It Matters

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
November 1, 2026

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Recently I was reminded of a comic strip that I'm told appeared in the Boston Globe some time ago. It depicted a man at a drive through window at a fictitious fast food joint called "MacCatholics":

"I'd like a burger, but hold the guilt." says the man.

To which a priest in the window responds, "I'm sorry, we don't do special orders."

The man counters, "But what about your motto, 'Have it your way?"

"Oh no", says the priest, "You're thinking of 'Unitarian King' across the street!"
Now, it is true freedom is a hallmark of Unitarian Universalism. And it is also true, that cherished as this freedom is by its members, it also the butt of many jokes and consequently, serious misunderstanding. The most common of which is heard from the lips of members and non-members alike, "In Unitarian Universalism you can believe whatever you want." But is this really religion your way?

Our history suggests otherwise.

As Sophia Lyon Fahs observed…

Some beliefs…

"Are like walled gardens…or like shadows…some are divisive…or like blinders…some weaken a person's selfhood…and are rigid."

While other beliefs…

"Are expansive…like sunshine…are bonds…or like gateways…some nurture self-confidence…and are pliable."

Fah's reminds us even in religion your way, "It matters what we believe."

It also matters how we get there.

Indeed, one significant difference between Unitarian Universalism and many other, even outwardly similar faiths, is not that we can believe whatever we want (we can't) or that we don't have any beliefs (we do), but how we arrive at and live our beliefs.

Ours is not, for the most part, a received or revealed faith, but a discerned, chosen faith. And so, the freedom we enjoy and defend in Unitarian Universalism is an important prerequisite to forming and living our beliefs.

Still, if we make Unitarian Universalism only about freedom, we risk replicating in our religion, a common consumer dilemma.

Indeed, for people of moderate to inexhaustible means, one of the challenges of living in a modern consumption driven society is navigating the freedom of choice. As one article on choice in the United States notes, "A trip to a typical supermarket reveals enormous choices such as 85 different crackers, 285 types of cookies, 230 varieties of canned soup, 80 different pain relievers, and 360 kinds of shampoo." The article goes on to state, "There is a point at which it (too much choice) becomes a burden."

When something becomes a burden, there's a least two ways I can think of that people typically respond…both of which I have indulged or tried to resist at different points in my life when overwhelmed with choice.

One is to make choosing as simple and easy as possible. Often, this means choosing convenience over all other considerations.

In the grocery store this might mean just grabbing whatever is on the end cap, regardless of its economic or nutritional value. Easy, but not necessarily the best option.

In religion an easy choice might mean hearing only what you want to hear; refusing to be moved or changed. It might also mean staying exclusively in your head or heart because that is where you are most comfortable or best defended against deeper engagement with something or someone. Again, easy, but not necessarily the best option.

Conversely, in the face of overwhelming freedom, another common response is to unwittingly or unnecessarily complicate our choice(s).

As a consumer we might buy multiple similar products we can't realistically use, in effect choosing not to choose between them. Or we might drive ourselves mad comparing labels or other details before making a choice only to wonder forever more once a choice is made if we in fact made the right choice.

In religion this might mean resisting discernment and engaging false equivalencies. It might also mean taking what is sometimes called the buffet approach. That is, exploring and trying a little of this and a little of that, skimming off the top, and rarely breaking the surface long enough to go deep.

Of course, freedom in Unitarian Universalism is neither intended to be a burden that inclines us toward doing what is easiest, immobilize us through perpetual second guessing, nor encourage habitual spiritual grazing.

So what is freedom in Unitarian Universalism intended to be? What is it for if not to have religion your way be religion any way?

One of the things I hear people express appreciation for in Unitarian Universalism is room… freedom…to learn about, approach or consider religious and spiritual concerns from a variety of perspectives. Which many find both expands and deepens their own theological leanings rather than changing it altogether.

And indeed historically, the freedom of our faith has been exercised in service of expanding and deepening our understanding and practice of religion and spirituality. It is fair to say then that the freedom of this faith is meant to provide ample, diverse openings for thoughtful reflection and exploration of beliefs and development of faith.

But as the familiar saying goes, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Which reminds us, as noble as the intent of freedom is in our faith it must be tempered.

But how? What is the counterbalance that both respects freedom's intent and restrains it potential to smooth the path toward anything goes?

One answer can be found in a the brief description of this religion I offer at the start of every worship service, "Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion that encourages everyone to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning." The charge to responsibly search for truth and meaning doesn't seem to make it into the jokes about our faith. But it is every bit as vital as the free part we and others prefer to emphasize.

That our faith calls us to be responsible in our search for truth and meaning, and thus in the discernment and living out of our beliefs, may not be funny, but it can be beautiful.

Indeed, I once witnessed a man, a UU, get up and talk about his "conversion" related to the issue of accessibility as his church was about to kick off a capital campaign.

He shared, and I'm paraphrasing here, that for a long time he didn't see the value of making the church fully accessible in the absence of an obvious need. As he noted, it wasn't like someone in a wheelchair needed to be carried into the building each Sunday.

To many his was a valid observation and not an uncommon argument, particularly when communities do not have the luxury of ready or unlimited funds.

But as he spoke, it was clear this was a thoughtful person who cares deeply for the people of his church. And so it was perhaps less a surprise than a touching example of freedom tempered by responsibility to hear him relate his newfound support for making the building accessible to one of the perennial questions of our faith, What does it mean to be welcoming?

I thought of that man's "conversion" as I read Jane Rzepka's reflection, "Fragment by Fragment" where she quotes Anias Nin, "There are very few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination." Rather, Nin notes, "Most…acquire it, fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic."

Now there's an apt metaphor. If you've ever seen, or worked on, even a small mosaic, like a tabletop, you know it is a time consuming affair. Having traveled and seen the magnificent mosaics lining the interiors of the basilica of St. Mark's in Venice and the Baptistry in Florence, I, to this day, remain in awe of the tremendous time, effort, artistry and skill that went into each. Closer to home, You can view stunning fragments of pictorial mosaics at the Yale University Art Gallery. And if you're willing to travel a little northward, in the Worcester Art Museum, you can marvel at a Roman mosaic floor which includes magnificent depictions of animals.

And I say marvel because it is no small feat to have found, shaped, and placed such tiny, multicolored, multi-textured, and sometimes seemingly unrelated pieces together in such a way as to form, over time, a coherent image of great artistic integrity.

One imagines the artists and craftspersons who designed and built them constantly engaged in the discipline of questioning. "Where might this piece fit?" "What is needed in this space?" 'Where can we find it?" "How does this piece relate to the overall design?" "What do we do with pieces that don't fit?"

Likewise, it is no small feat for us to draw from the multiplicity of our learning, observation, and experience, pieces sometimes seemingly unrelated to one another, and to form, over time, a coherent faith to which we turn, engage or wrestle with as we live our lives.

A process which calls us to our own spiritual practice of questioning, both individually and as a community. And not only, or even mostly of lofty questions, but ones much closer to the ground of our ordinary experience. For as Rzepka reminds us, "There's religion in the everyday questions." And that it is by asking these everyday questions that we, "find out what matters, what deserves attention, and how we might treat each other." Questions that not only shape our faith but carry the potential to heal our world.

The practice of questioning is both an effect of the freedom and an essential component of a responsible search for truth and meaning in Unitarian Universalism. While some religious people fear questions will sow unwelcome doubt, in Unitarian Universalism questions can and do provide clarity and promote much needed perspective.

Indeed, imagine going up to a work or art and never standing more than nose depth away from the object you are viewing. You wouldn't really "see" much….and not just because security, observing your behavior, would promptly escort you out.

Still, as people of faith, we are not simply observers of another's work. We are creators too.

Even still, if an artist tried to create a work with their nose pressed to the surface of their work. They would never know what it is they're creating.

Each of us is an artist….creators of the faith we live. A faith informed by beliefs we acquire, shape, place, set aside temporarily or discard all together through the practice of questioning.

Questioning is an opportunity…and our responsibility… to step back and look at our creation, so to speak…to evaluate the integrity of the composition or design…to understand what fits and what doesn't, what needs to be reshaped or held aside, and what needs to be discarded. And this helps ensure religion our way is not religion any way. Which is to say, it matters.

And, with an election that carries enormous consequences for the direction and potential healing of many wounds just two days away we're reminded the promise of freedom tempered by responsibility is not limited to our faith tradition. It extends to this land…this nation… we call home.

Indeed, it matters what we believe. And it matters how we get there. In Unitarian Universalism and the United States of America we have both the freedom to search for truth and meaning and the obligation to do so responsibly.

Let us then exercise both in each. Because it matters.

Amen and Blessed Be.