

How to be a Unitarian Universalist Evangelist
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Cohen
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How many of you watch *The Simpsons*? Those of you who have watched the show with some regularity have probably noticed that they have the tendency to make fun of Unitarians. One of my favorite episodes with a religious twist was one in which Bart Simpson had to go live, briefly, with their neighbors, the Flanders family. Mr. and Mrs. Flanders and their two sons, Rod and Todd, are very active and enthusiastic members of the local Christian church and they do not hesitate to share their faith with others.

When Bart, the eternal troublemaker, goes to live with them, he is dismayed at how little trouble there is to be had there. Finally, he comes upon Rod and Todd playing their one video game—Bible Busters. The point of the game is to turn all the heathens, who look an awful like the stereotypical cavemen, into Christians, who then stand upright, and are suddenly wearing three piece suits and carrying Bibles. The boys do this by aiming their Bible at them and zapping them with it. Bart is, of course, used to the blood and guts video games he plays most of the time and is immediately scornful of Bible Busters. But, as you might predict, with nothing else to do it is not long before he wants to play. He takes over the controls and struggles to hit anyone. Finally, he does. “I got him! I got him!” he yells. Rod and Todd look at the screen. One of them says, “Oh. No, you just winged him. You made him a Unitarian.”

Of course, this is not quite what I am thinking of when I talk about us becoming Unitarian Universalist evangelists. I don’t think our job is to go about the world zapping people with our religious tradition, turning heathens into followers of the one true way. Nor do I believe that Unitarian Universalism is a consolation prize for those of us who couldn’t get all the way to evangelical Christianity. But, as you will soon discover, neither do I believe that we should keep our religious light under a bushel.

Evangelism, converting others to our religious tradition, has never really been one of our strong suits. In fact, we don’t really talk about conversion at all. Most people go through the religious changes that bring them through our doors long before they enter a Unitarian Universalist church. A lot of people, both those born in the faith and those who discover it later, talk of being Unitarian Universalist all their lives. Central to our tradition is respect for the religious journeys of others, so we are not likely to go out into the world and tell people that they ought to be Unitarian Universalist rather than whatever they currently are. Instead, we try to keep an open door and hope that people will find us.

That is all well and good. But the truth is, our reluctance to get the word out about who we are keeps us small. Our passiveness about sharing our faith means that many people have never heard of us, or don’t know what we are really about. This despite

what I believe is our powerful religious message—a message of openness, respect, and hope.

We never want to be about forcing our message on those who are not interested, but there is always the danger of going too far in the other direction. Being too careful. Too quiet. Our world desperately needs what we have to offer, not only so individuals can find their way into our congregations, but also so that something of our vision of peace and justice, of tolerance and respect is heard wherever human beings struggle to live together.

In all my thinking about Unitarian Universalism recently, in my reflections on the purpose of ministry and our gathering together in religious community, I have come to feel that one of the central tensions that exists in our religious tradition, as well as in others, is between the call to transform the individual and the call to transform the world. Most often we come to a religious community because of our own personal religious search, or because we are looking for connections with other people, or we are looking for religious education for our children. My hope is that our congregation is about answering those desires. But I hope it is also about more than that. I hope it is about calling us to act on our ideals and work to improve the world.

Evangelism contains within it a similar tension. Is it about bringing individual people into our churches, growing our numbers, enhancing the programs we are able to offer ourselves? Or is it about bringing something of Unitarian Universalism out into the world?

The answer to all of this is, of course, yes! Religious community is about transformation of the individual *and* transformation of the world. Evangelism is about bringing new people to Unitarian Universalism *and* about bringing Unitarian Universalism to the world.

Of course, given that we are unlikely to go from door to door, trying to get our neighbors to join us here at AUUC, we do have to figure out what it would mean to be a Unitarian Universalist evangelist. I believe it is actually quite simple. I think for us to be Unitarian Universalist evangelists we must discover our central mission, and then live that mission out as fully and publicly as possible. That's all. Discover our central mission, and then live that mission out as fully and publicly as possible. (As I said last week and the week before—simple doesn't always mean easy!)

Those of us who are here probably already have some general sense of our mission, although we might understand it or articulate it in different ways. It is probably time for us to do some work as a congregation to clarify our mission, so that we can feel confident in ourselves as a community. For me it goes something like this: our mission is to build a community, connected by love and respect, open to genuine religious exploration, where those gathered are strengthened and cared for so that they, in turn, can do the important work of love and justice in the world. Let me say that again: our mission is to build a community, connected by love and respect, open to genuine religious exploration, where those gathered are strengthened and cared for so that

they, in turn, can do the important work of love and justice in the world. You may not agree with this completely, but I hope we are at least in the same ballpark. Either way, I hope this will begin to get us all thinking about the mission of this religious community and of Unitarian Universalism in general.

To be Unitarian Universalist evangelists, we need to do nothing more and nothing less than live out this mission as fully and as publicly as we can. There are two main elements to this—what we do here in this congregation, and what we do in the wider world. Both are equally as important.

Here, we must continue to build the loving, respectful, open community that is a safe place for people to explore the questions at the heart of our lives—who are we? why are we here? what truly matters? what can we learn from our inevitable deaths? what do we believe about the sacred in our lives? We must be willing not only to ask these questions, but to try to answer them as well. We must learn how to live with one another even when our answers differ. We must be willing to make connections with each other across the boundaries of difference, whatever they may be. We are not true to our vision if those who differ from the majority because of education level, or socioeconomic status, or age, or race, or gender identity, or sexual orientation, or family make-up feel somehow excluded based on that difference. We must be willing to welcome the stranger, whoever he or she is.

This warm and welcoming community is not going to be created by other people for us. *We* must do it. Church is like just about everything else in the world, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it.

I've been watching a lot of the Olympics this year, really for the first time. (I have to admit—I think the men's short track speed skating relay is my new favorite sport.) It is absolutely awe-inspiring to see what the human body can do. It's almost impossible not to envy the grace and strength of the athletes. Most of them do, of course, have some inborn talent and drive that the majority of us do not have. And yet, they are there only because they have given their lives to the pursuit of their sport. They were given the gift of talent, yes, but they have also made a decision to make the absolute most of that talent by pouring their time, energy, and love into it.

I am not saying that everyone should approach church with the intensity that Olympic athletes approach their sports. But I *am* saying that connection to a religious community and a deep and meaningful spiritual life are not things that happen to us simply because we want them to, or because we show up in church two or three Sundays a month. They happen because we work with others to *make* them happen.

The leadership of the church is working on developing new avenues to help people deepen their connection to each other and develop more fully their religious faith. You will be hearing more about this and we will be asking for your help. But even now, there are plenty of opportunities to create this kind of religious community.

I have challenged some of the leadership of the church to meet someone they have never met before each and every Sunday. I would extend this challenge to all of you,

whether you have been here for twenty-one years or are here for the first time this morning. One of the most powerful things we can do in this world is introduce people to each other. Let us begin that here, now, with each other.

There are lots of opportunities to explore our religious beliefs and deepen our own spiritual lives, from taking an adult education class to teaching children's religious education. From joining the choir to participating in some of the events sponsored by the Social Concerns Committee. The more you commit yourselves to this community, the more you will get out of it. The more we all commit to it, the closer we will come to living out our mission.

The second part of our mission involves our presence beyond this congregation. Our presence in the local community, in the nation, and in the wider world. We Unitarian Universalists are a relatively small group—just over a thousand congregations, under 200,000 adult members throughout the world. And yet, we have presence far beyond what our numbers might suggest. And I believe that our potential to be a force for good in the world goes far beyond what we are doing now.

These days the challenges of creating peace and justice in the world are front and center, as we watch Afghanistan struggle to recover from the recent and not so recent turmoil; as once again, the Middle East dissolves into violence and angry rhetoric; as even the Olympics becomes a place to play out the tensions of long-existing rivalries and anxieties. The rise of fundamentalisms of all sorts all around the world at the same time that we are becoming more and more aware of how small the world is and how interconnected we truly are is a challenge almost beyond comprehension; one that threatens all hope for true peace and justice.

It is, in many ways, in response to this new sense of connectedness and change that these fundamentalisms have arisen. One way to respond to the wider and wider views that the world offers us is to shut down, to close our eyes, to cling to one way and one way only of understanding the world. As we have learned, this is a dangerous thing to do. Dangerous for everyone.

Unitarian Universalism offers a different perspective. Perhaps what we have to offer to the world, more than anything else, is our belief that it is possible to live with pluralism. And not just live with it, but to *thrive* in the midst of it. What we are trying to do in our small congregations is a microcosm of what we all need to learn to do on the grand scale—respect and accept difference, learn from one another, be willing to be challenged and changed.

We share with many people a vision of a world of justice and peace, a world free of oppression and poverty and hunger. What we have that is uniquely our own is our goal and experience of embracing ambiguity and pluralism, even when it challenges the foundations of our own individual world understandings. I cannot think of a time in human history when the world needed this message more—that living in the midst of diversity and change is not only possible, it can be wonderful.

We need to bring this message to the wider world by talking about our experiences in our religious communities, by telling people who we are and what we are about. We need to *show* people who we are by how we live in the world. We will not change everyone to our perspective, nor would we want to, but having lived in our own pluralism for some time now, we have learned something about what it takes. And the world desperately needs our wisdom.

We need not only to live out our values as individuals, but to do so as a group and to name it as Unitarian Universalism. The times when our religious tradition has grown the most were in the early years, when many Unitarians and Universalists were actively part of the work to abolish slavery, and in the mid part of this century, when Unitarian Universalists played central and visible roles in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. People knew about us because we were out there in the world, living our religious faith in full view of everyone.

This is a challenge, and was then as well, because we never have full agreement on any issue facing our world, especially the ones that inspire great passion and sacrifice. And yet, if we stay quiet or act as individuals without making a connection to our faith, we may do some good, but Unitarian Universalism will not only disappear from public view and perhaps from relevance in the world, it will also lose much of its inherent power.

I've been working all along with the assumption that being a Unitarian Universalist evangelist is a good thing, something to which we should aspire. Some of you may not buy into that basic assumption; some of you may be wondering why we would want to do any of this in the first place. Aren't things fine just the way they are?

I invite you to think back about when you first discovered Unitarian Universalism, or decided that this tradition was the one for you, or came to realize what you had been given by being raised Unitarian or Universalist. Think about how that felt, to know that there was this religious community that could provide us with what we were looking for, that valued us for who we are as whole people, where our membership did not depend on subscribing to particular beliefs but rather on our willingness to genuinely engage with life.

Given that experience and how powerful it was then and remains today, how could we not want to proclaim it to the world? How could we not want to offer that same experience, that same feeling of homecoming to all those out there who are searching for a religious community?

Evangelism is not about growth for growth's sake. It is not about bringing in more people so we can pay our mortgage more quickly. It is not about convincing people we are right. It is about believing so passionately in our religious message and in what we have to offer others that we cannot stay silent. We do not become Unitarian Universalist evangelists to increase our numbers but because we are called to live out our mission as best we can and part of the living out of our mission is to let others know who we are and what we are about, not only by talking about it, but by doing it.

Of course, if we do this, if we begin to fulfill this mission both within our own congregation and also out in the world, and if we do it well, we *will* grow as people are drawn to the power of our message and the way we live it out. This will not always be easy, and sometimes the challenge of this growth will be so much that we will be tempted to retreat back, putting our light under the bushel once again.

One of the things that happens when people discover Unitarian Universalism or even a particular Unitarian Universalist congregation, is that we fall in love with it to such a degree, that often we don't want it ever to change. We get familiar with the people that we know, with particular ways of doing worship or functioning as a community and, despite our commitment to openness, we find that we don't want to do things differently. That we want to stay the same size, to keep things safe and familiar. And so, consciously or unconsciously, we resist the power of our own message or we resist sharing it with others because we are afraid of the changes that growth might bring. Perhaps we aren't as welcoming as we might be. Perhaps we talk only with the people we already know, not making the effort to meet new people. Perhaps we use insider language, or tell stories in a way that leaves out those who weren't there when it happened.

At the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tampa, Florida, the cover of the order of service each week says, "You are welcome through these doors as long as you do not close them behind you to another." I would hope this hold true here at AUUC as well. People are thirsting for our message of hope, for the experience of being welcomed into a community that is open to their particular religious search. The world is thirsting for our faith in humanity's ability to live together despite our differences. I believe that the way to express our gratitude for having found this religious home for ourselves, is to share it with others in whatever way we can. To say that people will find us if they need us is to fail to live up to our mission of bringing the experience of this loving, hopeful, open religious tradition to the world.

We will be challenged, not just to continue our religious search, but to continually meet new people, to be a part of a religious community that isn't the same as it was when we joined it, to find space for all the people who want join with us, to live out our faith in a way that takes time, energy, money, and love. But we will be rewarded by offering others the opportunity to share in this powerful religious message, by feeling a deeper connection with those who gather with us in this community, and by knowing that we have truly come to live out our religious mission.

I hope that we will all find ways in our lives, both within the congregation and in the wider world, to be Unitarian Universalist evangelists, that our religious faith may live up to the power of its message.

May it be so. Amen.