

Rev. Carol E. Strecker  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church  
5/1/05

### "Articulating Our Faith"

What do we believe? More importantly, what do we say about what we believe?

My colleague Forrest Church found himself at a dinner party. Seated between two strangers the conversation turned to religion, his religion. The conversation went something like this:

"You're a what?"

"I'm a Unitarian Universalist"

"Oh, I see," the man said, but obviously he didn't. He was rescued by the woman to our right.

"I've never really understood just what it is you Unitarians believe.

You are *Christians*, aren't you?

"Not exactly. I mean, we were and some of us still are but most of us don't call ourselves Christians."

"You don't believe in Jesus?"

"Not in an orthodox way, certainly. Many of us value his teachings but few, if any of us, believe that he was resurrected on the third day or that he was God."

"What about immortality?"

"Well, I guess you'd have to say that we're pretty much divided on that one."

"But at least you all believe in God?" interrupts the man across the table...

"Not exactly. Many of us do, if each in his or her own way. Others of us don't find the concept of God a useful one."

"Well then what then do you believe?" our bewildered hostess politely asks.

What do Unitarian Universalists believe? It's a hard question to answer. Talking about Unitarian Universalism in terms of shared beliefs is a little like trying to herd cats - when it comes to our beliefs we're very independent. We each go our own way. We don't often speak in terms of what *we* believe collectively because we don't share a common statement of faith. It would make dinner parties a lot easier if we did but we don't have a

creed that sums up our beliefs in a nutshell. But if someone at a dinner party asks you what Unitarian Universalists believe you can take the bull by the horns and say that for us, the right and the responsibility of the individual to choose his/or her own beliefs is paramount.

As Unitarian Universalists we are called to be seekers - each on a path of our own choosing. We're called to find our own truth; truth that's always part of a larger whole. And so we keep looking, and finding and losing our way - always open to new truth, new revelation. We are always learning and growing in relationship with all that is.

The freedom to choose can be daunting. The road is a long one with endless twists and turns - an adventure to be sure but one that can feel very lonely at times. I think it must be reassuring to stand with those who believe they have all the answers, believing they've arrived. But our faith calls us to seek - learn and growing along the way to be sure - but without the assurance that we'll find a definitive set of answers to life's biggest questions. We are often branded doubters and skeptics by those who cling to a static set of beliefs like a security blanket. But we question because we know we don't have all the answers. We embrace a willingness to let go of our limited understanding of truth in order to grow into a new a broader understanding.

My colleague Dick Gilbert has this to say in praise of doubt:

"When we doubt, we affirm the importance of reason and our confidence in ourselves as centers of religious authority. When we doubt, we affirm the seriousness of the religious quest. When we doubt, we recognize that truth was not engraved in stone 2,000 years ago. When we doubt, we acknowledge that our understanding of truth is imperfect. When we doubt, we strengthen our faith." ("In Praise of Doubt")

But we can become prisoners of doubt. The inherent danger in a questioning faith is that we can get stuck in the "no" of doubt without ever embracing the "yes" of truth. My colleague Tom Owen-Towle writes,

"Doubt by itself isn't enough. We choose to live *with* doubt but not *by* doubt. We live beyond reason and despite doubt; we live by faith. Doubt alone leads to despair, in which we slide from healthy skepticism into a

debilitating cynicism that negates the spirit of life." Healthy skepticism can easily devolve into bickering when doubt rules at the expense of the willingness to look for common ground.

James Luther Adams reminds us that we aren't just called to seek our own truth. He calls us out from our separate paths to speak out, to tell the truth not just as individuals but as a prophetic liberal church. If we get too hung up on the questions or our differences at the expense of letting people know what we stand for, how can we hope to speak with any real insight into the issues of the day? We must learn to speak with a prophetic voice if in the words of James Luther Adams, "We intend to make history instead of merely being pushed around by it." Prophets ask the hard questions. We are well suited for that role. But prophets also critique the status quo in light of a vision.

"Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the throngs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
And bring the homeless poor into your house;  
When you see the naked, to cover them,  
And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

This is the vision of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah - The Hebrews believed it was God's vision for the world. It's a vision based on values - a world of justice, equity and compassion - a world where everyone has what they need.

We may not feel that we have a corner on the market of Truth but we know there are many sources of truth that lead us to a common set of values. "It becomes the fate of freethinkers", writes Tom Owen Towle to stake our lives on incomplete but satisfactory data, penultimate values if you will." We don't share a statement of faith but we have crafted a statement of principles and purposes; our penultimate values if you will. Our principles are affirmations, about life, about the universe, about humankind. They can provide a foundation for a vision for the kind of world we seek. But we can't

keep it to ourselves. We have to put it out there. We have to show our concern for the shape of things to come by learning to be articulate spokespeople for the worth and dignity of every person, for justice, equity and compassion and for world peace in the context of the social issues of today. We shouldn't feel the need to crawl under the table when someone asks us what Unitarian Universalists believe. We should be eager to talk about our values and our vision. But to do that we have to talk to each other about what we believe. We have to look for common ground and stand with one another as a prophetic voice in the world.

I've come to believe that we can embrace the freedom to choose our own beliefs and speak with a united voice about the values that unite us. The religious Right is busy trying to create the illusion that Christians tow a very narrow line when it comes to values and a vision for this country. I love the piece that Jim Wallis and the folks at Sojourners published because it's a prophetic Christian voice that says this is our vision based on our values and we're Christians too! It's easy to forget that folks who call themselves Christian are almost as diverse in their beliefs as we are - maybe more so because theirs is a world church; racially and economically diverse - they are among the poor and the oppressed all over the world. Would that it were otherwise but we don't share a whole lot of diversity along those lines. Christians are rabidly conservative and rabidly progressive. We would do well to look for common ground with those who share our values among their ranks at the same time we're learning to share and speak out about our own shared values.

What it really comes down to in my book is integrity. Jim Wallis says, *God is personal but never private*". I just love that! "God is personal but never private." What that means to me from a UU perspective is that we all have the freedom and the responsibility to seek our own truth - that's god with a small G for me but that truth is meaningless unless I look for ways to make it real in the world.

10 of us spent a lot of time together this weekend exploring the Welcoming Congregation program as we prepare to offer a series of programs on becoming a congregation that's more open and affirming for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered folks. I have no doubt that many of us are in different places when it comes to issues of sexuality. Talking about these

things in church may seem downright blasphemous to some of you. It makes a lot of people uncomfortable at the very least. Others see oppression based on sexual orientation as a human rights issue. Then there are those people who see human sexuality as a part of who we are as human beings, spiritual beings, and that sexuality in the context of loving relationships is something we should affirm and celebrate as part of the human experience.

But one of the wonderful folks who came down from the Waterville church to facilitate our training this weekend summed it up for me when he said, "When it comes down to it, based on our values; the affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person - becoming a Welcoming Congregation is just the right thing to do.

And so, if we were going to put an ad in the local paper, lets say about the referendum that will most likely be on the ballot this November about equal rights for gays and lesbians, how would it read?

Could we say we support anti-discrimination legislation for gays and lesbians because Unitarian Universalists affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person as well as justice, equity and compassion in our relationships with one another? Is it something we could stand behind? Could we do it publicly - with one voice?  
What do you think?

Are our hands tied by our differences - when someone asks you what UU's believe do you feel bound to talk only about your personal beliefs - your faith? Or do we have enough common ground to talk about a set of values we hold in common - our faith?

May the conversation continue...

Amen.

