

Telling Our Stories (My Turn)  
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How to start my story, the story of my circuitous journey to Unitarian Universalism, my unexpected journey to Unitarian Universalist ministry. Here's what should be a good way to start.

One of my earliest memories was sitting on my great grandfather's knee, and listening as he told me stories from the Bible – Joseph and his coat of many colors, David and Goliath – was I named for that David? – Jesus explaining to his disciples that we should all be kind to children. My great grandfather was a minister, a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Herbert Erastus Davis. He was from upper New York State, but he found himself a missionary in the far reaches of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the U.P. Eventually, he settled in Homer, Michigan, a small town on a railroad junction, near Marshall, the town where my grandfather, Claude Innis Hunter, and his brother owned and operated a grocery store. Claude, I'm thankful to say, married the preacher's daughter, Grace, the middle daughter, and thus I'm here today.

Well, actually, not all the details of that story are literally true. I was born in 1942, and my great grandfather died in 1916, so I never sat on his knee, and, growing up, I heard almost nothing about him

But I did grow up in a Presbyterian family, and I grew up taking religion seriously. At one point when I could not have been more than 10, probably younger, I decided to read the Bible. Being an orderly person, with little imagination and reluctant to ask for help, I decided to start with chapter 1 of Genesis and read through to the end. I don't remember how far I got, but I'm quite sure that my project could never have survived forty years in the wilderness.

I don't remember much about Sunday school. One Sunday morning, in particular, has remained in my memory. The teacher asked us what it is we hoped for, what was our dream. While others named bicycles and ponies, I held out for world peace. Today I would say world peace with justice.

More than Sunday school, being in the worship service with my parents has created a lasting memory for me. I don't remember any of the sermons, but the hymns that we sang have stuck with me, especially the music. Deeper down, I believe that it was sitting in the pew with my parents that was the main thing.

One of the careers that I considered during my young years was ministry. I concluded that if the message of Christianity was a valid one, a life saving one, then I should help spread the good news.

When I was about thirteen, I participated in the confirmation class. I remember having some doubts about some of the beliefs to which we were expected to subscribe. Did Jesus really rise again from the dead? But I was not nearly brave enough to challenge the authority of church and family, and I told myself if it's good enough for Mr. Gibson – he was the minister for youth, young, intelligent, well educated – then it should be good enough for me.

I suspect that if the confirmation process had been delayed a year or two, I would have made public my reservations.

In looking back over my first 38 years, I have to ask myself, why didn't I discover and get involved with Unitarian Universalism earlier? That doubt I had about confirmation may have been the first clue that UUs were in my future. Or maybe clues could be found even earlier.

As an adult, maybe 20 or 30 years ago, I learned that my Connecticut grandparents, for a while, attended the local Universalist church. This came as a surprise to me, since both my grandmother and my grandfather were from old Connecticut Congregationalist families. This was in Stafford, Connecticut, before I was born. Here's what prompted that Universalist interlude: for a few years they lived in a town that had only three churches: Baptist, Catholic, and Universalist. I suspect the choice they made was an easy one for them. But apparently they were not convinced by what they heard, and by the time I was on the scene, they had moved again, and were back with the Congregationalists.

A few years after my grandfather died, my grandmother came to live with us. Why didn't I talk to her more? Why didn't I ask her more questions. Maybe the conversation would have turned to religion, and I might have been introduced to Universalism.

In high school my interest in theological issues grew, as did my doubts concerning the traditional doctrine. And it was in high school that I had my first explicit exposure to Unitarianism. This was, by the way, in the late 1950's, a few years before the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America.

I discovered, one day, that the Van Doren family was no longer attending the Presbyterian Church. Don Van Doren, a friend since we moved from one Detroit suburb to another, when I was ten, told me that they had gone to the Presbyterian Church while waiting for a local Unitarian church to get started. But he did not invite me to try his church or to join the Unitarians' youth group.

I remember asking my mother, at that time, what Unitarians were. She gave a dismissive answer, informing me that they rejected the Trinity and making it clear by her tone and attitude that Unitarians were a little funny, out of the mainstream, not acceptable to good Presbyterians. I wish now that I had been more rebellious as a teenager.

As a senior in high school, I chose as the topic for my term paper the immortality of the soul – what becomes of us when we die? My conclusion was, when you die you're dead – end of story.

My continuing interest in theological topics led me to study philosophy as a Princeton undergraduate. One of my early courses was philosophy of religion, taught by Prof. Walter Kaufmann. I'm amazed now that he could teach such a course and not cover the debate between Trinitarians and Unitarians or the various theories about our fate after death. Or maybe I just wasn't paying attention.

Princeton – the town – had a Unitarian church, but if that church had a campus outreach program, it never reached me.

After that one course with Prof. Kaufmann, I stuck with the more mainstream philosophical topics and even thought for a while that I might go to graduate school in philosophy. As an undergraduate I never took a course in the Religion Department; I'm not sure why that was. Another lost opportunity to encounter Unitarian Universalism.

Immediately after Princeton came three years in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the Harvard Law School, learning how to be a lawyer and staying out of Vietnam. Cambridge and neighboring Boston and the surrounding area have more Unitarian churches than anywhere else in the world. I must have walked by the Cambridge church countless times, without ever once climbing its steps or walking through its doors.

As a single young adult in Washington, D.C., working on civil rights during the day and active in the anti-war movement in the evening and on weekends, it never occurred to me to join a religious community, though I regularly attended anti-war meetings at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, and our most prominent leaders were a Quaker [Abe Bloom] and a Jew [Art Waskow]. For a year I lived practically around the corner from the National Memorial Universalist Church, but never went inside. And for several years I lived in walking distance of All Souls Church, Unitarian, and had neighbors who were members, but the only times I was inside the place were for political meetings or concerts.

But I continued to take religion seriously. And that, I think, is why I married not one but two Unitarian Universalists. I don't think that marriage with a Presbyterian who didn't take her religion seriously would have worked for me. And a Presbyterian who did take her religion seriously wouldn't have worked either, for different reasons. Judaism was too different, and Quakers were too quiet. Could I have told my mother that I had decided to marry a Catholic?

But Unitarian Universalism, I came to realize, was a perfect fit:

- A religion with reason as a foundation principle,
- A religion that didn't require me to believe quite improbable things,

- A religion able to grow and change,
- A religion that retained the music and the kind of worship that I had grown up with,
- A religion committed to *this* world.

Did I know, did I suspect, at that first wedding, in June of 1974, at Cedar Lane Unitarian Church, in Bethesda, Maryland, that three decades later I would be officiating at weddings myself? Did it occur to me, at that second wedding, in October of 1980, at the Main Line Unitarian Church, in Devon, Pennsylvania, that three decades later I would be preaching in that sanctuary? No and no.

Fortunately, Kerry invited me to church, and my love of music led me to real involvement with Unitarian Universalism, with the choir as my gateway. I am so glad that *we* now have a choir.

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I mentioned earlier the importance of hymns in my life. I've collected hymnals; I wrote a paper in a seminary course on a Universalist hymnal; I've occasionally tried to revise or rewrite hymn verses or add additional verses to hymns. The music first drew me to hymns, but I pay attention now to the words as well.

Thus I've been curious about what the word "it" stands for in the hymn, *It Sounds Along the Ages* [Singing the Living Tradition #187], which we'll be singing to close our service today. I posed the "it" question to you, a couple of weeks ago, in my series of email questions about Unitarian Universalism, in the hope that one or more of you would have a more creative imagination than I. William Channing Gannett, the author of *It Sounds Along the Ages*, and one of the most distinguished Unitarian ministers of the late 19th century, was also the author of our opening hymn, *The Morning Hangs a Signal* [#40].

It is the practice of our hymnal to use the first phrase of a hymn as the title, dispensing with the original titles if they were different. In this instance, Gannett, gave to his hymn the title "The Word of God."

Thus one can conclude that "it" stands for the word of God. What leaps out at me is what an expansive view of God Gannett had. He refers to the psalmist and to Bible scrolls, but he mentions as well the Buddha – the word of God can come from Buddhism as well as from Judaism and Christianity. He mentions the market in Athens – the word of God can come from Socrates, from Plato, from Aristotle.

Prophets spoke the word of God, awakening sleeping nations. No doubt he would have included Martin Luther King, Jr., among his prophets, not just those we find in the Bible. This is an understanding of God that goes beyond Christianity; this is an understanding of God in which

the human and the divine are intimately connected; this is an understanding of God that invites metaphorical interpretation.

But let's go one step further. Gannett was presumably thinking of the word of God as the answer to the what is "it" question, but he doesn't require us to give the same answer, and the editors of the hymnal invite our exploration and imagination by not letting us take Gannett's answer for granted. Our interpretation of the text can change, can evolve over time. Our understanding can vary, from person to person. And that's OK.

We can think of "it" as love. God is love. Love is the best one-word summary of Unitarian Universalism that I can imagine. "God is love," 1 John 4:16 reminds us, "and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." The punch line to this paragraph comes a little later:

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they *have* seen, cannot love God whom they *have not* seen. [1 John 4:20]

Let us all stand on the side of love, and maybe we can bring Adams County and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania along with us.

But back to Gannett's hymn, and the meaning of "it." We can think of "it" as the Holy Spirit, understood, of course, in a non-Trinitarian way. Or conscience – that works for me. Or the hymn may prompt us to think of the unknown or to think of the inevitable.

And the *word* of God reminds us that the word can become flesh. I'm not thinking, or not only thinking, of the Gospel of John, with the word of God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus, but I'm thinking of words like justice, love, peace, fairness – becoming flesh in the lives of the people, people who work for justice, people who live lives of love, people who stand up for peace, people who insist on fairness.

There's more, there's always more: "it" can represent our hope, "it" can stand for our faith.

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Unitarian Universalist ministers – and other UUs, too, I'm sure – have lately been giving thought to three features – or perhaps I should say three alleged features – of Unitarian Universalism, debating whether we should proclaim them or acknowledge that they are holding us back. These are individualism, anti-authoritarianism, and exceptionalism. [see Fred Muir, Berry Street Essay, June 2012; Harper's Ferry Ministers' Study Group presentation, November 2013]

I've been wondering, what role do they – individualism, anti-authoritarianism, and exceptionalism – play in *my* religious journey?

First is individualism. We recognize, perhaps we even celebrate individualism in our first principle, in which we pledge to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Likewise, we celebrate religious freedom. Individually, we go where our reason and our conscience lead us. As a result, we attract people who appreciate the freedom to believe what they choose, rather than what is imposed upon them by a higher authority. We attract seekers, those who are dissatisfied with their prior religious home or with their lack of a religious home and are looking for something that will work better for them, though they may not know quite what they're looking for.

In my case, I realize now that I was a seeker, back in my young adult years, but I don't think I recognized this at the time. I knew – or at least I thought I knew – that I could no longer find a comfortable home among the Presbyterians of my childhood, but I didn't know that there were UU congregations out there, congregations where I would not have to compromise my rationality and where I could flourish – and sing, too.

So I don't find our individualism overly problematical. Of course, we need to get along together in community. This means we don't always get our own way. Other people may have ideas different from ours – that doesn't make them wrong. Different people can like different kinds of music. Community means we have to do our share of the work. It means we have to provide financial support. Community requires generosity, and generosity means different things for people in different situations.

Thus in the multiple choice question I sent out by email a week and a half ago I asked “What, if anything would you add to our seven UU principles?” Answer D was:

We already include a statement recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of the individual, but we should add to that a statement recognizing the value of community, recognizing the dependence of individuals on the community (perhaps even recognizing our dependence on the whole interdependent web of existence, of which we are only a part).

The second of the three features was anti-authoritarianism. This is related to individualism. The Commission on Appraisal – that's an elected UU body – came out with a report on authority, in our congregations, in our national organization, last June. One of these days I'll read it, and I might even do a sermon or an adult education class in response to it.

But, certainly, a healthy distrust of authority can be a good thing. An excessive distrust of legitimate authority can be destructive.

In Washington, today, the failure of some to recognize the authority of the President is causing all kinds of damage. There are undoubtedly UU congregations where that is the case as well, where church board or minister are not able to function, but I don't see that as a problem here. I don't see it nationally in the governance of the Unitarian Universalist Association, either, but maybe I'm not paying close enough attention.

While I was always – almost always – an obedient child, as a young adult I turned against authority – specifically, against the authority of those waging war against the Vietnamese, who wanted me to join that effort. Though the law required my participation, I said No. Having stood up to the authority of the federal government, I would hardly have blindly followed the authority of any religious group. By this measure, I belonged with the UUs.

The third feature is exceptionalism. We claim to be an exceptional faith community, an exceptional denomination, different from others, better than others. Again, I'm not as concerned about this as some are. Bud Lite has to claim that it's different from Miller Lite or Coors Lite. Not only different but better. How else do they sell their beer? Now, I don't know how great the differences are among those three beers, but Unitarian Universalism *is* different. Different in a good way – that's why I'm here, and not across the street. But I don't think we've ever claimed that we're perfect, or that we're the best religious answer for everyone.

I can safely say that I have found a home in this faith community, in Unitarian Universalism. I'm pretty sure that many of you – most of you – have found the same home. I firmly believe that there are many more people out there, some sitting right now on a pew in a church of another denomination, some sitting in front of their television, watching the Sunday morning talk shows at home, who would find Unitarian Universalism the right place for them, as well. Many parents are looking for religious education for their children, looking for the kind of religious education that only a Unitarian Universalist congregation is able to provide. We need to be there for these people; we need to let them know that we're here; we need to invite them to join us; we need to recognize that they will change us, and that's OK; we need to see in the children that they would bring with them the next generation of Unitarian Universalists.

Let us kindle our flame, that it may shine brightly, and be seen for many miles. Amen.