

Why Are We Here?  
Rev. Dave Hunter  
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg  
May 3, 2015

Why are we here? This question could mean many different things, depending on what we mean by “we” and what we mean by “here.” At one extreme, it could mean Why are the 30 or so of us together, in this room, right now? At the other extreme, it could mean Why does humanity exist on this planet? Or even, Why does life exist in the universe? But, avoiding the extremes, I’m asking why we have a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Gettysburg. Or, more generally, I’m asking why we have Unitarian Universalist congregations wherever they happen to be. I’m not going to talk about Gettysburg in particular. And I’ll try to avoid getting distracted by asking why we do *not* have UU congregations in Hanover and Chambersburg, though I do think we should.

\* \* \*

Why are we here? *For community.*

Back in the 1980s, when Kerry and I, with Amanda and David, who are in their 40s now but were children then, when we lived in Northern Virginia, a bus ride from our Nation’s Capital, I was part of four different communities.

- There was the work place community, at the Department of Justice, in the Civil Rights Division’s Voting Section.
- There was our neighborhood community, at Lake Barcroft.
- David played Little League baseball, so we were part of the Columbia Pike Little League community.

The fourth community, of course, was provided by our church, the Unitarian Church of Arlington, which officially changed its name, sometime back in that era, to the Unitarian *Universalist* Church of Arlington, reflecting the consolidation of Unitarians and Universalists about a quarter century earlier.

The Voting Section was a good place to work, and I enjoyed having lunch with colleagues, but it wasn’t a community. We were there to do our jobs. Part of our lives was there, but not our whole lives. Work was fenced off.

I enjoyed Lake Barcroft. The Lake Barcroft community consisted of families living in houses built around what had started out as the reservoir for the City of Alexandria, with the lake created by a dammed up stream. During our summers back then, we did a lot of swimming in

that lake, at the beach a couple of blocks from our house. But we knew only a handful of families living there. It was a place of convenience.

The whole family was involved in Little League. David was the second baseman; his big sister Amanda was the score keeper; I was an umpire, and Kerry and I together served as vice presidents of the league, responsible for fields and scheduling. We got acquainted with David's coach and with other families with children on the same team. It was community for us. But then David turned thirteen, and his Little League days were over. And while I could have continued on as an umpire, it wouldn't have been the same.

But the church provided a real community for us. We made a lot of friends there. All four of us were involved in church activities. For me, music, singing in the choir, was the earliest and most important. I went on to get involved with money and membership and a bunch of other things. On Sunday mornings I would leave for church before the rest of the family, bicycling to church for the choir practice before the early service.

I had been unchurched in my earlier young adult years. Theological differences had led me to part company with the Presbyterians, and I hadn't yet been invited in by the Unitarian Universalists. I think I would have benefitted during those years from being part of a religious community.

When my father was diagnosed with lung cancer, just a few months after I graduated from law school and moved to Washington, it certainly would have been good to have a pastor to talk to, and older church members who had been through what I was going through, who might have helped me learn to talk to my father and my mother and my brother about what each of us was going through.

At the same time, I was confronted by the Vietnam War and the draft. I had gone to law school to avoid Vietnam, but law school was over and the war continued, and I was 1-A. I could have used a supportive religious community.

A few years later, when I was contemplating marriage, pastoral consultation and support might have saved me – and Catherine, too – from a painful experience.

\* \* \*

Why are we here? *To go deeper.*

A church – a Unitarian Universalist congregation, in particular – can provide the community we need, but it can provide more than that. Two basic religious questions are, first, what shall I do with this one amazing but time-limited life that, by the grace of God, or whoever, I have been given? And, second, what can I make of the reality that some day I will die, that I will be gone, forever?

These questions require us to go deeper, deeper than church potlucks, wonderful though they be; deeper than volunteering for any of the myriad tasks that have to be done to keep the church going, as essential as they are.

One way we go deeper is through intellectual activity – through sermons, lifespan faith development, books, small group discussions.

I started going deeper at a young age. When I was no more than about 10, I decided to read the Bible, from the top. I don't remember how far I got, before I abandoned that project. Trying to read the Bible by oneself, without guides or commentary, is a misguided project at any age, and an impossible one for a 10-year-old. Later, in high school, I wrote a major paper on the immortality of the soul. My conclusion was a skeptical one. My interest in theological topics led me to major in philosophy, and my courses included philosophy of religion and medieval philosophy.

Lately, I've been reading *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preach from Galilee*, by Bart Ehrman. Before that it was *Christian Beginnings: from Nazareth to Nicaea*, by the now late Geza Vermes. Awaiting me is *Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam*, by Susan Ritchie, which I acquired recently at our district spring assembly.

For those of you who want to go deeper, here's an opportunity for you: a one-week course sponsored by Meadville/Lombard Theological School, our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago. The course is called "Crossing Boundaries: Multifaith Leadership in the New America." It's a new non-credit course just for lay leaders. It will be held from August 8 to 15, this summer, not in Chicago, but at the Chautauqua Institution on the shores of Chautauqua Lake, in southwestern New York State. Your teacher would be none other than the Rev. Dr. Lee Barker, Meadville/Lombard's President.

A second way to go deeper is through spirituality. For me this means music, music in church, music in church last weekend. Last Saturday and Sunday evenings I was among about 200 singers who performed Bach's B Minor Mass, in the Wayne Presbyterian Church. The combination of Bach's music, the traditional words, in Latin, the voices, the orchestra, the powerful, magnificent organ, the huge stained glass window in the back of the sanctuary, directly in front of me, the architecture of the sanctuary – Singing *et resurrexit tertia die . . . et sedet ad dextram Dei Patris*, whether or not one accepts the literal message of the words, it's a moving experience. If anything is spiritual, that was.

Also last weekend, was Music Sunday at the Main Line Unitarian Church. I sing in the choir whenever I can. We performed the Requiem by Clif Hardin, the music director at the River Road Unitarian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. A beautiful, challenging piece, about death, as the name implies. A few minutes ago I read the poem that provides the words for the requiem's final movement, with the deceased speaking to loved ones left behind.

A third way to go deeper is through institutional involvement in Unitarian Universalism. My path led me from singing in the Arlington choir, to leading the annual pledge drive, to serving on the church board, to serving on the district board, to the fateful step of preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry. But there are many paths that can be followed, and, fortunately, most do not lead to ordained ministry.

I've distinguished three different ways to go deeper into religion, but we don't have to think of them as distinct, separate endeavors, separate realms. They can and usually do cross over, they blend, they can be mutually reinforcing.

\* \* \*

Why are we here? *To bless the world.*

That's why we're here, to bless the world, to make the world a better place, to promote the recognition of the worth and dignity of every person – including those in the City of Baltimore, every one of them – to share the world with all its inhabitants and to preserve it for future generations. How do we love God? By loving God's creation, by loving those made in God's image. As Unitarian Universalists, we have a variety of views about what awaits us in the inaccessible future, but we agree that our focus should be on this world, not on some other world, some other realm beyond death, beyond space and time. The kingdom of God – or the realm of peace, justice, and sustainability – will be here, if anywhere. And God won't do it for us: it's up to us – we are God's hands.

You can list ways that we can further this project as well as I can.

- Vote. Be involved in the political process.
- Promote vaccination.
- Promote education, here at home, and around the world. Military means alone will not create a safe, stable world. We need education for all. And that includes girls and women.
- Take global warming seriously and act accordingly.
- Let's put people to work, constructively. There is so much that needs to be done – global warming prevention and remediation, infrastructure restoration and development, health care, scientific exploration here at home and on Mars and beyond. And we have so many people in this nation and on this planet whose potential is being wasted, and so much money that is idle but could be used to good purpose.

- If Jesus really said that poor will always be with us, I don't know what he meant by it or why he said it. But, really, there's no excuse for the amount of poverty that exists today in this nation and around the world. While eliminating inequality may be impossible and is arguably undesirable, we can certainly do a whole lot more to enable those on the bottom to improve their lives and the lives of their children, and we can certainly do a whole lot more to encourage those whose wealth exceeds the median by an unbelievably high factor to use that wealth for the public good.

Some things we can do as a congregation; others we can do in cooperation with other UU congregations or as a denomination or in cooperation with non UU congregations and denominations. And individually, through volunteer activities, through our paid work, and through how we live our day-to-day lives, we can make a big difference, and set a good example.

\* \* \*

Why are we here? *To spread the good news, the good news of Unitarian Universalism, and thus to welcome others through our doors.*

Why would we want to do this? you may ask. We have our cozy little congregation here; it meets our needs. You never know who might respond, if we broadcast our welcome. We have our cozy little denomination, a small percentage of the nation's population, but it meets our needs, and, despite our small numbers, we do have our influence.

Why do we want to share the good news of Unitarian Universalism? Well, if it's good news, if it's good, why wouldn't we want to share it? Now if sharing it with others meant there would be less left for us, like fudge, for example, that would be another matter. But we can share it, share it widely, and we don't lose it, it's still ours.

I didn't find Unitarian Universalism until I was 38 years old. Is it my fault for not going through the doors that were in plain sight? Or did others have a responsibility, not only to let me know that such a thing as Unitarian Universalism existed, but also that I would be welcome and might benefit from it and appreciate it?

There was the high school friend who explained that his family was no longer attending the Presbyterian Church because now there was a Unitarian church in town, and his family was Unitarian, not Presbyterian. But he didn't invite me to come with him, to try it out.

During my three years in Cambridge, I must have walked by the Unitarian Universalist church hundreds of times. It never once occurred to me to go up its steps and through its doors. Should they have stood outside passing out flyers and encouraging students to come on in?

In my second year in Washington, I lived almost around the corner from the National Memorial Universalist Church, on 16th Street, but I was never curious enough to explore what might be going on inside, and they didn't seem to have any interest at all in inviting their neighbors to join them for Sunday worship, or for anything else. A few years later, I lived just a few blocks from All Souls Unitarian Church, also on 16th Street, and some of my neighbors in the Ontario Apartments were members there. But if I ever entered that church it was either for a political meeting or a concert.

I won't claim that everyone needs to be part of a religious community, or that one cannot lead a satisfactory life without confronting the basic religious questions of how we should live and how we should respond to the reality of inevitable death, but I think being part of a religious community can be beneficial for many people, probably for most people. And for people like me, whose rationality leads them to reject some apparently basic ideas of Christianity, Unitarian Universalism provides the best, perhaps the only possible religious community.

So let us let the good people of Gettysburg and Adams County know that we're here, and that we welcome them to join us. Let us not hesitate to invite our friends and neighbors who do not have a church home, or who feel out of place where they are now, to join with us on Sunday morning.

One easy – but very incomplete – way to spread our UU good news is to put a UU bumper sticker on your car, proclaiming, for example, “Love is our doctrine, Service is our prayer.” If you would like a bumper sticker, and if you promise actually to affix it to your car's bumper and not just put it in the glove compartment and forget it, I have a few with me. See me after the service.

If we are to bless the world, we would be more effective – not just here in Gettysburg but across the nation – if there were more of us. Newcomers bring with them their experience, their energy, their ideas.

\* \* \*

Why are we here? *To provide a place of rest.*

A place of escape from the pressures, the worries, the crises of the world and of the family, a place of sanctuary. One hour a week of relief, of respite, or perhaps one year out of seven of sabbatical. And if you sleep through the sermon, that's what you need, it's OK. I do it myself.

Not an escape from the world – we are part of it, part of the problem and, I hope, a larger part of the solution. Not an escape but a time-out.

And, when our time is up, when our days have come to an end, our church provides a place of memory, a place of eternal rest.

\* \* \*

Let me sum up. Why are we here? Why do we give our time and energy and money to maintain a Unitarian Universalist presence in Gettysburg, and in hundreds of other places across the country? Here are five answers to that question – there are others, you can be sure:

- (1) to provide a supportive community;
- (2) to enable those who are part of our community to go deeper into Unitarian Universalism, to go deeper in our thinking, to go deeper in our appreciation of the world and of the blessings we have received;
- (3) to be part of a religious community, part of an association of congregations, that seeks to bless the world, to help move us toward peace, justice, and sustainability;
- (4) to help share the good news of Unitarian Universalism, that love is our doctrine and service our prayer, that you don't have to think alike to love alike, to invite others to join us, and to assure that Unitarian Universalism will be available in the decades – dare I say the centuries? – to come; and, finally,
- (5) to provide a place of retreat, rest, and renewal.

Amen.

## What Can a Religious Community Provide?

*(the reading that preceded the sermon)*

Here is what a religious community can provide:

a place to contemplate the miracle of existence –  
why am I alive, here and now?  
why does anything exist at all?  
what meaning can I give to my inevitable death?

A religious community can be with you when you are going through hard times – someone to hold your hand in the hospital waiting room.

A religious community can give you the opportunity to participate in beautiful music and to be moved by a prophetic voice. Working together and with others of like mind, members of a religious community can help make our society and the world more just, peaceful, and sustainable.

A religious community need not ask you to believe “what you know ain’t so,” but can challenge you to test your beliefs against the conclusions of reason and the wisdom of tradition and can remind you that the search for and discovery of wisdom and understanding did not end two thousand years ago.

And what about the children? A religious community can feed their inquiring minds and hands, introduce them to the great stories, and help them internalize the requirements of living together in community.

Yes, religion can mean different things to different people, and no, there is no one correct definition of religion, but we humans have not yet outgrown our need for religion. Perhaps we never will.