



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Finding Worth in a Liberal Religious Community”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human. James Luther Adams

By building relations we create a source of love and personal pride and belonging that makes living in a chaotic world easier. Susan Lieberman

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. Together, our vision widens and strength is renewed. Mark Morrison-Reed

Sermon (*Polished river stones handed out before sermon*)

The band just sang, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” I think we’re all looking for something and that search has led us here. Hopefully, some of you have found something of what you’re looking for here, at this liberal religious community. I believe those three words not only describe who we are, but proclaim our worth.

We hear a lot these days about the ‘spiritual but not religious’, those who have given up on organized religion and in surveys may describe themselves as ‘nones’. Not Roman Catholic women married to God, but people who check off the ‘no religious affiliation’ box. None.

I imagine many of you might call yourself ‘spiritual but not religious’, but since you’re sitting in a pew, I guess you haven’t totally given up on organized religion. Others of you may deny that we are a religious community. Ethical and spiritual, but not religious. God save us from religion and religious zealots, you might think.

Religion and organized religion gets a bum rap these days. Too many people blame these as the cause of war, genocide, terrorism, enslavement, environmental damage, homophobia, anti-scientism, anti-intellectualism, sexism, and more. Many people involved in organized religions have misused religion to further their own agendas for greater power and privilege. We see it in the headlines every day. The people who perpetrate these atrocities rightly deserve our condemnation.

But not all organized religious groups deserve this. I don’t think Unitarian Universalism does. Unitarian Universalists would be hard-pressed to support such acts of violence. Some of us might justify war to protect or gain a group’s freedom from oppression, but not because of some narrow religious righteousness.

As someone called to serve Unitarian Universalism, I clearly support our brand of organized religion. I think if more people knew about our tradition there might be fewer ‘nones’ checking off that box. But by checking off that box and giving up on organized religion, they lose out on what is worthy in a religious community.

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion. We are liberal, not because of we share that social or political stance (which we don’t), but because we enjoy liberty from religious doctrine and creeds. Because we are free of an outside authority that would tell us how to run our congregations; we are free to name our own ministers and leaders; and we are free to believe as our individual hearts and conscience demand. We are also liberal, or generous, by acknowledging multiple truths, by welcoming all who wish to come in, and by sharing our time, talent, and treasure with others.

We are religious because we share belief in a set of core principles we covenant to affirm and which bind us together. Religion does not require we all believe in a supernatural deity, though that is a common misconception. Religion, as Rev. Peter Courtney pointed out in an earlier service this summer, is whatever rules our lives or guides our behavior, even when it seems like nears superstition.

Because many of us come out of other traditions where religion is defined as a very particular set of beliefs, many here prefer the term *spiritual*. Spiritual seems more open, more individual, and maybe even less organized. Others among us may prefer the term *ethical* because we are guided by shared ethical values and many of us hold no supernatural religious beliefs. But that is not all that we are. Many of us believe in something ineffable, unknowable, and mysterious. I believe under the broad term *religious* there is room for all of us.

And when we come together we form a community, a oneness even with our diversity of beliefs and differing preferred terms or identities.

Perhaps you remember the Biblical tale of David and Goliath. David, who later becomes king, is just a little shepherd boy in this story. Though young and not a warrior, he manages to take down the giant Goliath by using one stone in his slinger. He had five smooth stones in his bag, but he only needed one. I have five reasons I think our liberal religious community is worthwhile, but any one might convince the ‘nones’ or the ‘spiritual but not religious’ to try us out.

First (*holding up a stone each time*), as our unison reading affirms, here in this community we are reminded of our high ideals. Our Seven Principles, our Covenant, our Mission, and our Vision, all printed on the back of your program, reveal our aspirations. They describe how we wish to be treated and want others to treat us. They remind us that our truth may not be someone else’s truth. They remind us that what we do for good or ill affects others and the more good we do will eventually come back to us. It is too easy to slip into self-centeredness and accept the world as it is, instead of how it could be, but returning to this community each week calls us back to what truly matters.

Second, in community we share our life journeys. We receive support when life becomes hard and we offer support when others are in need. When life needs celebrating, we do so together, lifting us up together. When wisdom and guidance are needed, we’re there. When we just need assurance that we’re not alone, we’re there. Let me ask you, and if you’re willing please raise your hands for this: Have you helped someone or been helped by someone here in the Fellowship? (*Nearly all raise their hand.*)

Members of this congregation covenant to care about one another. In the past, connections might have been found with neighbors, but many of us don't know our neighbors. And often our neighborhoods are segregated by class or race, isolating us from the true face of the larger world. Religious community provides a place where race and class unite in shared purpose.

Third, in community our voice becomes greater than it can be alone. If we believe in our Seven Principles, then we must act to realize them. As an organized body we are more effective in bringing about change than any one of us could ever be. Our Standing On the Side of Love campaign is just one example of how we can make a difference. Again, raise your hands: Have you joined your voice with others to raise visibility or seek justice on some issue important to our faith? (*Nearly all raise their hand.*)

Fourth, although anyone can be spiritual by themselves, when ideas exist in isolation, there's no check on those ideas. A community can be a testing ground for sharing ideas. Our diversity of belief challenges us to think deeper about our ideas and gives us new ones to consider. Getting a little roughed up polishes all our stones. Again, I ask you: Have you shared some ideas with others here and maybe had them roughed up a bit, but feel more polished in the end? (*Many raise their hand.*)

Finally, the fifth stone of community relates to the others. By being part of a community we serve something larger than ourselves. Enough studies have shown that when a person's life is all about the 'me' of personal gratification, that person really isn't happy. Having more things, wanting more admiration, or wanting more power and privilege won't lead us to love, life meaning, or happiness. Instead, when we serve others we gain connections, a sense of self-worth, and meaning and purpose for our lives. In religious community we are drawn out of ourselves and into something bigger.

But as I've said before, a community can't exist without the people who make it up. When you don't show up, you're not a part of it. Community means 'with oneness,' being together as one body. A companion is someone who 'shares bread' with you. To eat a meal together means you're sharing time together. To take a class with others means you're getting to know others and they you. To march for justice together means you're in solidarity with others who share your convictions, hopes, and dreams. When we do these things together, we are a community and companions on life's journey.

That doesn't mean you can't just show up on Sunday morning. You can. But sitting in the pew and leaving right away doesn't allow us time to get to know you, or you us. And we want to know you. We want to make room for all who wish to enter, and we will rejoice when you come in, as we sang in our gathering hymn.

To help us become the community we aspire to, we're introducing "Stepping Forward Together," a theme to direct our ministry or program activities this year. You probably noticed the large stepping stones on the outer curved wall as you entered the sanctuary. Each stone represents a ministry area you can engage in that will serve your religious, spiritual, or ethical journey this year. Some activities will nurture your spirit, others allow you to offer your talents to the community. For the next four Sundays program leaders will be around the sanctuary after each service to answer questions and help you become more engaged in the life of the Fellowship. I hope you'll linger after the service to check out these activities.

What I've just said is all very rational, but there is heart here, too. Each of these five stones is filled with heart. The stone you hold is not cold and dead. It is warm from your hand, and warm

from your heart. And whispered in the stories we tell about our lives, whether over coffee, when sharing Joys and Sorrows, remembering someone who has died, or celebrating a marriage, all reveal stories of heart and soul. All our loves, losses, frustrations, compassion, hopes, and dreams are bound up in the rocks and stone foundations of this community.

Sometimes we expect inspiration, awe, and even the divine to show up or occur in powerful ways, as if David's stone has hit us between the eyes. But more often it comes in the silence of a meditation, in the smile and greeting of a stranger, or the simple singing of a song. Be sure to listen for the heart beat of this community. It is there, giving life to all we do. May it always be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share a particularly insightful, emotional, relational, or inspiring experience you may have had while being with others in a religious community (such as during worship, while socializing, acting for justice, taking a class, etc.). What connected with you so strongly?
2. What do you find personally meaningful in being part of a spiritual or religious community?
3. Together as a community, how do we draw out the best in ourselves and others so that we can be the beloved community we desire?