



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“What’s in a Word?”

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The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God. Augustine of Hippo

Science is the language of God. All else is poor translation. Rumi

Words are such gross machinery, so primitive and ambiguous. Frank Herbert

Albus Dumbledore: “Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it.” J.K. Rowling

Reflection:

Do you remember that old playground chant, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names [or words] will never hurt me”? We were to say that if we were being verbally abused or bullied.

We all probably said it, but did you believe it? We all know that names and words can hurt us emotionally, if not physically. Words can be powerful weapons. Even if they’re not used to intentionally hurt, thoughtless speech can marginalize, demoralize, and exclude.

Religious language, a specialty vocabulary, attempts to define and describe what isn’t easily described or defined. Sometimes, when a word attempts to describe an abstract concept, like God or spirituality, the word seems to trap the idea and place it in too small a cage.

I believe it’s time to let some religious words go free. I believe it’s time to let go of some assumptions and associations certain religious words may have for us. I believe we need to allow some of these words room to expand, to let their complexity breathe like fine wine. I want to open the cages and let these words fly free.

But that’s me, a humanistic religious naturalist speaking. I know expanding our vocabulary isn’t easy for some and I know it isn’t desirable for some. We UUs are as complex as that fine wine, so it will take time and we may never fully release the words from their cages.

So why do I want to try? Why use religious language when some among us find these words painful, meaningless, or somehow not UU.

I try because I want to help the religiously wounded heal. I know some of you may find religious language painful because of past religious experiences where words were used as weapons for control or shame. I hope you'll join me in exploring these words, so that you can take away their power to hurt, and perhaps to redefine them for what you believe now.

I try because I want to help those who find religious language meaningless possibly discover the complexities of the words and perhaps make new meaning of these words. And, for those who think religious language is only for those with supernatural beliefs which super-rational UUs would never affirm, I try because I hope you'll learn they have value and meaning for many among us.

If I, or we, were to avoid including words like God, prayer, worship, faith, or sin in our discourse, I believe we would be doing ourselves a disservice. By avoiding these words I think it denies who we profess to be as Unitarian Universalists. If we avoid these words, then we're likely avoiding the ideas behind these words as well. If we are to follow our Fourth Principle, the responsible search for truth and meaning, we need to engage one another with new ideas and even to question settled beliefs. Part of my job is to challenge you by questioning your assumptions, religious language included.

Though religious language is less precise than some specialized languages, like medicine or astronomy, it is a necessary tool for talking about abstract spiritual and religious ideas. And these ideas aren't just for academic, intellectual discussions with no bearing on our lives. What we believe about life, death, and what we're supposed to do with our lives matters. The answers, even the questions, help give meaning to our lives and may influence how we live the lives we're given.

If we exclude from our vocabulary words like God, worship, prayer, etc, then we're also excluding people from our congregations who find those words meaningful. I know there are some who feel excluded from our community because we *do* use some religious words. They feel their non-religious beliefs are unwelcome. Our very theological diversity creates this apparent dilemma.

Each week on the front of your order of service, we print, "Celebrating shared values and diverse beliefs." Our shared values are generally expressed in our Seven Principles, printed on the back of your program. Our diverse beliefs are drawn from various sources, generally outlined as the Six Sources, also printed on the back cover.

If we are to be truly accepting of diverse beliefs, then I believe we need to be comfortable and conversant with each other's language. To meet this challenge I try to use both religious and non-religious language in our services. When I lead the occasional prayer, I address the prayer with words that I hope will meet a variety of beliefs. I might open with, 'Spirit of Life' (for the religious humanists and mystics), and 'To all that is good in the human heart' (for the more secular humanists), and 'Gracious God known to us by many names' (for the more theistic). I hope to create an entry for every person, whatever their beliefs.

That probably just makes me an equal opportunity offender, but it's the best way I know to faithfully serve our diverse membership.

In an attempt to give equal time to the less religious among us, I changed some wording in the order of service last year. Call to Worship became Call to Shape Things of Worth. Sermon became Reflection. Benediction became Good Words for Going Forth.

Benediction means good speech, as in a blessing. A Sermon is nothing more than a thoughtful commentary on a topic that has religious, spiritual, or moral implication.

Worship means to ascribe or shape things of worth from an Old English word. We worship what we assign worth to. In Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition this usually means an idea of God. But ideas and principles can be worshiped, too, if we hold them to be of ultimate worth. Although we might not say we worship our seven Principles in the same sense that some worship a god, we do place high value on them.

Although I changed some words to describe what we do on Sunday morning, I didn't change the meaning of those elements. The change simply requires a different group to translate the words into a language meaningful to them.

Apart from what goes on within our Fellowship, I think being conversant and comfortable with religious language is vital to our engagement with other religious traditions. We need a common language for interfaith dialogue, even if our meanings differ.

One benefit of engaging with faiths outside our tradition has been for me the realization that our interpretation of certain religious words, particularly God, are not all that different. Those caged words do their best to get in the way of shared understanding. It's too easy to assume words have only one, narrow definition when they truly carry more complex nuances. If we allow it to emerge, we may see great depth and beauty in the language of reverence.

We may not like that we hold religious language and our diverse beliefs in tension with each other. But I think this is a blessing, or if you prefer, a gift of our tradition. Tension implies movement, growth, and change. It means we're thinking, feeling, reacting to, and reflecting on contrasting ideas. Hopefully, we're learning from each other. If we make room for each other's beliefs and words, we can be that shining beacon of diversity that proves to the world we can all get along.

In closing, I want to share a paragraph from a sermon delivered several years ago in Portland, Oregon, by Rev. William R. Sinkford. He said:

So much can be lost in translation. Words are imperfect tools we use to tell our story, to know our truth. If we remember their limits, perhaps we can use them to greater benefit. If we remember that we are all and always translating, listening for the words beneath the words, then perhaps we will make more time and more space to listen and even to hear. Perhaps we can come to remember and understand not just the challenge, but also the gift of our being together, and the possibility for wholeness that gift can open for us. [from 'In Translation,' <https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/translation/>]

May we be generous in spirit and welcome whatever words and meanings we long for. May we be up to the challenge of our diversity.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Is UUFA inclusive enough of diverse beliefs, from *supernaturalism* (one or more deities apart from natural law) to *naturalism* (a variation of the divine in all things or no divinity at all, however you define divinity)? Should it? Explain.
2. What religious words are emotional triggers for you, and why? Can you translate effectively to make them more meaningful for you? If you have triggers, what might lessen your reactivity?
3. How might your comfort or discomfort with certain religious words find better balance with someone else's conflicting level of comfort or discomfort?