



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Letting Our Light Shine”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

*No one who has lit a lamp covers it with a container, or puts it under a bed;
but puts it on a stand, that those who enter in may see the light. Luke 8:16*

If you light a lamp for someone else, it will also brighten your own path. Nichiren Daishonin

*How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world.
William Shakespeare*

Be aware that who you are and what you have to offer can be a beacon to some lost soul. Iyanla Vanzant

Sermon

We're in the final few weeks before the winter solstice when daylight begins to lengthen, making these the darkest days of our orbital journey around the Sun. For ancient peoples living in the northern hemisphere it is not surprising that lights feature in their winter holy days. Pagan bonfires, Hindu Diwali lamps, Jewish Hanukkah menorahs, and Christian stars and tree lights all brighten dark days with life-giving light. We continue to value light today.

Light guides our way in the dark. Light in a window invites stranger or friend in from the cold. Lights blinking in coastal lighthouses warn of rocky shoals and help sailors guide their ships to safe harbor. Starry lights in the heavens keep us humble by reminding us we are just a small part of the infinite cosmos. And a flame of light burning in our Fellowship's chalice celebrates our legacy of religious freedom and our Seven Principles, especially our call to justice which gave birth to this symbol during World War Two.

In this Fellowship we not only light chalice flames, our Vision speaks of becoming a beacon of liberal religion. By that we mean we want our UU tradition to be visible or known in the larger community so that others who might want to be part of an open, non-creedal religious community like ours can find us. It means that people will know what we stand for because we live out our values in the community, that our actions illustrate our convictions. And, it also means that we have a voice in the community, that our values of respecting all persons and knowing we're all one interdependent community, are heard and may influence people in positions of power. Being a beacon means we are seen, we are heard, and we are well-known.

Sadly, Unitarian Universalism is the best kept secret in many communities. We frequently hide our buildings in the woods because we like being in nature, and we may not announce our presence with bold signage. Fortunately, with our building expansion project we will improve the visibility of our UUFA sign. We're also reluctant to toot our own horn because we're afraid of doing to others what may have been done to us—unwanted proselytizing—so we stay silent about who we are and what we offer. And that means we're effectively hiding our light.

I don't want Unitarian Universalism to be a secret. I know we can remove any basket from our light so that it will shine boldly. I think we're ready for some increased UU evangelism. I, for one, am proud to be a UU evangelist.

Don't run away! I don't go around neighborhoods knocking on front doors. I don't wish to press people to convert. Like so many religious words, it's easy to think evangelism is defined by what we think of as its worst example.

UU minister Tom Schade says, "Evangelism is spreading a message, sharing good news, entering the public square to contest the foundational ideas that shape the social order."

If you're new and just discovering this faith tradition, please don't think my message is just for current Unitarian Universalists. I hope you'll hear what our good news is because I believe Unitarian Universalism has good news worth sharing. I know our tradition has saved lives and healed many wounded by prior religious experience. I believe our voice is needed in the public square as a counter-balance to those who would restrict freedom of religion, the use of reason and science, or an embrace of diversity.

My UU colleague, the Rev. Shana Lynngood, also writes of UU evangelism. She says, as if standing at someone's door:

We are knocking because the world is in urgent need of our message, which says that all people matter... That the well-being of our earth is intrinsically linked with our own future; that peoples in other parts of the globe cry out for peace and we must hear and heed their cry; that people in our towns and cities cry out for food and shelter and a way of life that values ... a way that knows all souls are worthy of love. (Yes,) we stand in a long line of visionary Unitarian Universalist thinkers and believers who call to us. What they dreamed be ours to do, indeed.

By quoting one of our hymns in that last phrase, the Rev. Lynngood places the responsibility firmly on our shoulders to continue sharing the message of our forebears.

Rev. Peter Morales, current President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, also urged UU evangelism during a conference several years ago. He said:

Evangelism is the natural result of a deep belief that we Unitarian Universalists have something important and precious to offer. Evangelism is founded on the beliefs that people have a need for religious community, for deep relationships, for spiritual exploration, [and] for social involvement.

“Amen,” I say.

Evangelism may seem like a terrible practice because of its abuse by fundamentalists. I’m sure you, like me, dread those unwanted knocks on our front doors by missionaries convinced they must save our souls. But that unwanted hard-sell doesn’t have to be the face of evangelism.

Instead, we UU evangelists can willingly share why UU values matter to us or why our UU community matters to us when natural openings in conversations occur. That’s not forcing ourselves on others.

I hear you share with me and others at UUFA what you find valuable and meaningful about your involvement in this community and religious tradition. So why not spread that joy wider?

But a UU evangelist is not just someone who talks. It’s also our being in the wider community living out our values and witnessing to others what we must act with kindness, compassion, and for justice because our faith demands it of us.

Evangelism also can mean wearing our UU identity on our chests, literally. When you serve up food at Our Daily Bread, or buy local produce at the Farmer’s Market while wearing UU t-shirts or jewelry, you’re making connections in other people’s minds that this is who we are and what we do. That’s evangelism, too. And seeing our UU identity may prompt someone to ask a question about us. That’s willingly opening a door to hear our good news.

I know some of you are evangelists already. I also know some of you may be uncomfortable by my suggesting we become greater UU evangelists. But I bet you are evangelical about some other beliefs you hold. Do you talk to people about preventing climate change? Do you wear t-shirts or buttons indicating your identity with or support of some idea or group? Do you work on political campaigns or go knocking on doors to register voters? If you have evangelized other causes, and if you believe in Unitarian Universalism’s worth, then it’s not a stretch to become a UU evangelist, too.

One reason some may be reluctant to speak openly of Unitarian Universalism might be because ours is not a simple tradition to explain. It’s easy to say we have no doctrine, but that doesn’t say what we do have. Our Seven Principles help define what’s important to us, but they don’t convey what you or I individually believe or find worthy in this tradition. But when we tell our stories, reveal the love we feel for this community, and share the love that lies at the heart of Unitarian Universalism, then we’re being the best possible evangelists we can be.

It also doesn’t hurt to be ready with a 30-second answer to the general question, “What is Unitarian Universalism?” My personal quick response is “We are a covenantal religion comprised of people who share common values and embrace differing beliefs.”

But a common answer I hear from non-UUs is, “We’re the religion where you can believe anything you want.” I cringe a little at that description, because it’s not true and it sounds narcissistic and undisciplined. It’s not true because we have ethical boundaries which limit some

beliefs, though not many. And our individual search for truth and meaning must be disciplined and responsible, as our Fourth Principle states.

I'm proud of the role Unitarian Universalists have played in furthering positive social change in this country. I'm proud that we walk our talk. I'm proud that we are a great example of how to get along with people of differing beliefs. I'm proud that we welcome all people to our congregations. I know we have something to offer people looking for what we've already found, so I have no shame in admitting my faith to others.

I also know there are people who have no idea we exist but would welcome our good news. And, by brightening our beacon we may find allies in other liberal faith traditions, like Reconstructionist Jews or Cooperative Baptists, such as those who participated in the recent Interfaith Thanksgiving service. We need allies like them to make our collective voice louder in the public square and to influence important issues affecting our lives or faith communities.

Becoming a beacon matters because I believe the world will be a better place when more people share our values, whether or not they become UU's. May you be inspired by your connections to this tradition to become a greater, more visible evangelist. Together, we can make our beacon shine more brightly.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Recall a time you might describe as a 'conversion experience' when something prompted a change in your behavior. What feeling and/or belief accompanied this change?
2. What 'light' (passion, belief, etc) burns within you? How well do you share this with others?
3. Are you a UU evangelist or do you hide your UU light under a basket? How do you share (or hide) your level of commitment or identity with UUism to others?
4. How well are UUFA's beliefs and values displayed in the larger community? Should more or less be done to become a brighter beacon?