



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “The Lens We See Through”

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### Centering Thoughts

*The best theology is rather a divine life than a divine knowledge.* Jeremy Taylor (17<sup>th</sup> cy)

*How we see the world is how we value it.* Ellen F. Davis

*Theology is the process of using language to describe certain kinds of experience.*

*We look for truth in the nature of the world we live in.* Galen Guengerich

### Sermon

There’s an old joke about a newly deceased Unitarian Universalist (UU) arriving at the Pearly Gates. Standing before the gates, the person sees two signs pointing in different directions. One sign says, “This way to Heaven.” The other says, “This way to a discussion about Heaven.” The new UU arrival follows the sign to the discussion group.

For some of us, Heaven *is* a discussion group. Heavenly or not, UUs must wrestle with religious ideas because we grant you the authority to decide what you will believe. You don’t have to believe what I or anyone else believes. The Fourth UU Principle affirms we may engage in ‘a free and responsible search for truth and meaning’. We gather in community to test our ideas out and learn from each other. The community keeps us accountable from going too far off the proverbial deep end.

Our freedom of belief leads some to think UUs can believe anything we want. Although we want you to discover what is right and true for you, our beliefs are bounded by Seven Principles that outline the shared values we covenant or promise to affirm and promote. They’re listed on the back cover of your order of service.

To discuss and probe specific beliefs, I’m currently facilitating a ‘This I Believe’ class. On Sunday, May 1, a few members of this class will share their credo statements with you. *Credo* is Latin for ‘I believe,’ or more literally, ‘to place one’s heart’ on a set of beliefs.

If you are or grew up Jewish, you probably know by heart the *Shema Yisra'el*. This belief statement begins:

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart...

If you are or grew up Roman Catholic, you may know by heart the Apostles' Creed. Protestants may know a slight variation of this:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

This Christian creed contains theological assertions about the nature of God, Jesus, death and the afterlife, moral judgment, and the church.

Though we don't have a one-size-fits-all creed, here is an easy statement about us you can memorize (it's one we teach our children):

We are Unitarian Universalists, with minds that think, hearts that love, and hands that are ready to serve. Together we care for our Earth, and work for friendship and peace in our world.

'Minds that think' refers to our use of science and reason in deciding what we believe; 'hearts that love' refers to love as a guide for our neighborly behavior; and hands ready to serve for the recognition that whether divine hands exist or not, human hands are needed to make the world a better place. It's a good summary of who we are, but it's possible that another faith tradition might affirm the same things.

My personal UU elevator speech attempts to set us apart: "Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal religion comprised of people who share common values and embrace diverse beliefs."

We join together as a community not because we agree on a doctrine, but because we promise or covenant to do so. Our Seven Principles are our shared values, but individually, we believe as we must. That we embrace diverse beliefs while joining together as one community distinguishes us.

Anytime you or I think about life, relationships, mortality, the beauty of life, or how to be good, we're doing theology. Strictly speaking, theology means the study of or words about God. More broadly it means the study of ultimate reality, which includes questions about life, death, meaning, morality, divinity, and more.

When I attended Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, my Methodist systematic theology professor described theology as ‘the lens we see the world through’. Whatever our beliefs, he stressed that they color or inform how we see and understand our life experiences. If I believe in a Creator God, when I see a beautiful sunrise I might say, “Thank you god for most this amazing day,” to quote the Unitarian poet e.e. cummings. But since I’m a religious naturalist, when I see a beautiful sunrise, I say “Wow! I’m so glad to be alive and able to witness such beauty.” My vision is not filtered through a ‘God’ lens.

Similarly, I think Democrats and Republicans see the world differently, and our theology informs our politics. Culture, class, race, and many other differences create other lenses that inform how we understand the reality we find ourselves living.

UU minister and theologian Galen Guengerich says,

“[Scientists try] to describe the physical world and explain its workings, ... theologians try to interpret human experiences and account for its meaning.” [Galen Guengerich, *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age*, page 79]

We use our theologies, then, to make sense of our lives. Guengerich adds,

“Theology is the process of talking about faith in a thoughtful and organized way—how faith arises, what sustains it, why it falters, and where it can make a difference in our lives and world.” [‘Theology for a Secular Age,’ [www.uua.org/leadership/uuu/2009/theology](http://www.uua.org/leadership/uuu/2009/theology)]

As I’ve said many times, if our beliefs make no difference in our lives or the world, then there is little point in having them. But with them, our core beliefs make us less susceptible to any shiny new idea we encounter. Most of us don’t fall for the latest fad idea because we do have a working theology, though we may be unaware of it. If we’ve given it little thought, in a time of crisis we may be unsure how to act. A personal theology can provide a compass to guide you and a foundation to ground you.

Echoing this idea, Paul Tillich, in his book *Systematic Theology*, writes, “Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundations and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.” Tillich recognizes that religious truth (what we believe) must be connected to our lives which are located in a particular time and place. Our beliefs, therefore, matter. Theology should not be an intellectual exercise without consequence to our lives.

Whatever your personal theology, and even though we have no single creedal faith statement, I believe Unitarian Universalism has its own theology. I believe we have a theology of inclusiveness, as found in our First Principle—all are worthy, all are welcome. Our inclusivity comes from Universalism’s promise that God’s love saves us all. I also believe we have a theology of interdependence, as indicated in our Seventh Principle. This comes from Unitarianism’s claim that God or Ultimate Reality is one and Transcendentalism’s belief that the divine is within all things, a unity. Our long Unitarian Universalist name still has meaning for me.

I want to share one more credo with you—my own, in its short form. Identifying the pieces and putting them together made me realize some consequences to my beliefs. The process made

clear why I am called to help make life better for all people, how I should treat my neighbor, and that I should be grateful for my life. I structured my credo to follow the order of the theological topics presented in the Apostles' Creed. My credo:

I believe life is sacred, and we are called to bring hope and healing to the world so that all may freely rejoice in the fullness and sacredness of life. I believe in the primacy of love in all relations; the trustworthiness of reason, experience, and intuition as authority for belief; the wisdom found in the world's great religions as a source for my faith and understanding; and in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, Buddha, and other sages and prophets; that humans fail to live up to their goodness and must return to right relations through acts of repentance and restoration; that life is meaningful only when we give it meaning; and that when we die, we return to the stardust we were made from, living on only in memory. And I believe in the Unitarian Universalist church; in community worship and personal spiritual practice; in celebrating life with rituals and ceremonies of remembrance and hope; that life is a spiritual journey; and in Unitarian Universalism's mission and vision for creating and sustaining a peaceful, just and fair world.

Although my chosen theological label, humanistic religious naturalist, isn't named here, it is described. I make no mention of a supernatural, divine guiding hand, and I indicate human hands and hearts must create the Beloved Community.

Since UUs have no single doctrine carved in stone, and because we know experiences change our understanding of the world and our lives, we recognize that beliefs may change over time. Our faith is always in a process of becoming. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's brother Samuel, both Unitarians, said, "Revelation is not sealed!" meaning new ideas, new discoveries, and new understandings will come our way. Ours remains a living tradition.

Long may it live.

Long may you be a part of this faith tradition.

Long may we put our faith and theology into practice, each and every day.

Long may it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. Share your story of how you came to know what you know or believe. Was it revealed, intuited, experienced, or reasoned out? Why are you sure your understanding is true?
2. What do you believe is the central truth or theology of Unitarian Universalism? What distinguishes it from other faith traditions?
3. What is the relationship between your personal faith or truth and your religious community? What does it mean to you to participate in a religious community?