



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Being and Becoming a Unitarian Universalist”

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A sermon delivered January 26, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.* Rev. John Buehrens (UU)

*We are the certain and the seeking, the lifers and the newcomers, the beloved and the broken hearted, the insiders and the rejected, all of whom have found a home in the extraordinary, yet intimate communities of Unitarian Universalism.* Melissa Harris-Perry, journalist

### Sermon

It's exciting and worth celebrating a person's decision to become a member of the Fellowship. But what exactly does it mean to become a *member* of a Unitarian Universalist community? What does it mean *to become* a Unitarian Universalist? Just what *is* Unitarian Universalism to which you may belong?

If you haven't asked these questions yourself, someone likely has asked it of you. When someone discovers you either attend a UU congregation or self-identify as a UU, these questions are common responses. Because becoming or being a UU is not always clear, I offer some ideas for you to reflect upon as you consider what the membership journey means to you.

What is Unitarian Universalism? Here's my quick elevator speech, the answer I'd give in a 30-second hypothetical ride between floors: *Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal religion comprised of people who share common values and welcome differing beliefs.*

We are *covenantal* because we promise to be together. We vow to be in relationship, to work through the messy details of living, learning, and caring for one another. A single shared doctrine holds most religious people together. Since we don't share one belief, something else must keep us together. The root meaning of *religion* is 'to bind fast'. UUs are bound by our promise, or covenant, to be in relationship while affirming and promoting our shared values.

If the elevator ride is long, I might add: *Our shared values are expressed in seven principles and our diverse beliefs are informed by several sources, including wisdom and experiences from the past, the present, and even the future.*

Ours is a living tradition which acknowledges life's journey inevitably includes change. Revelation or truth is still emerging, therefore ancient prophets and sages don't have the last word. And because the world is too amazing and complex to hold only one truth for all people, for all time, we embrace diverse beliefs.

For some, becoming a member reflects a new UU self-identity. For others, it may reflect an affiliation that is less central to who they are. In either case, the signing of our membership book can be a symbolic rite of passage, an act indicating a personal commitment to the values of the Fellowship and a promise to support it with time, talent, and treasure, as your means allow. This commitment deserves joyful recognition.

Signing the membership book should not be an empty gesture. I hope it represents a desire for spiritual growth. Our covenant states you promise to commit to positive change in yourself and in the world.

Your active participation and presence will change you in ways you want to be changed, as well as some you may not expect. Hopefully, your involvement will improve your ability to manage your life, add deeper meaning to your life, and help you become a person who lives more fully in alignment with your values, our shared values. Because we are together in community, we benefit from each other's presence.

Although the commitment and obligations of membership are most evident in those who pledge to be official members, it doesn't exclude any regular non-member participant from these same effects, these same opportunities for transformation. Our community includes friends as actively engaged as members. We embrace everyone, though joining confers some additional benefits because membership has meaning beyond its symbolism.

Unitarian Universalism, whether for members or friends, is a mouthful. The word *unitarian* comes from the Latin *unitas*, or oneness. Historically this referred to the oneness of God, in opposition to the three persons or trinity of God. Early Christians disputed the nature of Jesus: was he fully divine, somewhat less divine, fully human, or a combination? In 325, at the Council of Nicea, Emperor Constantine tried to end the arguments by deciding that God was three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Anti-trinitarians were branded heretics because the person with power said so, right or wrong.

The word *universalism* comes from a belief in universal salvation, that Jesus' death was a saving act for *all* humanity, not just the faithful or righteous. This was declared heretical in 544 because a loving God was deemed inconsistent with eternal punishment. One thousand years later, John Calvin's followers taught that even before you were born God knew some of you would be damned forever. Universalists insisted God too loving to withhold hope for even the worst among us.

These theological identities eventually became denominational names. In 1568 the first named Unitarian Church was built in Transylvania. Although they went by other names, the first Universalist congregations appeared in England by the early 1700s. The first named Universalist

Church in America began in 1779, the first Unitarian Church in 1796, though each theology had been preached long before. The two churches joined to become the UU Association in 1961.

Although we still carry these two theologies in our name, the meaning of each word has changed in keeping with the broadening of our tradition. Unitarian still refers to oneness—the oneness or unity of all humankind. Universalist still refers to universal salvation—the belief that all people are worthy of love, a saving love that will conquer hate, fear, and indifference.

However we understand our name, Unitarian Universalism stands for freedom of belief. It stands for the right of conscience, the lessons of experience, and the use of reason in determining one's beliefs. It stands for the right to believe as one must, within an ethical framework of peace and justice for all. It stands for an individuality tempered by interconnectedness, knowing that whatever one of us does – affects all of us. It stands for the democratic process allowing people the freedom to responsibly speak their mind and heart, while staying in right relationship. In a word, it stands for love.

The UU minister John Buehrens believes people join religious communities in search of a meaningful life. When a religion doesn't provide doctrinal answers to "What is the meaning of life?" then the community must offer the time and space for that discernment. Any of us can be spiritual by ourselves. We can learn by reading a book, experiencing a sunset, or feeding the homeless, and we might take time to reflect on the meaning of life. But being part of a spiritual community offers more than what we can do alone.

The community can challenge us in directions we may not willingly have gone by ourselves. The community can support and comfort in ways no personal security blanket or hot toddy can. The community can hold us accountable when we might rather get a pass. The community can remind us of who we want to be, even when it is easier to ignore our ideals. This community is here for you and me, but it is you and me that make up the community. It does not exist if we don't show up.

When you participate in the community, you provide yourself with an opportunity for spiritual growth. When you sing in the choir, for example, you learn how to adjust your voice to others, lend strength where others may be weak, let someone else have a moment to shine while you step back. When you participate in worship, you may stretch yourself in front of others, take risks, knowing we'll forgive any stumble. When you volunteer for an activity, you may learn you have inner leadership skills or creativity that might otherwise remain dormant. When you volunteer to reach out to a person in need, you may discover levels of compassion unknown to you. And you learn you are not alone.

Yes, you can sit back and not join every committee or fill every need in the Fellowship. There are times in all our lives when receiving may be what we most need. But there are also times in our lives when giving is what we most need. Through the rhythm of giving and receiving we gain connections and commitments to people, to faith, to values, and to the world. Through this valuable exchange we gain the meaning we seek while making a difference in many lives, including our own.

The first quote on the order of service reads, “To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.”

To speak of these connections, please pull out a gray hymnal and turn to #468, *We Need One Another*, by George E. Odell. Please respond by reading the *italic* type. When we’re finished, keep this page open for reference.

(See *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal for reading #468.)

Thank you.

In a moment I will invite you to form a dialogue partner with someone you’re sitting next to, but not the person you might have arrived with. First, you’ll have a moment of silent reflection. Then I’ll ring the bell for you to turn to a partner. Please introduce yourself, then, answer the discussion prompt #1 at the end of this order of service. It reads: “Share a time you felt connected to this community. What made you feel especially connected? If you are a newcomer, in what ways would you like to feel connected?” You’ll have roughly two minutes each. If you need a prompt, look to the responsive reading, #468, for times you may have made a connection. I’ll ring the bell when it’s time to switch. Please begin sharing.

(Ring bell at 3-minute intervals)

Thank you for sharing some of your answers and for perhaps making a new connection, a new friend in this Fellowship. Please continue your conversations after the service has ended.

No matter what your membership status, we welcome you. We encourage your active engagement. Available to everyone are meaningful connections, spiritual growth however you define it, affirmation of your worth, and the right to believe as you must. Together, let us learn and grow within this caring community. Together, let us lift up the connections and commitments that are worthy of our worship. Together, let us lift up the connections and commitments that are worthy of our worship. May it always be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Share a time you felt connected to this community. What made you feel especially connected? If you are a newcomer, in what ways would you like to feel connected?
2. How does being part of this community energize or strengthen you to live life well?
3. Do you identify yourself as a Unitarian Universalist? Reflect on and share why or why not.