

*Claiming our Religious Identity*  
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Cohen  
Sunday, September 18, 2005  
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church

READINGS

from the Introduction to *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (1989) by Forrest Church (and John Buehrens)

Equating theology and autobiography may be somewhat facile, but less so perhaps for Unitarian Universalists than for followers of other faiths. For most of us, our faith did not choose us, we chose it. Born Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, or into a secular or “mixed” household, when it came time for us to affiliate with a religious institution we sought one that fit our own thinking, not one that imposed its thinking on us. This is even true for individuals born into Unitarian Universalist families. In our religious education programs, though we place special emphasis on liberal religious traditions and values, we also introduce our children to many different religious and theological approaches, encouraging them to formulate their own beliefs and make their own commitments.

Unitarian Universalists are neither a chosen people nor a people whose choices are made for them by theological authorities—ancient or otherwise. We are a people who choose. Ours is a faith whose authority is grounded in contemporary experience, not ancient revelation. Though we find ourselves naturally drawn to the teachings of our adopted forebears, these teachings echo with new insights, insights of our own. Ralph Waldo Emerson did not seek disciples; he sought people who could use their minds and tap their souls as profoundly as he did. In a Unitarian Universalist church, revelation is an ongoing process; each of us is a potential harbinger of meaning. (p. xx-xxi)

from *Engaging our Theological Diversity* by the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association

The roots of both Unitarianism and Universalism are historically Christian. That the majority of Unitarian Universalists today do not personally identify themselves as Christian does not change the fact of our origins. Furthermore, we have remained culturally Protestant, especially in our forms of worship, even as the focus of our worship (and even our use of the word *worship*) has changed. Despite this, negative reactions toward Christianity or anything identified as Christian are common in many if not most UU congregations. Many will read almost any scripture but the Bible. Although we may pay lip service to valuing our Christian heritage, we shy away from it in practice.

Denying our roots is not helpful to our perceptions of ourselves in either theory or practice. Such denial tends to make us react (even overreact) rather than respond to challenges. This can be a serious hindrance to the coalition building that needs to take place within the constellation of liberal religious traditions in an era of growing conservatism. It cuts UUs off from partaking fully of the wisdom to found in the teachings of Jesus. And it makes us less welcoming to those whose minds are open, whose search is not done, but whose values have been shaped by that preacher’s message—whether such people are inside our ranks already or not.

More generally, since feeling embattled or marginalized is not unique to UU humanists any more than to UU Christians or those of other deeply held beliefs, we need to address directly the fact that many come to our doors bearing the wounds of past encounters with organized religion. When those wounds go unrecognized, we foster the conditions for continued theological reactivity within our congregations...

A more recent phenomenon, which the Commission has come to label exoticism, is in effect the obverse of the reactivity mentioned above. Most commonly, while reactivity leads to dismissive attitudes toward Christianity, exoticism leads to an uncritical acceptance of other, less familiar traditions such as Buddhism or Hinduism. Both attitudes work against the thoughtfulness required for the accomplishment of true pluralism. (p. 147)

## SERMON

According to a poll in a recent Newsweek magazine article on spirituality in America, twenty percent of adults have changed religious faiths since childhood and an additional four percent have stopped affiliating with any religious tradition at all. The article also reflects that even many of those who remain within the faith of their childhoods have experienced some shifts in belief and/or practice.

This is not unfamiliar territory for those of us who gather here in this, or any, Unitarian Universalist congregation. Unitarian Universalism, as Forrest Church writes, is a chosen faith. More than eighty percent of the adults in this and other UU congregations have come to this faith as adults. Even those of us who did grow up here, in this tradition, have known shifts in our religious thinking and practice, and have had, at least once, the experience of choosing Unitarian Universalism for ourselves.

For me, this journey has been about as simple as it gets. I grew up Unitarian Universalist and (with a brief vacation from church during my college years) never really looked anywhere else. Though I can recall moments of choice—the return to church after my college graduation, the decision to go into the Unitarian Universalist ministry—I will acknowledge that my experience has been decidedly different from most of yours. I have always known I was Unitarian Universalist.

I know that, for many of you, finding this place and knowing it to be your religious home feels like the culmination of a long and sometimes difficult journey. I know that some of you have had to let go of the faith of your family in order to be a part of this community, and that that can be a painful decision that doesn't always go over well. I have heard again and again expressions of gratitude and relief at finding a place of religious openness and exploration. I have heard people talk of a feeling of arrival and the completion of a search.

If you have been looking for a long time and are breathing a sigh of relief to be in this place and with these people, I am glad you have found us. I am glad you are here. If you need time just to rest, to celebrate, to make yourself at home, I hope you will do so. You are welcome here.

But the welcome we offer is not a simple one. Indeed, our welcome is reflected well in these words by Walt Whitman;

*Listen! I will be honest with you. I do not offer you the old smooth prizes, but offer rough, new prizes. These are the days that must happen to you. You shall not heap up what is called riches. You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve. However sweet the laid up stores, however convenient the*

*dwelling, you shall not remain there. However sheltered the port, and however calm the waters, you shall not anchor there. However welcome the hospitality that welcomes you, you are not permitted to receive it but a little while. Afoot and lighthearted, take to the open road, healthy, free, the world before you. The long brown path before you, leading wherever you choose. Say only to one another: "Comrade, I give you my hand! I give you my love more precious than money. I give you myself before preaching and law. Will you give me yourself? Will you travel with me? Shall we stick together, by each other, as long as we shall live?"*

You see, the choice of becoming a part of this religious community is only a beginning. Your journey is not over. None of our journeys is over. Choosing Unitarian Universalism is a first step, but there is much more to do in order to truly and fully claim our religious identity. I know this has been and continues to be true for me. I believe that it is also true for us a religious faith tradition. Not only do we each have work to do and discoveries to make about what it means to be individual Unitarian Universalists, but, as a denomination, we have work to do to understand who we are collectively, what holds us together as religious community.

I believe that the first thing that we have to do, both individually and together, is make peace with our religious past. For some of us this is an easy thing, for others much more difficult. For us as a community and a denomination it is quite complicated. And all of it is deeply interconnected.

It is only recently that I have realized that even I, as a third generation Unitarian Universalist, have work to do in this area. Part of what I focused on during my sabbatical time was learning about my Jewish heritage, which comes to me through my father's family, and exploring how it impacts my religious identity and ministry today.

When I first talked about this endeavor, both to you and to myself, I presented it in a fairly detached way, almost as an intellectual exercise. The truth, as I learned, is far different from that. I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that I actually had a lot of emotions connected with the question of my Jewish background.

On some level I was aware of this. Aware of the guilt I feel for the ways in which I *didn't* feel connected to Judaism. Aware of the longing I feel for the ritual and tradition that so permeate Judaism and which I often find lacking in Unitarian Universalism. Aware of my anger at those times I experience the cultural marginalization that still comes with being Jewish in this country. But I hadn't gotten far in really recognizing all of this, let alone understanding how it affects my religious identity and practice today.

With some time and some effort during this last year, I understand this all a bit more fully.

Probably the most significant moment in this journey thus far was the conversation I had with my grandmother's cousin, Maxine. She showed me the marriage certificate and citizenship paper of my great-great grandfather who came to this country in the mid part of the nineteenth century. More importantly, she shared with me what she knew of the story of the family, from immigration through the Lower East Side, to Brooklyn, to Queens, to Long Island. A common trajectory for the many. What she described was a family working as hard as possible to become assimilated into American culture.

There wasn't any question of stopping being Jewish. Until this generation, such a thing wasn't really possible. But my recent ancestors' Judaism was primarily a cultural identity, not a religious one—the rituals and traditions and affiliation with a religious community become less and less important with each generation.

Suddenly, my own sense of disconnection from Judaism made more sense. Even talking more deeply with my parents helped me understand this. I admit I was a little surprised when my father described that when my parents met and got married neither of them was religiously active and they never really even talked about the role of religion in their lives and their future children's lives. (It just goes to show, you never know what is going to happen!)

At the same time, I was interested to hear about the generations that came before me and understand more how their Jewishness was something that just was. There was no choice involved, one way or another. Whether or not they kept kosher, went to temple, or any of the rest of it really didn't matter. They were, and always would be, Jewish.

This is much less true for most people in my generation but there is enough of that reality left to explain the reaction I have whenever I think about, learn about, or hear about the Holocaust. I am certainly Jewish enough to have been a target of the Nazis, to have been forced to leave my home country or be sent to a concentration camp. There is no doubt that distant members of my family were. It is in these moments when I feel most Jewish, when I am aware of this heritage I cannot and in fact do not want to deny. It is in these moments when I come to feel like I have some claim to the richness of Judaism and it is indeed part of who I am.

All of us have such stories, stories of religious challenge, of connection and disconnection, of hurt and hope. For those whose religious childhoods were difficult or painful, it is tempting to try to leave them completely behind, the same way we as Unitarian Universalists have sometimes tried to leave our collective Christian heritage behind. The problem is—it doesn't work. And not only doesn't it work, but, however much we want to leave our past behind, I believe we lose out when we do so. Almost all of us will find in our religious past gifts for our present and future, if we are open to them.

I believe the Commission on Appraisal is right. To move forward in our religious journeys, we must come to terms with our past. We must understand what is understandable, fully let go of what we want to leave behind, and realize that we are who we are in part because of who we were. Unitarian Universalism would not exist without our Christian roots, and there is much there to be valued and celebrated, even as we move beyond its limits. If we do not do this work first, we limit what is open to us as we move forward.

Many of the central elements of Unitarian Universalism make sense only when we understand our Christian roots. The focus on this world rather than the next; the understanding of Jesus as prophet and teacher rather than the Savior and the son of God; the emphasis on what we do and how we live rather than what we believe; our reluctance to use much ritual in our worship; our faith in the potential of humanity—all of these things arose from a Christian context and in conversation with other ways of interpreting the Christian message.

Yes, many of us have chafed under traditional Christianity's limitations, but I believe we will only be strengthened if we claim our Christian roots proudly. If we explore together how they have shaped us and what pieces continue to be a part of our religious belief and practice. This will help us as well in our interfaith work as we are able to claim common ground with liberal Christians rather than always needing to distance ourselves as much as possible.

Separation is an important part of growth. Separation from our parents is how we begin the move toward adulthood. But, as we know from experience, some form of reconnection and integration, or understanding and acceptance is almost always necessary for full adulthood. The

same is true for us religiously. And so this work with our religious past, both as individuals and as a faith tradition, is essential in order to fully claim our religious identity in the here and now.

The next stage of our religious development involves exploring fully where we are now. Understanding more about what brought us here, we can now turn to what we want out of our religious and spiritual life in this moment. Are we here because we are in crisis and need care and guidance? Are we here with questions—about life and death, about meaning and hope, about who we are and why we are on this earth?

Are we here because we are looking for a place to put our gifts to use, both inside and outside this religious community? Are we here because we looking for support in living a life of authenticity and usefulness? Are we here because we are longing for connection and community, for real relationships in an all too often virtual world?

Once we know what we are looking for, at least in this moment, we can ask how being a Unitarian Universalist responds to these questions, these needs, these hopes. Part of this work is coming to understand more fully Unitarian Universalism itself.

I love hearing about members of this community who visit other Unitarian Universalist congregations when they are traveling. What they quickly realize is both how similar and how different all these congregations are from each other. I have been a part of this faith tradition for thirty-four years and I still am often unsure about who we are at our core and what it really means, beyond affiliation with a congregation, to claim Unitarian Universalism as my own.

We try to describe Unitarian Universalism in a variety of ways, some more helpful and accurate than others. I have heard people say it is not possible to be Unitarian Universalist and anti-abortion, or that it is un-Unitarian Universalist to hold people accountable to their commitments, or that being Unitarian Universalist means everyone can believe whatever they want. I believe all of these particular statements are wrong, but none of them is uncommon within our congregations.

There are boundaries to our tradition and to our communities. For the most part, we allow people to choose for themselves whether to opt in or opt out, but it is not true that everything is welcome here or that anything goes within our congregations. Yes, the boundaries are flexible, and permeable, and change over time. But they are there and we need to come to understand them together.

We need to talk about what our values lead us to promise about how we treat each other in community. We need to talk about how we will work through our disappointments and our hurts. We need to know that setting limits does not violate our religious values, though how and when we do it matters a great deal.

We also have to explore together the boundaries around religious belief and practice. Again these boundaries are flexible, permeable, and changeable. But they are there and we need to learn to take risks and talk about them directly. What do we have in common religiously and theologically besides that we have all claimed ourselves to be a part of this Unitarian Universalist tradition?

Yes, we have come here because it feels right, because no particular way of thinking, believing, or practicing will be forced upon us here. At the same time, we have joined a religious tradition already in progress. One with a history of its own, with pre-existing norms and understandings, stories and rituals. Yes, we are small enough and open enough that our presence has the potential

to shift these things, but this faith will never belong to us to do with what we will. In this brief time that we are caretakers of this faith, we owe much to those who came before us and those who will follow. We are in this together and none of us can expect that our wishes and our perspective will prevail at every turn. Such is life in community.

Which brings me to the future. One of the basic understandings of Unitarian Universalism is that faith is evolutionary. Like everything else I have talked about today, it is evolutionary both in the small scale, as each of us grows and develops in our faith and beliefs about the world; and in the large scale, as Unitarian Universalism grows and develops and new understandings and discoveries become a part of who we are collectively.

I would guess that a majority of people who come to Unitarian Universalism have, in the words of Forrest Church, *sought [a religious community] that fit our own thinking, not one that imposed its thinking on us*. This is fine as far as it goes. But we should also be looking for a religious community that challenges our thinking to change, to grow, to open us to new insights and practices.

As with everything else in life, if we are too comfortable here, something is wrong. If we are completely at ease in this community, then this community is not doing its job. I would venture to say that none of us always lives up to our ideals, none of us knows all that might be known. Perhaps here we can offer each other both the challenge and the freedom to take further steps on our journey.

It seems that at some point in recent history, integrity and strength seem to have come to mean never changing one's mind, being completely certain and unwavering in one's belief. This is not integrity. This is not strength. Strength comes in the having the courage to have our beliefs challenged by the beliefs of others and in being open to changing our beliefs in the face of these challenges; integrity comes with having the humility to acknowledge that we are not always right. Part of choosing Unitarian Universalism for ourselves means choosing an evolutionary approach to faith. Our beliefs will change and Unitarian Universalism itself will change. It will not always be what it was when we first walked in the doors. That can be a painful realization, particularly if we and our faith tradition move in different directions.

Taking this risk is part of what being Unitarian Universalist means. If what we are looking for is a place where we will always be comfortable, where everything we believe is always affirmed and shared by everyone around us, we are in this wrong place. This is not an easy thing to live with, particularly if we have left another religion because we did not always agree with it.

All of this may seem like an awful lot of work. I can imagine that you might be thinking, "Don't we all have enough to do without all this work just to be a part of this religious community?" Perhaps. I am not claiming that any of us will fully live up to this ideal of religious living. But I do believe that part of claiming our religious identity as Unitarian Universalists is claiming for ourselves this journey. A journey where walking through the door and knowing ourselves to be at home here is merely one step along the way. A journey whose destination is unknown and, in the end, perhaps of little importance. A journey that, as we travel it as best we can, will help us to live as close to our ideals as we can and will provide us with a sense of both belonging and meaning which will offers us both roots and wings as we move into the future.

Amen.