. One thing that I never dared to question before becoming a UU was the nature of God.

In Catholic school, from enforcers of the faith like Sister Virginia, I had come to know God as an authoritarian figure. He was omniscient, omnipotent and he kept score. He was always

there with me, watching, scrutinizing, judging . . . waiting for me to screw up so that he could put me back in my place.

Even more invasive than God judging my actions was that he also presided over my thoughts. From childhood, and continuing into adulthood, God was in my head. It became such that nothing bad could happen to me without me looking back at a less-than-holy moment I'd had and creating a link. If I accidentally spilled scalding hot coffee all over myself I would think, "I knew this would happen. This is because yesterday after that guy cut me off on the freeway I thought about flipping him off. Even though I decided not to, God is punishing me for being too slow to turn the other cheek, almost not treating my neighbor as myself, and refusing to forgive and forget." I felt micromanaged.

Once I became a UU, even though I now had the freedom to choose my beliefs, I felt compelled to do right by my Catholic God and try to live in his good graces. So, I continued – as I always had done – to do a lot of praying. I begged for his forgiveness and for his benevolence. Yet, like most authoritarian figures in our lives, there was no pleasing him.

This is how deeply our indoctrination into the religions of our formative years can embed themselves into our psyches. Even once I felt like I was well along the UU path, having been a member of the church for four and five years, this version of God lived in my head. Perhaps today some of you have a passenger like this riding along with you. Watching, judging, chastising.

I reached a point where it seemed like maybe the healthy thing to do would be to give up God, but every time that I considered doing so this horrible anxiety would rise up inside of me. It would start out small and build to a near panic state. See, I wasn't completely convinced that there was no God, so there seemed to be at least some chance that deciding not to believe in him would bring his full wrath down upon me. I imagined myself saying, "God, I don't believe in you anymore," resulting in him smiting me and – as Sister Virginia had foretold – I would find myself spending a fiery eternity in Hell. The same Hell that I was now all but certain did not exist.

It took me a whole lot of free and responsible searching to reach a new place in my spiritual journey. I was at the place where growing meant letting go. Maybe we've all been through something like this in some area of our lives. In this case it meant finally letting go of every last bit of the dogma; letting go of the mental construct of an infallible absolute authority; letting go of belief in the unbelievable.

Maybe if my God had been a more loving God, things would have ended differently between us. It took nearly eight years from when I began my spiritual journey, but in 2012 the mental and emotional toll of my relationship with God reached a breaking point. I just could not take the self loathing, shame, and guilt any longer. I threw caution to the wind and made a

conscious decision to stop believing in God. I shut him out of my head, stopped praying to him, and quit blaming him for anything.

I have yet to be smited.

But what are you left with when faith is gone? It turns out that once you ditch the dogma, you aren't left with much. The God belief is just the tip of the iceberg. It means that you are also letting go of answers to questions like what happens after we die, who or what created the universe, and what is our very reason for being? Though I had roughly 40 years of life experience and my personal beliefs about right and wrong to guide me, once I let go of dogma I didn't feel like my beliefs were tethered to anything anymore. My truths were adrift in a sea of existential quandaries.

I think this is the reason why the word "responsible" is in the sentence "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." If you are going to have the freedom to take a faith journey then you'd better approach it with vigilance and discipline or you risk spiraling down into a darkness in which life loses all meaning and finding the truth seems hopeless or even pointless. As it was, I visited some pretty dark places. But what got me through it was responsible use of the biggest tool in the UU toolbox: Reason.

If UU's have a hammer, that hammer is Reason. And if one thing is for certain, we know how to swing it.

Since so much of that which I held up as Truth with a capital "T" was grounded in dogmatic belief that was not based upon fact, I decided that I would not merely try to re-tether my beliefs to something else, but completely tear them down and rebuild them from the ground up, using facts as my foundation and reason as my hammer. I turned to science as my source for facts and I've had a lot of fun delving deeper than I ever had before into biology, neurology, physics and astronomy. Science has turned out to be a much more solid foundation for me than dogma ever was. Give me a good peer reviewed journal over the Bible any day.

For example, applying reason to the current scientific understanding about the origins of the universe, our planet, and the evolution of life have helped me to rebuild my belief in the uniqueness and specialness of my life – of all life – and why life matters. It has actually made me view life as being much more precious, because I grasp the incredible unlikeliness of it.

Recently someone asked me, "But what if reason hadn't resolved your existential crisis? What would you suggest to someone else who is going through something similar?" My answer is that we are a community, here to support one another along our spiritual journeys. Before I discovered that reason was the right tool for me, I relied upon the support of my Neighborhood ministers and friends, and the weekly services to keep me afloat. Failing reason, I would encourage someone to keep falling back onto the support of this community until they aren't falling anymore.

So here's where my journey has led me: I still experience the spiritual, but in a completely different way. I connect to the spiritual by getting out into nature to marvel at the diversity of life that has evolved on our planet over the course of the past four-and-a-half billion years. I consider how unique and special each one of us is, that in the vastness of time and space we exist here and now . . . that we exist at all.

The spiritual exists in my children and the enthusiasm and excitement with which they embrace each new day and new challenge. I express my spirituality through the gratitude, compassion and love I show to the special people in my life, and by what I give back to the world.

To co-opt a phrase – I feel “born again” into the world. This real, solid, physical world. Right here, right now. My life is my truth, and how I choose to live it is what gives it meaning.

As for my spiritual journey going forward, it will be exciting to see where this new phase of it leads me. Will I still find truth and meaning in the same way 10 years from now? I guess I will need to keep travelling along my spiritual journey to find out. In the meantime, I'm excited for my four-year-old twins that they will get to grow up in a religious community that allows them an opportunity that I didn't have, to ask probing questions about faith, spirituality, and belief – and have them answered.

Seen from this perspective, for both people who found Unitarian Universalism as adults and those who are born into the faith the phrase “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is liberating. All of us are free . . . free to choose our own spiritual journeys and embrace whatever truths and meanings we discover along the way, ultimately sharing in the rich community of belief such diversity creates. And these facts make the search worth celebrating.