

**Why Unitarian Universalism Matters**  
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First Parish in Hingham, Unitarian Universalist  
(Old Ship Church)  
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**Meditation**

Embraced by the beauty of the season...

Once again the miracle of gold and red and yellow...

Embraced by the beauty of this place...

Post and beam, pulpit and pew holding us...

Sharing company with all who have worshiped before us...

All who will worship here in time to come...

Yes, embraced by the sure company of one another:

May our sorrows be gently held...

May our worries be eased...

May our hopes be lifted and nurtured...

May our faith be strengthened...

May our love be deepened...

**Readings**

The first reading is from the conclusion of a monograph titled “Unitarian Universalist Culture: The Present and the Promise” by Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Marilyn Sewall:

I believe that a few committed people can make a huge difference – history has shown us that repeatedly. And though we are small in number, Unitarian Universalist history is replete with examples of individuals whose committed lives have brought significant change to this country. That said, I would add that we also have the potential to grow our numbers far beyond what we have ever aspired to do. We are amazing, talented, creative people. It is time that we take our place as grown-up religious people, with a sense of purpose that matches our capabilities.

There is a growing sense of urgency that many of us feel. We are called to be citizens at a time when the earth itself is being ravaged, perhaps beyond saving in a couple of decades; when our country, instead of giving moral leadership, is building empire with a “pre-emptive war”... when budget deficits and trade deficits grow, giving us less economic stability and control.

Travel ahead twenty, or say fifty years into the future. What will our children and grandchildren say of us? *Will they say, where was the church when the world came crashing down?* How will history picture us – fighting between

the humanists and those spiritually inclined? Pointing the finger at one another, as to who is racist and who is not? Having endless discussion groups in the church basement, but taking little action?

The costs of being passive, or spiritually arrogant, or divided, or unfocused are just too great. Let us leave our foolish ways, and rise to be the people we are called to be. The times demand it. We should ask no less of ourselves.

The second reading is by 18<sup>th</sup> century American Universalist preacher, Rev. John Murray:

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

## **Sermon**

Perhaps some of you remember the old joke: Which way did the Unitarian Universalist go at a fork in the road, with the sign in one direction pointing to heaven and the sign the other way pointing to a discussion group about heaven...

You guessed it...

And maybe that's because at least for many of us conversation *is* a kind of heaven. And not just an intellectual heaven. No, the best conversation engages both head and heart. And the best conversation connects people not just head to head, but person to person – so that, agree or disagree, with heartfelt ideas expressed around a circle, participants begin to feel increasingly that they are not just talking to one another, they are part of one another.

For me, anyway, a delight in “conversation about things that matter” as I have often put it, goes to the heart of why I am grateful to be a Unitarian Universalist. Particularly because it is a conversation without pre-digested answers to life's great questions. We stand beneath the night sky, amidst the cosmos, and no one is telling us we have to squeeze it all into a particular salvation story or myth. We read an ancient text – Bible or Buddha, Koran or Confucius – and no one is telling us what it must mean or that we must accept and believe it all word for word.

All ways of affirming that we are a religion of the free mind – for which I am grateful. If there wasn't a religious movement like Unitarian Universalism, I do believe I would have to invent one!

Even so, this would not be enough for me. The even better news is that we are also a religion of the open heart. For no, it wouldn't be enough if the conversation stayed in the parlor. The conversation must – and does – change lives. So that we go out into the rest of our lives and do our bit to make a difference. So that we sometimes join together to do our bit to make a difference in an often hurting world.

So though we may or may not agree concerning many of the issues of our day – whether abortion or tax policy, stem cell research or war and peace – any more than we may or may not agree on matters of theology or philosophy... we do agree that it is an essential part of any religious community, certainly our Unitarian Universalist liberal religious community, to help heal a hurting world, to do our part as we are able... and maybe more than we think we are able.

Yes, we are a religion of the free mind (which means free pulpit and free pew) and also a religion of the open and generous heart.

And I, for one, am mightily grateful to be part of such a religious community and religious tradition – a tradition with, not incidentally, ancient roots – in some ways back to Socrates, certainly back to Jesus, and including the great religious and social reformers closer to our time: Channing, Hosea Ballou, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Clara Barton, Julia Ward Howe. And in our own time: Whitney Young, Pete Seeger, William Schulz, who went from leading our Unitarian Universalist Association to directing Amnesty International USA.

Free thinking open heartedness, understanding that the world and cosmos are too vast to be put in a box, and a community of faith and quest which accepts all of this, and which accepts me and you and you... as we are... *and* as we can be, and which encourages us to do our part to contribute to justice, peace, and ecological sustainability.

Pretty darn good in my book.

But *do* we make much of a difference in the world? Do we matter much? As much as we would like to matter?

We are small after all – depending on whose doing the counting, we are only a few hundred thousand at most, and only about a thousand congregations. How much could it matter that *we* exist in a nation of three hundred million, in a world of six billion? How much difference do we make, can we make? And does it matter whether we make a difference or not?

Well, Margaret Mead famously said: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.*

Was she right? It's a tough proposition to test. Yet though a hundred anecdotes are still just a hundred anecdotes and not statistical truth, the stories of small groups changing the world are legion. Where else, after all, would change begin than with a small group?

Where else but in Lech Walesa's Gdansk shipyard?

Where else but at Highlander Folk School in the 1950s, training center for the likes of Rosa Parks?

Where else but in Ralph Waldo Emerson's living room, in Thoreau's cabin?

Where else but in Faneuil Hall in the company of Sam Adams and others?

Or looking quite a bit further into the past, where else but in the streets of Jerusalem two thousand years ago? Or twenty-five hundred years ago in the marketplace of Athens or the Deer Park where Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, gave his

first sermon?

So... maybe... too... where else but here, in this community, and communities like it with which we are linked?

For yes, so often change, revolutionary change – whether in philosophy or religion, in politics or in social arrangements – begins in the mind and heart of one person, then another, then a small group... and when the time is right and the ideas are ripe... transformational change unimaginable in one moment of time becomes the new reality in the next. The walls fall, the regime crumbles, newly recognized rights – civil rights, marriage rights – become simply the way things are.

Indeed, though predicting when and how and whether is a dicey proposition, still... we should *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world.*

Well then, *is* our relatively small Unitarian Universalist community of congregations such a “group of thoughtful, committed individuals” with the potential to “change the world” (and of course change it for the better, since small groups can unfortunately also change the world quite for the worse too)?

I don’t know. But I do believe that we ought to behave as though we were.

Earlier in the essay from which the first reading was drawn, my colleague Marilyn Sewall wonders why our liberal faith hasn’t grown more in numbers over the past generation. Wonders why we have actually become a smaller percentage of the population even as more conservative and fundamentalist religious groups have grown dramatically.

She wonders... because she “can’t imagine a faith that speaks more to our times than Unitarian Universalism.” What faith tradition, she wonders, could be *more* relevant to our times than one which emphasizes freedom and love, which in our pluralistic era speaks so easily across religious traditions, which exists “to foster spiritual growth in our members, and out of that spiritual grounding, to help heal our hurting world”?

Well, Marilyn suggests a number of factors that might hold us back from our true and genuine promise. But it is not my purpose today to focus on what might be holding us back.

Rather, today I simply want to affirm that Unitarian Universalism *does* matter in this world we share, and that we can matter yet more if we choose to behave as though we matter, as though we can and do make a difference.

Just to begin with, in my own words enlarging on Marilyn Sewall’s insights:

In a world in which reasoned debate so easily is reduced to sound bites, what could matter more than a tradition that still believes that reason freely exercised must be brought to bear on the great questions of our day, and that we must listen to one another at least as much as we talk to one another?

In a world sometimes so heartless, what could matter more than a tradition of open and overflowing heart, that reaches out to touch lives regardless of creed or belief or background, that seeks to speak on behalf of those who too often have too little voice - those marginalized by poverty, by oppression, by injustice in its all too many varieties?

In a world still wracked by violence and war and unsustainable ways of living,

what could matter more than a tradition and a community of faith which lifts up the possibility of another way on our planet than war and violence; another way on our planet than unbridled and unsustainable exploitation of resources?

I could go on.

What could matter more?

And we are of course not alone in most of this. Of course not. We strive to nurture the spirit and heal the hearts of all who enter our doors, as do so many traditions. And we raise our liberal religious voice on the issues of our time with others of like mind and heart. Our small group joins with other small groups... and others... and others... Just maybe, to change the world.

So... all this said, perhaps it didn't need to be said. Wouldn't we want to affirm that of course Unitarian Universalism matters? Why else would we be here each week?

But at least now and then *why* we matter must be spoken, because how *much* we matter – to each precious individual and to the world in which we live – is up to each of us and to each congregation in the association of congregations of which we are a part.

And if we do believe that our free faith matters, that our liberal religious way in religion matters, that our Unitarian Universalism matters... then we need to support our church and we need to support our association, each of us to the extent we are able: with our time, with our energy, with our financial resources – with our lives.

I for one wouldn't have committed my life to the Unitarian Universalist ministry if I didn't believe that our faith mattered, or if believed that it has only personal meaning. Yes, we do begin with the deeply personal, each of us nourished by our UU faith tradition into an ever deeper spiritual centeredness in the world, presence to what some call the sacred, to love, to beauty, each of us speaking our minds from our hearts, freely.

But it must not end there and it does not end there. We are, as my colleague Tom Owen-Towle has put it, “free thinking mystics with hands” – our care and compassion (and yes our conversation) overflowing into a world in need of the healing touch of any and all who would help to make a difference.

So may it be.