

“But the Words Get in the Way”
February 25, 2018

Rev. Nancy O. Arnold
UU Congregation of Danbury

It is quite challenging to be a Unitarian Universalist. There is no set creed which everyone accepts. What we are called to do is to accept and encourage one another in our spiritual growth as individuals and as congregations. Ours is a principled faith. The Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes guide us in our individual search for truth and meaning, as does your own Mission statement. That we choose to search for truth and meaning in a congregation such as this is significant. It's a lot easier to search for truth privately, knowing that ours is the one true path. Instead, we choose to join a congregation of people that both accepts and challenges us in our quest for truth.

Newcomers to our congregations are delighted, and sometimes puzzled, by how it is we function as churches, or even “worship,” when there are no set beliefs that bind us together in faith. There – in one sentence, I've used three words that often cause upset in UU circles. *Church*, *worship*, and *faith*. Sometimes I use these very intentionally as a way of opening the door to deeper conversation. The response gives me an opportunity to explain what I – as a Unitarian Universalist minister – mean when I say those words.

“Church” simply means the gathering of people who worship together. That's the definition given it by the Puritans, our Unitarian forebears in this country. The Church is the gathering of people who worship together. Church is the people, not the building. The building is called a meetinghouse (at least in most of New England).

To some people, “worship” implies adoring some deity. In fact, the word “worship” means to ascribe worth to something. When we come together in worship, we celebrate what we value most – for many of us, it is this gathering of people in fellowship that we value most.

“Faith,” has a connotation of being a commitment to, or belief in, a deity. When addressing Coming of Age youth, I help them get at the source of their faith by asking the question: “In what do you place your trust?” Trust is at the heart of faith.

When we gather together as people of faith, we covenant with one another to form a congregation, just as the Puritans did. “We do bynde ourselves... to walke together” (from the *Cambridge Platform*, 1648) that is the covenant out of which our Unitarian congregations grew. The covenant – another word that sometimes gives UUs pause – the covenant – is the promise we make to one another, as members of the same congregation.

Universalists, the heart complement to the Unitarian head, had a very different experience. Until the consolidation of the two religions in 1961, Universalists were more Christian focused. They were liberal Christians who placed great emphasis on creating the kingdom of God here on earth through their social justice work. Their roots in God and Jesus were expressed from the heart. For them, worship was a time to gather joyfully in song, prayer, and ritual such as Communion.

The origin of this Congregation was the First Universalist Society of Danbury organized in 1822. It is the second oldest church in the Unitarian Universalist Metro New York area, and among the early UU churches formed in the state of Connecticut.

So we brought together these two similar, but distinct, traditions to create one whole. In the process, some things were lost, or cast aside. The Universalists greatest fear about the merger was that they would lose their Christian identity to the very rational Unitarians. And, indeed, that is exactly what happened. The Universalists were subsumed by the Unitarians and gave up many of the practices they valued most: prayer, ritual, and good old-fashioned hymn singing. But they brought to the union *their* covenant – they are here to serve the greater good of the whole. *The congregation is not here to serve them – they are here to serve it.*

The covenant is what binds us together. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes are set forth as a covenant: *We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...* The covenant is central to our faith, as my colleague Tom Owen-Towle describes it in “Pledging our Troth:”

As a religious heritage bonded not by creed, confession, or common prayer but by covenant, Unitarian Universalists vow to stay at the table long enough to understand one another and mold a viable community. Ours is a fellowship united not by law but by loyalty, by faithfulness of vows rather than sameness of beliefs. We promise to hold and be held by one another. We pledge our troth or trust. Fidelity, internal discipline, and mutual responsibility are required in a covenantal faith in order to work out our differences together. (Tom Owen-Towle, *Freethinking Mystics with Hands*)

You can see why it is such a challenge to be a Unitarian Universalist. Everything is open to question and discussion. Certain words just seem to require more explanation than others. For example, I am often asked to explain my definition of God. Only Unitarian Universalists would even consider that God requires our definition. The word God evokes strong feelings among us. I know this. And yet, I sometimes forget that until someone reminds me of it.

When is a word more than just a word? When the word is a symbol for something else. Words carry power with them. And sometimes the words get in the way of keeping our covenant. In our third UU Principle, we covenant to “affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Your *Mission Statement* says that you are: “an open religious community that welcomes a diversity of people, ideas, and beliefs.” You “celebrate that which is good in life, and offer comfort and care in times of need. With others, (you) work to create a just society and a sustainable Earth.” And you “stand as a beacon for independent thought, and encourage lifelong spiritual and intellectual exploration.”

Unitarian Universalists honor “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” We don’t say that we have all the answers. We don’t say that we are perfect at accepting one another. We simply say that we affirm, we promote, we encourage, and we honor one another in our spiritual growth and our search for truth and meaning.

When we gather as a congregation, how is it we can actually encourage one another in our spiritual growth?

With great difficulty. We are atheists, humanists, deists, theists, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and pagans who gather together as Unitarian Universalists. We come together to worship, seeking a common thread that binds us as a congregation. To say that creating unified worship is a “challenge” in such a congregation is an understatement. With all the theological diversity we embrace, how can we nurture one another’s spiritual growth while remaining true to our own individual beliefs?

Experience tells me that it's difficult. We speak different languages. When we enter a Unitarian Universalist meetinghouse, we bring with us our varied pasts. We bring with us memories of childhood and family relationships. We bring with us all the religious experiences that have shaped us. We have among us people who grew up in a liberal religious congregation. We have among us people who were molded by fundamentalists. And we have among us those who grew up with no formal religious training. What we bring to this place are our varied pasts and our expectations for what we hope to become. We embrace the Unitarian Universalist principles as a way of being in the world. And yet, we cannot escape the prejudices and personal politics that have shaped our lives.

Most of us probably would not be comfortable in a church that avows there is only one truth, found in the Bible through the message of Jesus Christ and his disciples. There is no attempt to be inclusive of varied religious beliefs. If anything, we go out of our way not to impose our beliefs on others. But I want to suggest that in our own way, we can be just as filled with the sense of our own rightness; with a sense of our own righteousness.

We would not presume to tell someone what to believe. But what happens when someone tells us that she or he is a Unitarian Universalist Christian? How do we react inside? Does something in us recoil?

If someone suggests that God exists, do we think them weak? Do we assume they need a "crutch" in order to live?

And, if someone chooses to pray as a way of being connected to something greater than themselves, do we think them irrational?

Words that we carry with us from past traditions may evoke reactions and feelings that we are not even aware we harbor. Words like "communion," "sin," "ritual," "sacrament," "God," "worship," and "church" are imbued with our own histories. We give them meaning from our own experiences. We struggle to be accepting and encouraging of one another in our spiritual growth. But the words get in the way...

Jacob Trapp said that "If it is language that makes us human, then one-half of language is to listen." How well do we listen – and talk – to one another about our own spiritual journeys? Not very well. "If it is language that makes us human, then one-half of language is to listen." We need to start by listening to ourselves. What are the voices we carry within us from the past? What words haunt us as we hear another's story?

When someone tells us how important pagan, or earth-centered ritual is to their spiritual life – what feelings are aroused? What is it we hear when someone speaks of breaking bread in communion? And what feeling is evoked when we hear the word "God" or "Goddess?"

If I tell you that I believe in *Love* as the basis for all relationship, *Love* as the creative source of our power, *Love* as our common strength, how many of you would agree?

Now, how many of you would agree when I say that I believe in *God* as the basis for all relationship, *God* as the creative source of our power, *God* as our common strength? I can see some of you thinking. "What does she mean by *God*?" you want to know. "Define your terms," you say. Okay – what if I say that I believe in "a god whose name... is love?" (Carter Heyward)

The word "God" carries with it many connotations. Authoritative. Punishing. Judging. Loving. Comforting. Like many words that have passed through the generations of prophets, God became different things at different times. We try to respect the religious views of those who worship a God different from ours. A God that would instruct someone to kill another human being in the name of religion is one that gives God *and* religion a bad name. I do not

believe that we must respect or tolerate such a God. We can only try to understand *the person* who acts on behalf of such a God.

Our roots as Unitarian Universalists are in oneness. The oneness of God as Love. Our Unitarian Universalist history claims “a god whose name in history is love,” as theologian Carter Heyward put it. Universalists believe that *God is Love*.

When I first came to a Unitarian Universalist congregation forty-three years ago I could not use the word “God,” even when singing hymns. I could not shake my childhood image of God as judging parent who wanted to punish me. But something changed. And it wasn’t just me. God changed. And that was a good thing. It meant that God was not static. If God could change, that meant I could change too. God changed from being a punishing judge, to being a comforting Grandmother God, made in the image of my own grandmother. God became a loving comfort and creative source in relationship. (In fact, now I experience God most through my relationships with other people.)

I had to learn to relate to my childhood God as an adult. The adult in me was judging and intolerant. Not the child. The child was capable of clarity and compassion. But she had been judged harshly and hurt by religion in the name of God.

It was easier for a time to discard God. There was no need for God the parent, the crutch, or the judge. I was perfectly capable of judging myself much more harshly than any God ever would! And that is what I fear many of us Unitarian Universalists do. We judge ourselves, and we judge others, by the childhood standard we think we have rejected. But what I have learned is that rejecting the past doesn’t work. We cannot reject the past, without rejecting a part of ourselves.

Words have power because we give them power with our beliefs. We cannot accept and encourage the spiritual growth of another when we reject the very words and concepts that sustain them. And, we cannot accept others without first accepting ourselves.

How can we nurture one another in our spiritual growth, if we are stunted in our own? How are we to encourage each other as spiritual beings when we can’t even get past the words?

We can start by listening to the people behind the words. Words that evoke a response in us are telling us something about ourselves. We may have unfinished business around old words and concepts. We may need to comfort the judge in us that rejects a past tradition. And, we may need to hear what the judge is really telling us before we can reconcile our past. We can listen to the judging voice within ourselves that wants to discount what we hear. We can remember that we are the people behind the words.

Accepting ourselves and one another is harder than adopting any creed might be. As spiritual beings on a human journey it might be helpful to have a few rules to guide us. But there are no concrete rules for being. We are simply present to each other, in the way we are present to ourselves.

It’s telling that as a Congregation, you don’t have a behavioral covenant. The *Purposes* outlined in your Bylaws (Article II, Section 1) and *Mission Statement* present what you aspire to be as a Congregation. A behavioral covenant expresses *how* you will make that happen – together.

To covenant with one another, you must first trust each other. There is no mention of “trust” in any of your documents. Instead, you use words like “celebrate”, “work,” “stand,”

“freedom,” and “affirm and promote.” I hope that when your new minister arrives, you will create a behavioral covenant, to guide your ministry together, and to ground it in trust.

Tom Owen-Towle suggests that when we join a Unitarian Universalist congregation, with its

common history, shared liturgical practices, and binding ethical principles... we admit that... we are not solitary figures, we are *communitarians*... We don't need to trust if we never seek permanent bonds while wandering this earth. But trust is necessary for those who choose ... (Owen-Towle, p. 21, *emphasis* mine)

the partnered path of living in covenant. To trust each other, we must know each other, accept and honor each other, in all our humanness. Sometimes the words will get in the way. But if we can allow the words to become gateways to greater understanding and deeper community, we will be accepting and encouraging of each other in our spiritual growth. And we may come to know each other – and ourselves – as if for the first time.