



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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

“This I Believe – Today”

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Centering Thoughts:

*I have been a seeker and I still am, but I stopped asking the books and the stars.
I started listening to the teaching of my soul. Rumi*

*It took me forty years on earth to reach this sure conclusion;
There is no Heaven but clarity, No Hell except confusion. Jan Struther*

*When your life is filled with the desire to see the holiness in everyday life,
something magical happens: ordinary life becomes extraordinary,
and the very process of life begins to nourish your soul! Rabbi Harold Kushner*

*People take different roads seeking fulfillment and happiness.
Just because they're not on your road does not mean they are lost. Dalai Lama*

Opening Words/Chalice Lighting:

The Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen –

Good morning! We continue our theme of Listening this month by listening to four members of the Fellowship share some of their beliefs. These members took part in the ‘This I Believe’ class I facilitated recently. In that class we discussed ultimate questions religions traditionally answer, such as: Does God exist? Why be good? Why am I here? Does life have purpose or meaning? What happens when I die? and more.

Unitarian Universalism provides an ethical guide in the form of our Seven Principles, but not answers to ultimate questions. Instead, we provide opportunities for you to find your own answers throughout our activities, including adult education. In this way we make real the 4th Principle which affirms and promotes every individual’s free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Our faith tradition celebrates common values as expressed in all seven Principles and it embraces diverse beliefs. Together our varied beliefs form a rich and colorful tapestry.

A seminary professor of mine once described theology as *the lens through which we see and understand the world*. One's beliefs—religious and otherwise—make up that lens. Everything we see and experience is filtered by our beliefs. Beliefs therefore matter because they influence and interpret our lives.

What does the world tell *you* is true? Are you listening?

Let us listen this morning with open hearts and minds to the truths being shared among us.

Let us light our chalice this morning for each of our searches for truth and meaning.

May this light guide our way.

Reflections:

Irene Muthe –

THIS I BELIEVE ... My religious upbringing began in the same way that many children's beliefs started. Parents and other family members were our first teachers. Eventually, church, school, and friends entered into this fray and our belief system began to develop. As I gained new insights and understanding through these various sources, I came to understand theories about God and how our life was both created and sustained.

But I was dealing with far more complex issues. First, I was first exposed to Lutheran teachings, the religion my mother was baptized in, as well as I. My second exposure was to the Russian Orthodox religion through my father, who was born in Russia and raised in the Eastern Orthodox religion. By then, I realized that there were too many religions for me to absorb and sift through. It seemed to me that every religious tenet was founded on a "holy grail" and each thought they were the only "true believers". So, I had to find my own truth. Something that made sense to me and supported my beliefs and fed my spiritual quest.

When we moved to Georgia, we came upon the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Over time, I found that many of the answers I was looking for were "there". As John Buehrens stated in his book *A Chosen Faith*, "As UU's we are free to choose our beliefs....Of course, being free, we are responsible for what we make of that freedom....Freedom may be our forge, but responsibility remains the anvil of which our faith is pounded out and turned to use."

I accept the teachings as stated in *A Chosen Faith* and I dedicate myself to 'use'. "When we employ our freedom responsibly, directly experiencing the transcending mystery and wonder of the creation, our spirits are renewed and we become open to the forces that create and uphold life."

THIS I BELIEVE!

Frank Boardman –

I grew up in a Jewish-agnostic household and as a result was never concerned with spirituality, an afterlife with heaven or hell, or punishment by a god for not observing ritual commandments. I try

to live ethically because my life is simpler and safer that way. I am not bothered by the meaning of life. I can create a meaning for myself but that does not necessarily apply to other people's actions and beliefs.

Long ago I read and became fascinated by Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Cat's Cradle" published in 1963 which describes a fictional religion invented by fictional characters in order to comfort people who go through very bad times. I have emphasized the word fictional because the inventor of the religion emphasizes in the novel that his religion is based on a pack of lies, thereby differing from other religions which claim to be true. So I feel there is nothing wrong with taking comfort in someone else's fiction for times when living rationally seems to me to be insufficient.

In this religion, the Creator of the Universe puts us into groups of people. Some of these groups are carrying out the will of the Creator. It is almost impossible for the people in the groups to know that will. They think that they are carrying out the Creator's will, for example, by doing good, but they are usually wrong in that thinking. You do not know what you are really accomplishing but when you die, the Creator will tell you what you accomplished for him or her or it.

So when I am depressed I believe that I am either entertaining the Creator with my struggles or accomplishing something for the Creator of which I am unaware, and I slowly feel better. I also believe as a corollary that the Creator of the Universe is satisfied with his (or her) world just as it is, with all the poverty and hardship and disease and killing. The Creator is entertained by following how we deal with a world that is imperfect and contains evil, just like our being entertained by "Breaking Bad" or "House of Cards".

When I have recovered I forget about all this nonsense. You don't have to ask me if I believe this nonsense is true; the answer is no. But it works as far as making me feel better and that is something the "true" religions do not do for me. My beliefs cause no harm to other people as I am not commanded to feel superior or harm non-believers in this admittedly fictional religion. There is no crime of blasphemy or heresy in this world.

John Muthe –

Raised in New England, I was introduced early to Sunday School. My early memories were simple God was "there" in church, and we "saw" him sitting in the clouds on the ornate church ceiling looking neither very friendly or loving kinda scary to a young kid. This is my journey..... Three years later, we moved and attended another Congregational Church built in 1680. I belonged to Boy Scouts, attended confirmation classes, and Sunday services regularly. Unlike Central Church, my new church was simple, and white. I accepted a liberal Christian definition of God. Attending varied churches over many years, while I "got" the liturgies, I never totally formulated my own religious philosophy. At UUFA, over the years, I've been welcomed and embraced. I discovered a genuinely spiritual environment, a dynamic Fellowship with amazing energy, and a loving environment that truly values humanity. I know "God" is in this

house! I accept there are many definitions and understandings of what “God” or a supreme being is or is not, and to me, that’s all good! I do believe however, “God” is that supreme power of the universe, the force which created the spark of life, and powers evolution. Undefined in human terms, it is greater than our human understanding. To me, a God of love, forgiveness, renewal, and life. This God gives us freedom to think and act. Approaching 80, my “belief” system is founded on both Old and New Testaments of the Bible. I have come to understand them as metaphorical Jewish “truth” written by Jews as opposed to some kind of literal “Christian” truth, and they must be understood in their original Jewish context. I believe that “God’s love is available to every person! I also believe It is not for me to judge or change people or their belief systems, but rather use the “God Spirit” within me, to better me, help me love and care more for others. I embrace “The inherent worth and dignity of every person”. This I believe!

Kathy Mason –

Good Morning. I am Kathy Mason. My husband Scott and I moved to Athens three years ago and immediately joined UUFA. We had been Methodists and Presbyterians. We lived in Greenville, SC for 10 years but are originally from the Midwest. After retirement, I started to search for greater meaning through study of other religions, the Bible, theologians, and my own intuition, which I feel has been led by guides and God. I have been trained in Reiki in Indianapolis and in Bend, Oregon where we spend part of the year with family. Reiki is application of energy. When we returned this fall, I decided to take Rev. Allison's class. I learned about Unitarian Universalism in our orientation class, but I never fully defined my beliefs. This class has been very helpful in fleshing out some beliefs, such as human nature, good and evil, God, death, and nature of reality. So, I believe –

I believe in a God or the Divine, the source of all life and love. I feel I am a person of energy in a physical body with both a personality and a soul. I believe that all, human and non-human are interconnected and life is a spiritual journey of discovery. I am walking on a spinning earth in a moving galaxy, but I believe that the spirit and love of God or the Divine is with me and in me here on earth. I may look for a God or the Divine in words, but I find God or the Divine in my every day living as I become aware and conscious of my life, my soul and my love for myself, my family and friends and the world we live in – in both the chaos and beauty of it all. My body will cease, but I feel my soul may live on. Thank you, Rev. Alison, for guiding me.

I currently have my feet in two states. However, I find a very loving community here, the opportunity to serve, and the encouragement to live shared values. I am becoming UU. This is drawing Scott and me to eventually settle in one place – here. I believe in Brené Brown’s – *Daring Greatly* book in which she encourages – to risk, to live with uncertainty and to become vulnerable. This is both a challenge and reward for me. I have a plaque given to me by a friend that says – “bloom where God plants you.” Hopefully, in the near future I can with certainty firmly plant two feet here at UU and in Athens.

Closing Words:

The Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen –

Francis David, the Transylvanian founder of the very first Unitarian Church in 1568, is attributed for saying, “We need not think alike to love alike.” Indeed, we know the world is too complex and creative to contain only one truth for all people for all time and in all places.

Let us celebrate our differences, knowing that whatever we may believe, we each carry a light within – a flame lighting our way to truth and meaning for our lives. A bright light made of spirit, energy, love and compassion, shining for all to see. Let’s sing boldly and confidently about that light. (*Followed by singing “This Little Light of Mine.”*)

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What most informs your beliefs—personal experience, external authority, intuition, or something else? Explore or describe how this source offers you wisdom, truth or meaning.
2. What are the ultimate, eternal questions you long to have answered? Why these?
3. What Source, divine or otherwise, do you draw upon when facing life’s challenges? Share a time this Source sustained you.