

“Traveling By Caravan”  
Sermon by Sharon Wylie  
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA  
July 3, 2011

Tomorrow is Independence Day here in the United States, a time when we celebrate our freedoms not just historical, but freedoms cherished to this day. It is no coincidence that freedom is one of the highest values of this country AND of our religious tradition. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These words from the Declaration of Independence—written by Unitarian Thomas Jefferson—could just as well summarize several of our Unitarian Universalist principles today.

So I want to talk this morning about this idea of freedom in our faith tradition. I want to talk about the complexity of that idea, “freedom.” I want us to think about what we really mean when we talk about our religious freedom.

If you’ve ever tried to explain to someone what Unitarian Universalism IS, or what we’re ABOUT, then you know it can be a challenge. Discussion of religion often starts with the question “What do you believe?” And right away, we’re stumped—right?—often stammering something like, “We can believe whatever we want!” even though we know as we say it that THAT somehow doesn’t seem like the WHOLE of what we want to convey. Yes, technically, we CAN all believe whatever we want, and I’m guaranteed freedom of the pulpit up here, but you do not expect to hear a sermon today about God’s judgment of us and eternal hellfire or about the need for obedience from a wife in a marriage or anything that would dismiss or undermine the inherent

worth and dignity of all people.

We are a non-creedal religion, meaning that none of us needs to conform to a shared statement of belief to be here. “Come, come, whoever you are.” If I started preaching hellfire and brimstone, I probably wouldn’t be invited back here, but neither would I be stripped of my congregational membership or even denied ministerial fellowship. The closest thing we have to excommunication in Unitarian Universalism is the icy withdrawal of friendship and fellowship. Don’t get me wrong, that “cold shoulder” is enough to end ministries—and it does—and enough to rebuff people who don’t share enough of our values.

Like other non-creedal faiths, we DO have central and shared beliefs. Quakers are non-creedal, but nevertheless share a belief in the possibility of direct, unmediated communion with the Divine. Disciples of Christ are non-creedal, but nevertheless share a statement of identity that affirms their belief they are part of the one body of Christ. Unitarian Universalists are non-creedal, but nevertheless share beliefs that we summarize in our seven UU principles.

Our particular non-creedalism is broader and more open than any other faith tradition, that I know of anyway. So let’s recognize that our uniqueness is part of what makes it so hard to describe ourselves.

Personally, I think there are better answers to the question “What do you believe?” I want to suggest it would be all right to say, we believe in three things: One) we believe every person has inherent worth and dignity. Two) we believe that all existence is interdependent. And three) we believe that truth and meaning is found

through a free and responsible search. These are three of our principles turned into belief statements. There is much to explore and debate about any of these, and there are certainly more shared beliefs we could offer the curious, but I see these three principles—the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the interdependent web of all existence, and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning—I see these three as critical to understanding what we are about, and what we have always been about.

Now, I know that the THIRD one—we believe that truth and meaning is found through a free and responsible search—is going to be complicated for anyone who hears it for the first time. It's definitely going to be complicated for anyone who has an assumption that church is about being told what to believe. It would be simpler to just talk about the other two principles, definitely. But we've never been about pithy marketing. And I don't think anyone can understand Unitarian Universalism as it exists today without understanding our belief that revelation is NOT sealed, NOT finite, our belief that truth is continuously revealed to us, and our belief that the sacred texts and teachings of the world's religions are a STARTING point—and just one of myriad starting points—for exploring what is sacred and what gives meaning in this life.

And we need to be careful when we talk about this principle. We need to be careful to name that our search for truth and meaning is not just FREE. It's not just free. It must also be responsible. Our over-emphasis on freedom is what prompts us to say, "We can believe anything we want!" We forget about the responsible part. And I

think we do THAT because we aren't quite sure what it means. That's what I want to focus on this morning. Responsible to WHOM? Responsible for WHAT?

To be responsible is to be accountable, and to be accountable is to be in relationship with someone or something. Embedded in a principle that easily reads as an affirmation of individualism—the free and responsible search for truth and meaning: the idea that each of us gets to decide for ourselves what to believe—embedded here is the implicit notion that our search can only occur in a context of accountability to, I would suggest, a larger community.

Some of us might bristle at the idea that we are accountable for our beliefs. Our culture privileges freedom above such values as compassion, family, education, politeness, civility, and even common sense. Almost any behavior short of breaking the law is acceptable. In our reaction to oppressive societal mores that codify what behavior is acceptable and what is not—and woe to you who fall outside the range of acceptable behavior—in our reaction to that, we have swung the pendulum perhaps too far in the other direction. We are in danger, I fear, of forgetting what responsibility and accountability to others means.

The irony, the absolute irony, is that we think responsibility to others LIMITS our freedom instead of understanding that responsibility is the SOURCE of our freedom. Nobody understood this better than James Luther Adams, who wrote our responsive reading today. Adams was a Unitarian minister, ethicist, and theologian, and he is considered one of the finest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His theology was heavily influenced by his time spent in Germany just prior to World War II. He

witnessed the rise of the Nazi party and the failure of religious liberals to adequately respond. He spent much of the rest of his life challenging liberal religion to strengthen and deepen our engagement with each other, with our communities, and with the political democratic process.

Adams saw in our congregations the freedom of association, voluntary associations. He observed, “Every totalitarian theory rejects just this freedom. Indeed, the rejection of freedom of association, the rejection of the freedom to form groups...can serve as the beginning of a definition of totalitarianism.” (JLA, Social Responsibility)

This freedom of association is MORE than the freedom to assemble. Voluntary association calls us into relationship and into accountability. Adams writes, “The voluntary association at its best offers an institutional framework within which the give and take of discussion may be promoted, an institutional framework within which a given consensus may be brought under criticism and be subjected to change.” In other words, our voluntary association is not about agreeing with each other. It’s about ENGAGING with each other.

If I were to tell you the still, small voice within me tells me to contribute more of my time to fighting for immigration justice, you would affirm, I think, that I should respond to that gut feeling, that I should answer that call. If I were to tell you the still, small voice within me calls me to harm myself or others, you would challenge me. You would encourage me to seek mental health care. You might even REPORT me to authorities for threatening to do harm. And rightly so. Here, we hold each other in a network of love and responsibility.

Yes, we do get to decide for ourselves what to believe. But we must do so in relationship with and accountability to a larger community. This is how we appropriately test and criticize our beliefs, beliefs that will lead us to action.

Adams tells us, “The only way in which [we] can reliably form and transform beliefs is through the sharing of tradition and new insights and through the cooperative criticism and testing of tradition and insight. In other words [says Adams] [we] must sincerely work with each other in order to give reliable form and expression to faith. This is the only way in which freedom FROM tyranny can be fulfilled in freedom WITH justice and truth.” (Faith for Free Men, p. 60)

Writing over 60 years ago, Adams already saw the dangers of our liberal faith tradition, warning us, “Belief in merely individualistic, [splintering] freedom of faith can lead only to [blandness], to a faith in ‘I know not what,’ to faith in the arbitrary” (Faith for Free Men, p. 60).

Remember his words we spoke together a while ago: “I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship; that protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom...it is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.”

To me, this is what lies at the heart of our free and RESPONSIBLE search for truth and meaning. Individuals brought into the caring, trusting fellowship of congregational life. Our integrity and freedom protected and nourished here. Our shared insights transforming rigid tradition, birthing something new, throwing open

our doors ever wider. “Come, come, whoever you are.”

Now, survey data consistently shows that MANY more people identify as Unitarian Universalist than attend our churches, up to THREE TIMES as many, depending on whose survey you look at. There appear to be a half million people who consider themselves Unitarian Universalist without belong to or attending one of our congregations. This is true even though our Church of the Larger Fellowship offers an entirely online religious community for people not physically close to one of our congregations.

I think those who consider themselves Unitarian Universalist without attending a congregation have MISSED the very essence of Unitarian Universalism. Our faith tradition calls us to be in relationship with one another. To comfort each other, to support each other, to search together, to be responsible TO and FOR one another. There is no RESPONSIBLE search for truth and meaning outside of community.

The question “What do you believe?” turns out, I think, to be the WRONG question. It’s a question for rigid tradition. A question that assumes we’re done exploring what we believe. And it’s a question that assumes religion is about what we BELIEVE rather than what we DO.

I think the real question is, “Why do we gather together?” Why do we come here when there are so many other things we could be doing?

James Luther Adams tells us ours is “a pilgrim church,” a pilgrim being a traveler on a journey to a holy place. He calls ours “an adventure of the spirit.”

Unitarian Universalist minister Lynn Ungar, adapting words from the Sufi mystic

Rumi, suggests ours is a caravan, a GROUP of travelers. I agree with both of them.

We gather together as travelers bound in an interdependent web of mutuality and accountability, freedom and responsibility. Each of us rattling along in our own wagon, individuals brought into a caring, trusting fellowship. Richly colored canopies overhead flap in the breeze, providing protection as we travel on. We share food and drink and love, nourishment of body and spirit, sustenance to face the unknown ahead of us. Our shared insights transforming rigid tradition, birthing something new, throwing open our doors ever wider. We are on an adventure of the spirit.

We are free, yes, and in our freedom, we have chosen to travel together.

We believe every person has inherent worth and dignity. We believe that all existence is interdependent. And we believe that truth and meaning is found through a free and responsible search.

### BENEDICTION

Come, travelers, come.

May we find and offer nourishment here.

May we find and offer protection here.

May the interdependent web of mutuality and accountability, freedom and

responsibility be strengthened, healed, and transformed by our fellowship.

Come, yet again, come.

May it be so. Blessed be.