

CAN YOU BE A UU WITHOUT KNOWING IT?  
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Speaking of being something and not knowing it, there is a story of a woman who goes to heaven and the welcoming angel tells her that in Heaven, as long as they want, people can continue to worship in ways that were comfortable to them. Walking along they pass by a Roman Catholic mass being held in a Cathedral woven of cloud and starlight. They pass by Muslims prostrate in prayer under domes of shimmering stone. The Unitarians are there having a discussion around a coffee pot that never runs dry. Then they pass a brick church. The woman hears a voice booming from the pulpit within, but the angel asks the woman to be very quiet. "Who is in there?" she asks. The angel replies, "Those are the Christian Fundamentalists. It would break their hearts to know the rest of us are here."

In a very different spirit, Robert Hohler, one-time executive director of a Unitarian organization called the Laymen's League, recounted this:

"Perhaps its [the League's] most significant contribution was to the growth of the overall Unitarian denomination through its sponsorship of an innovative advertising campaign in magazines and newspapers [in the 1950 and early 60s]. The ads that asked 'Are You a Unitarian Without Knowing It?' evoked a flood of inquiries from people wanting to know more. This campaign still stands as the most successful outreach program liberal religion has ever sponsored."

It was powerful and effective advertising because it used a trick question. In the strictest sense, I assert, one cannot be a Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist unless one is part of a Unitarian or UU congregation. So, the answer to the question of the sermon, "Can you be a Unitarian without knowing it?" is "no"; end of sermon... But if we were to put the question more accurately it would be "Are you the sort of person who could, or should, be a Unitarian but haven't found out about us yet?" Such phrases do not fit well in advertisements.

My bare minimum number is that there should be at least one UU in every thousand people. In a city of two thousand there should be at least one couple who subscribe to the Church of the Larger Fellowship, (which is our UU congregation for people without a congregation). In a city of a million there should be at least 1,000 active UUs. St. Louis metro has about two million people, and yet there are only about 975 of us on the rolls of the four metro churches, so we have room to grow.

The problem in its simplest terms, the reason that there are people that should be Unitarian but don't know it, is that we are not clear on what it means to be one. 'The most successful outreach program liberal religion has ever sponsored' raises some theological questions. For instance, if someone is already a UU without knowing it, does it matter that they don't know? Once you know about a UU church why should you join it? Is the UU identity merely that of being liberal religious in attitude, or is something else required for someone to become UU? What does it mean to know you are a Unitarian and what keeps you one for the rest of your life? It is a tricky question, deceitfully simple, but full of other questions.

For a moment, imagine if politics in American went really bad. No, worse than they are today. Imagine that it was declared illegal to be liberal, and especially illegal to

be a UU. The question is, 'would there be enough evidence to convict you?' Some, to save their skin might say, "Well, I did go there rarely," or 'I once was a member but I haven't done anything with them in quite some while.' We don't take attendance each week, so how would anyone know? For some the discomfort of pledging, or giving up a Sunday morning, or making any commitment is enough keep them outside. Others leave as soon as church dynamics become difficult. But a true member of this church identifies with the values and principles and power found here even when it is difficult, even when dangerous. You perhaps have heard that a recent survey in America found *three times* as many people, than the actual number of people counted on UU membership rolls, (300,000) were willing to identify themselves, on a survey, as Unitarian Universalist. Imagine what power we would have if all those people were serving in congregations, joining our social justice work and pledging to our programs! Maybe the important question is "Are you not really a Unitarian, but think you are?"

It is, also, interesting to note that though in many places Unitarian Universalists are increasing in rapid numbers, nationally our numbers have remained flat for some time. That is because the old school Unitarians in New England have failed to capture this generation and the losses in the old Unitarian stronghold are offsetting gains everywhere else. New England used to be a place where one could find many families in which every generation, going back for hundreds of years, were all life-long Unitarians.

Most of us are converts, but I have a special appreciation for life-long UUs. So many Unitarians and UUs have grown up with such a vague liberal religious identity that when they become adults they easily joined the religion of their spouse, or drifted from religious community altogether. What is worse, their parents accepted this choice without an argument. Every time I talk to my daughters I ask if they are attending church. Now, I know that many congregations make that difficult for young adults to be involved, but I don't accept that as an excuse. I want more life-long UUs. That is why I began the story for children this morning by telling them, we are Unitarian now and I want them to grow up to be good Unitarian Universalists, and to know that they are.

Unitarians in the 1830s were largely very liberal Christians, especially those who were both inspired by Enlightenment values and who were striking out against the Calvinist orthodoxy of their day. In the 1900s Unitarians still gained our power and significance within the context of a general Protestant Christian culture. But by the 1970s we had set aside much of the Christian faith and were confident that Religious Liberalism was a thing unto itself. We upheld Freedom, Reason and Tolerance as if they were ends forgetting that they are only means to developing and living a more vital and powerful faith. In the book *Faith Under Siege* by our own "Tolly," Anatole Browde, he quotes one of my favorite 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians, James Luther Adams. In an essay "A Faith for the Free" Adams responded to the modern problem with religious faith:

"To be sure, the word 'God' is so heavily laden with unacceptable connotation that it is for many people scarcely useable without confusion... [But that in which we have faith] is the inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence. It is inescapable, for none can live without somehow coming to terms with it. It is commanding, for it provides the structure of the process through which our existence is maintained and by which any meaningful achievement is realized... the free person's faith is therefore a faith in the giver of being and

freedom. Human dignity derives from the fact that to be a person means to participate in this divinely given meaning and freedom [in] this reality.”

Our theology embraces all living things. One of the most influential liberal *Catholic* theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a man named Karl Rahner, and he went a little further. The imprint of his thought on the results of the Vatican II Council was significant. He was a deeply Catholic man and maintained the centrality of the Roman Church to Christ and the centrality of Jesus Christ to salvation. He also affirmed that, all human beings have a latent awareness of God in any experience of meaning. For him this awareness made the whole of the Christian revelation possible. Furthermore, and most important for this sermon, he posited the idea of the “Anonymous Christian.” This is someone “who lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that [his or her] life is oriented around a grace-given salvation of Christ.” [*Theological Investigations*, translated by David Bourke] In other words a person who lives by faith, hope, and love in the best spirit of Christianity, but who thinks of themselves as Hindu, or Pagan or atheist, would be a Christian without knowing it. Rahner did not argue that such persons must exist, only that they were possible, and given the nature of God’s love and grace, probable.

Despite the many who agreed with him some Christians, to this day, describe his theology as “bizarre,” “twisted,” and “dangerous.” But we should know that Karl Rahner was wonderfully Universalist. Instead of feeling smug and secure and close-minded about who was in his church and who was not, he opened the doors, set the welcome table, and lived by a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity. This is how we should also live, just as Rahner was deeply and explicitly committed to his faith and yet believed in the Anonymous Christians, we must love this congregation and must also believe in the “anonymous UUs,” who would want to be UUs but don’t know it, YET.

To be certain, there are many people who are aligned with our church and our principles, but who will, for one reason or another, never be members of our church. One significant example from Muncie, Indiana, was Virginia Ball. As the wife of a life-long Universalist, Ed Ball, she was a close supporter and a generous friend of the Muncie UU congregation. But she was officially a life-long member of the Presbyterian Church. In the last few years of her life she attended UU worship more often than the Presbyterian, because we gave her a unique form of comfort, but she was memorialized and buried with Presbyterian ceremonies, and gave more to them in her will.

I know that there are people in many religious traditions who do not need conversion. I noted that the Saint Louis organization Interfaith Partnership/Faith Beyond Walls have a mission statement on the top of their website: “As communities of faith, we agree to differ, promise to love; and unite to serve.” I have read UU congregational statements that are almost identical to that one. Interfaith Partnership “Promotes peace, respect and understanding among people of all faiths. We achieve our mission through dialogue, education, social advocacy and service programs that are uniquely interfaith.” We must do the same with programs that are uniquely Unitarian. At one level our mission is not ours alone, it is shared by all people of good will.

People of other faiths may not claim our church as theirs but can claim an affiliation with our principles and our spirit of community, and connection, compassion and trust. Everyone will benefit from our deep commitment to protect religious liberty,

except for those who want to coerce people into religious conformity. All people of any faith, are empowered by our commitment to promoting the full use of the democratic process in society at large and to creating a world of peace and justice. To paraphrase the Layman's League in the sense of values they all can be UUs without anyone know it.

Furthermore, there are those who may never be affirming of our faith and who may see this church as directly opposed to their theology, but still they need to know what we stand for. "Iron sharpens iron," says the Hebrew proverbs, "as one person sharpens another." I remember on person who came to our church in Lubbock, TX, because she was a member of a very conservative congregation and was attending a workshop on how to convert people of other faiths to the true faith of Jesus Christ. They had gone down the list that included Catholics and Hindus with Methodists and Muslims. Finally the leader mentioned the Unitarians, saying, "Don't even waste your time with these people. They love to argue with the truth and are so tolerant they even have atheists in their church." When my friend heard this she was intrigued and went to see what we were like. She did not waste anytime trying to convert us and instead came back every week. She joined our church a few months later.

So that leads us back to those people who need our faith, need our church and are so glad when we invite them in. I have met teenagers who were isolated, on the edge of despair, perhaps considering suicide, yet who were caught by the simple and direct attention of UU youth who reached out to them and loved them. Our ability to make human care and contact a religious duty has saved lives. Once you know that the power of the world runs in circles, not in creeds, through the wind and green trees, and loving families of all sorts: then you want to create a religious community that affirms the freedom and abundance of that power. Once you see the power of reason and science illumined by faith and vision you want it to shape your living and be added to your power and source of hope. And once you have joined a community that embodies the power of love and reason, then it is your duty to find those others who need to be here and let them know what they are missing. We must open our doors and call people in.

In order to reach these people we have to tell everyone about our congregation and way of religion. We must invite people to worship, to covenant groups, to holiday events, to Clark Lectures, to programs for families, to our social events even. People come to church because someone they trust invited them. They stay because someone they like befriends them. They get involved because they identify with our purpose and values. We must find all who would love to be Unitarian, but don't know it yet.

To conclude, let me remind you of a story that the UU Minister Stefan Jonasson has told from his time at the 1999 UUA General Assembly in Salt Lake City. While there he "met with the head of missionary work for the Mormons. Since we were coming to town," he recounts, "the Mormons had done their homework and knew a lot about us. One of them said... 'You know, Unitarian Universalists have a remarkable ability to attract visitors proportionately [far] more than the Mormons do. But you're lousy at holding on to them.'" This is a fact. After some discussion he concluded, "If your churches were half as successful at integrating and retaining members as we Mormons are, then Unitarian Universalism would be the most dangerous church in America." "I knew deep down that he really meant it," Stefan says. "I, also, had a pretty clear sense that he was not much concerned that we would ever become that great a danger." What would it take for us to prove that Mormon wrong? What would it take to become the

most dangerous church toward racism, hatred, and injustice, to be the greatest threat to oppressive, coercive and narrow-minded religion?

To become the most dangerous church in America we need to do a better job of embodying what people seek here, not in certainty, but with deep confidence and faith about ultimate things and the transforming power in human existence. We must reach out and find all those who would love to be UU but don't know it yet. We must reach out to all those who are partial UUs and don't know it yet. We must reach out to those who are allies on our core issues, but who will benefit from the values and principles we promote. We must integrate and retain the people who seek this community, and at the same time increase those who know about us and who will someday seek us out. So I ask you, to paraphrase the apostle Paul, whatever in this church is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is wholesome, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything here is excellent or praiseworthy: you have a duty to tell others about it and invite them to join with us. For here is one part of mighty circle of Truth and Love and through its power will come healing, wholeness, and liberation. Even to UUs who don't yet know it.