

The Gospel of Unitarian Universalism: Two Kinds of Good News¹

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Let's spend some time this morning thinking about what is really basic to Unitarian Universalism—a denomination whose original names are all but meaningless to many of us today. This isn't unique to us. American denominations often bear names associated with ecclesiastical organization or theological doctrines that bear little relationship to their current life. I don't think Presbyterians hear much about the Westminster Confession these days, or Episcopalians about the Thirty-Nine Articles. The name Unitarian comes because our founders did not believe in the trinity. The name Universalist comes from the belief in universal salvation—that everyone goes to Heaven. I don't know about this congregation, but my guess is that most Unitarian Universalists have never heard these doctrines preached from a Unitarian Universalist pulpit. In fact, these days you could be a Unitarian who believes in the Trinity and a Universalist who believes that when you die you're dead and that's the end of it.

We are largely identified by our social action and our liberal views. Those are certainly things that make this a good home for me. But that's not *all* we are. Our views and good works flow from and are reinforced by ideas that underlay how we behave in the world. Indeed, I think we have a good message *for* the world.

Let's call that message our gospel. We don't use the word “gospel” much in our denomination, especially those of us who tend humanist, but it's a good word. The word “gospel” comes to us, by way of the Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon. We get the word “evangelism” from the the Greek and Latin words for good news, which in the Anglo-Saxon was “god-spell,” meaning “good story.”² So this morning I'm going to be Mike the Evangelist talking about Unitarian Universalist gospel—our good news.

And we've got good news to proclaim. In fact, we have some upper-case Good News and some lower-case good news. That is, with a capital G and a capital N, and a small G and a small N. They're both good but I think it's important to know which is which.

I'm using “good news” somewhat playfully this morning, but also seriously. (And also, with apologies to our Universalist half, focusing on the Unitarian side.) What is our Good News—our fundamental message? What I'll try to do this morning is to make a distinction between our social action and the ideas that underlie them. They are interrelated but distinct. Our social action and the causes we support are crucial to who we are, but they are not all we are. I'm using idea of Good News to try to make that distinction. I believe we have significant Good News.

The lower-case good news

¹Based on a sermon originally delivered to the Unitarian Universalists of Fallston (Fallston, Md.), June 6, 2021.

²Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gospel-New-Testament> accessed 5/23/21

So, let's start by considering our lower-case good news. I'm defining this kind of good news as really important, and fundamental to what we do, but still different from our upper-case Good News. I'm going to give some examples, then explain.

I'm so happy that my home congregation is active in the community. I'm so happy that we do good things. I would not want to belong to a congregation that was not involved in building a better world.

Unitarian Universalist congregations all over the country, are engaging in anti-racism work. We're looking at white supremacy in American institutions and history, we're looking at it in our own churches and denomination, and we're looking at it in our own lives. That's good news.

We have worked on—we're still working on—issues of gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity. We've developed a welcoming congregation program so congregations can justifiably signal that they are welcoming congregations. That's good news, and while it seems natural today, it was the result of a long process.

None of this good news came without effort. These were not easy, automatic things. Our attitude toward LGBTQ+ people was not always welcoming. Congregations debated hanging rainbow flags. Coming out against apartheid was not always a given. At some periods in our history, in some parts of our country, our religion represented the conservative establishment. It took work to become the denomination we are—or more accurately, to become the denomination we are becoming.

If I were talking to someone who was looking for a new religious fellowship and wanted to know more about us, certainly I'd tell them those good news items I've just been talking about. The good things we have done and are doing say a lot about what kind of a community we are. They are important to do because they make us who we are and who we want to be. It's good news that we do these good things, but they are not our upper-case Good News.

We do these things I've been talking about *because* our upper-case, capital letter Good News calls us to do them. You might say we do them not because they are our *purpose*, but because *they are our job*. They are the outward signs of our inner belief. Some people might come to us because they like our stance on causes—and I certainly hope they do—but our stance on causes is not the capital letter good news we proclaim. They are *behaviors*—these efforts at social justice and racial equity and all these other good works that we do—that flow from an underlying, more basic, capital letters Good News that we proclaim.

The upper-case Good News

So, let's look at our capital Good News, the ideas and practices that underlay all our good works.

And the best way to start is at the beginning, with the first systematic and very popular proclamation of our Good News, which happened in Baltimore in 1819. Preaching at the ordination of Jared Sparks, the Baltimore congregation's first minister, at a time when Biblical criticism and the historical approach to religion were in their infancy, the Rev. William Ellery Channing made a number

of radical statements, some of which still speak to us today. I could spend ninety minutes analyzing his ninety minute sermon, but here's just a few points. Preaching from I Thessalonians 21, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good,”

- He urged the congregation to bring their intelligence to the Bible, just as they would to any other document. In other words, “Think, people! Use your minds!”
- He discarded much of the Bible as time-bound and inapplicable to modern times.
- When we read the Bible, he said, it is (and here I'm quoting) our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject and the aim of the writer his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known for explaining what is difficult, and *for discovering new truths*.³ [Emphasis Supplied.]

Think about this! We recognize that religious ideas are subject to the same scrutiny as other ideas and that religion exists in time, that some religious teachings that might have been right for one time are not right for ours. And we are to use our reason to discover new truths.

Yes, discovering new truth! We believe that humankind is still discovering truth. Humans will develop new insights, new ways of looking both inward and outward, will set new standards and seek to rise to them. New discoveries in science, rather than being enemies of religion, open new vistas of awe, wonder, and mystery.

Implicit in this is the idea that religion—including our religion—is not static. We believe—we know, we have experienced—that denominations can grow and change, just as people can. We have experienced this in our own denomination. We are not the denomination that Channing helped found. Indeed, it only took a few years before Channing's brand of Unitarianism became old fashioned, and new expressions of Unitarianism began to evolve. By the end of the 19th century, a non-Christian, humanist Unitarianism evolved that would seem familiar to many of us today. In the twentieth century, we welcomed Neo-pagans and followers of earth-centered religion into our community.

Some people were unhappy with this religious evolution. Some wealthy members of the First Unitarian Church in Baltimore were so unhappy with this movement that in the 1890s they financed a Tiffany glass mosaic of the Last Supper which is still dominates the sanctuary wall. But evolve we did and—this a key point—nobody got forced out. All still had a home. I'll come back to this.

The point I'm making here, the capitol G Good and capital N News, is that religion is an evolving institution and we are an evolving religion. And the really Good News is that you and I are part of that evolution. We are making it happen. Channing did his part, now we are doing ours.

Furthermore—more Unitarian Universalist Gospel—we are honest about what we know and don't know. We are open to truth and to insight into how to lead a good life wherever we find it. This

³ The sermon is widely available on the Internet. Among the most readable is <http://ucmtl.typepad.com/files/unitarian-christianity-1.pdf>.

leads to the liberating Good News that no religion, including our own, has the whole truth or the final truth. This builds in, or should build in, a sense of our own limitations and thus humility in our engagement with the world.

As a corollary to this, we are comfortable with doubt, comfortable about not having final answers. We have our truth, our gospel, our good news, but we know that other approaches to religion, other approaches to leading a meaningful, ethical, caring life, also have value. We are open to learning from them. I find this comforting. We're a small denomination; we don't have to save the whole world by ourselves!

Okay, so far, but you might be thinking, good enough with your Good News about religion and how denominations work and all that, but what's your Good News for me as a person? You might be thinking, these ideas are good, but religious life is lived in congregations. If I'm a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, what does this mean for me? Well, I'm glad you asked.

The best statement I've ever read of what a congregation should be doing comes from the Geneva, Illinois, Unitarian Society. In 1842 they declared their purpose—we could say their Good News:

Being desirous of promoting practical goodness in the world, and aiding each other in our moral and religious improvement, we have associated ourselves together: - not as agreeing in opinion, - not as having attained universal truth in belief or perfection in character, but as seekers after Truth & Goodness.⁴

Promoting practical goodness in the world—in modern terms, social action. Aiding each other's moral and religious improvement—spiritual development, a statement of community. Not necessarily agreeing with each others, not people who have arrived, but seekers.

Note what is not in this statement. It is not a statement of belief. What it says is that these are our aspirations and more importantly, by implication, that we can do this! Helping each other, we can achieve these things. We can live our lives this way! In that sense, thought not formally a creed, it is a statement of profound belief.

This little congregation in 19th century Illinois, which would have been much less diverse socially and theologically and in almost every other respect than many of today's Unitarian Universalist congregations, put its finger on what binds our very diverse congregations and denomination: we are here to help each other in a mutually respectful way.

Some congregations make it a practice of ending their services by singing (from the gray hymnal), “From you we receive, to you we give, together we share, and by this we live.”

These are not just words for show. We welcome you just as you are to join our community. We encourage your growth to where you want to be. I'm emphasizing you, as a unique, irreplaceable individual, but we do this in community. We recognize that people come trailing clouds of identities, and belong to multiple communities. We try to see all these aspects of you, but we also try to see the

⁴<https://www.uua.org/midamerica/history/vignettes/history-vignette-13-uu-society-geneva-il>

unique you before us, a person of worth and dignity.

We Unitarian Universalists trust you to use your mind and your emotions and your experience to find the path you want to travel. We believe that a religious fellowship does not need to have a doctrine dictated to it, that we can build an intimate, supportive fellowship of people who believe very different things about some ultimates: about whether there is a god or gods, or life after death, or whatever. We believe that it is possible to do this, to succeed in creating a pluralistic culture, and we try our best to live that culture. This is Good News indeed.

Cultivating racial and social diversity in our congregations is a work in progress, but we have certainly succeeded in theological diversity. Indeed, here a goal is not simply diversity but pluralism, which the Pluralism Project at Harvard University defines as “the energetic engagement with diversity.” It's not just getting along. We don't want, in the words of the Pluralism Project, “Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship”⁵ We want real encounter and relationship! What that means, for example, is that I, as a humanist who doesn't believe in a god, I want to hear from those of you who do, so I might learn from you and better understand you, and be able to support you in your beliefs. (I notice that this afternoon you have meetings scheduled for Progressive Christians and also for Atheists/Humanists/Agnostics. Yes!)

The point is this: our religious growth comes not just from ideas and practices which we share and are familiar with but also from ideas and practices which are different from our own. What will make us individually and collectively strong is for each of us to examine our own ideas, and to lovingly and respectfully articulate them, live them, and from the grounding of our own approach, to listen to those who approach our mutual journey from a different perspective.

How do we meet this challenge? When we do this, we do it well. When we do it well, we transcend the labels "humanist," "theist," and the other labels we use to describe what kind of Unitarian Universalist we are. When we focus on our dreams, aspirations, and community we do so deeply and well. Indeed, we are at our best when we talk to each other, when we find ways to express our differences along with our commonality.

These attitudes that I've just discussed are very important as rules of the road or what we might call procedural beliefs. Respect other's beliefs, feel free to adopt the best and most workable, and so forth. This attitude helps us live peacefully with differences. The Good News is that people can find ways to do this, and we have found one of these ways.

We have discovered that we don't have to believe exactly the same thing to have a successful, enhancing religious community. The shared spiritual life (however you define spiritual) doesn't depend on uniformity of belief other than the belief that we can travel the path together, abiding by some simple rules of the road. I think our congregations model for the larger society that communities can exist and flourish without being uniform in belief if they are unified by mutual respect.

Finally, that Good News that makes all this work: our concern for the conduct of life trumps belief questions. We often express this as “Deed before Creed.” “What do you believe?” is an important question, but what we're really interested in is how your belief influences your behavior

⁵<http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>.

toward your fellow human beings and toward the world we live in. Do your beliefs affect how you walk in the world? We believe that working together we can be better people, creating that better world. Good News, indeed.

And here's where our lower-case good news and our upper-case Good News meet. All these good news things we do—our social action, our being open and welcoming, our respect for the individual before us—flow from and support and enhance our Good News. The lower-case good news gives action and life to our upper-case Good News. Our gospel only lives as we make it live.

So, this, then, is our Gospel, our two kinds of good news. I urge you to spread both kinds of good news, by your words and by your actions. Proclaim it to the world! We believe that human beings acting together become better people and can make a better world, and that we will be better people in that better world.

To borrow from that great Rosie the Riveter slogan from World War II, our Good News is that We Can Do It. We Can Do It. We can be better people in a better world. And let us all say, We Shall Do It. We *shall* do it!