



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“This I Believe”

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Reflections delivered by members on May 1, 2016

Centering Thoughts

All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all that I have not seen. Ralph Waldo Emerson

Nature is my manifestation of God. I go to nature every day for inspiration in the day's work. I follow in building principles which nature has used in its domain. Frank Lloyd Wright

Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man. The Dude, “The Big Lebowski”

The God I pray to is both transcendent and immanent, a part of me but greater than me. Kate Lore

Reflections

In this service members of the “This I Believe” Adult Religious Education class, facilitated by Rev. Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, shared their “This I Believe” statements.

Vivian Preston Sellers

As of today, I do have these beliefs:

I believe most strongly in what I now call the “lower case c” Christian beliefs of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, and of including everyone as that neighbor. I believe this not only because Jesus taught it, but because the Golden Rule is a precept of all the most-recognized world religions. For millennia, people have realized that if we could just do this ONE thing, the world, and our lives in it, would be so much better.

I believe in the power of direct experience to inform my beliefs, values, and behaviors. This first source from which UU’s draw our living tradition is of importance to me because I no longer want someone else telling me what I MUST believe; I want to figure it out on my own---as difficult as that might be. I want to be allowed to use the other sources---Christian, Jewish, and other world religions, great teachers and philosophers, earth-centered religions, and humanist teachings---all of which I use to strengthen my belief in the Golden Rule.

I believe that there is much good in this world; that love, compassion, equity, faith, generosity, and

empathy do exist. I believe that they are powerful forces I can use to make my life and the lives of others better. I believe that this is the divine within myself and others.

I believe that there is much evil in this world; that hate, discrimination, cynicism, selfishness, and greed do much to damage our earth and the people on it. I believe that I must fight this evil--- starting with that within myself.

I believe that the first principle of Unitarian Universalism---to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of EVERY person--- is the most difficult to put into practice because of those who would seem evil to others. I believe this is where the challenge of the Golden Rule becomes most evident; it is a struggle of sometimes epic proportions to find that worth and dignity, even at times within ourselves.

I believe, though, in optimism. I believe that good must conquer evil for the earth and its inhabitants to survive, and that this will happen. I believe I will, over time, become a kinder, more loving and compassionate person and that most people desire this for themselves.

I believe in doing good things for others in this life, not because it will save me from some fiery pit for eternity, but because it will make life better for all.

I believe that I have only one life; as Emily Dickinson wrote: "That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet." I believe that I will only live on past my physical existence in the memories of those I knew, and in the DNA that courses through my children.

I believe that my spiritual and religious existence will inform the remainder of my life with questions and that I may never answer them to my satisfaction. But I do believe that this life, with no formal creed, is better for me than to live a life by someone's else's beliefs; for, as Shelley Denham's song says, "even to question, truly, is an answer."

Brandon Foreman

As an attendee of Rev. Allison's class, I learned so much from the other attendees as well as myself about our belief systems. We spoke about a number of times, including deities (or lack of), morals, and the mysteries of death. In the UU, we are free to believe and explore our beliefs and spirituality. Even now, I don't have my beliefs set in stone; they are a work in progress and will probably remain in progress as I discover and learn more within myself and the world around me. I expect my beliefs to change as my knowledge and experiences increase. My beliefs are drawn from a few religions and belief systems. I believe in some shamanic and pagan beliefs as I believe that we are interconnected with nature and the spirits around us, as I believe in spirit animals and spirit guides. I also believe in the golden rule, "One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself," which is a belief that I carry with me in everyday life as I interact and meet people. In addition, I also believe in some humanistic beliefs, as I believe that humans do have the responsibility and the power to change the world.

So what does that make me? Well, I don't like to give myself labels... but if I had to give myself one, I would call myself a Seeker, as seekers are people searching for their path, no matter where

it would lead. My beliefs can change and evolve and they could change tomorrow or a week or a month or a year from now as I am still on my journey to learn more about myself and my path. It is a journey that I will lead to many places, both in physical, mental, and spiritual, in hopes that I can find truth in myself.

Carol Lee Baker

During the 46 years that I was without a spiritual or religious home, I felt that I couldn't express my personal religious beliefs because of the fact that I was a singular non-believer among many, many traditional believers. Now, when I have this perfect opportunity to express my beliefs, I find it very difficult. It was much easier to define what I do NOT believe rather than what I DO believe.

A few weeks ago our Sunday service was on "The Lens We See Through." As part of that service, what is essentially The Golden Rule was presented as other religions express it. To hear that expressed

through the lenses of differing religions was very significant and deeply touching to me. The Golden Rule - such a simple concept. So universal... I believe in this simple concept. To me this makes sense. How can I give to others any less than what I would appreciate from them?

There is wisdom in the world's religions. There are commonalities which could serve to unite religious followers, rather than set them apart and put them on a path of hate and destruction. I believe in emphasizing and celebrating those commonalities. How does it make sense to hate and kill in the name of God and religion? I believe in the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

I believe in God. Not as a supernatural, all powerful, controlling, or punishing type of being. I believe in God as a force of all existence. An energy, an essence that lives in each of us. My concept of God would not support religious conservatives who, based on their religious beliefs seek to restrict the freedoms of everyone else. William Ellery Channing taught that every person carries a seed of the divine. Let's nurture that seed and be more accepting of others' beliefs.

I believe that Christ was an exceptional person who lived his life to spiritual fullness and whose teachings of love, acceptance, forgiveness and healing are to be emulated, not worshiped.

I believe that life is sacred and is to be joyful. Living consciously with respect, love and acceptance for all other life are actions that enhance our present life rather than being a way to create a better afterlife. Although death is a certainty, what happens after death is unanswered. While I would love to feel the presence of loved ones who have passed on, at least in spirit or essence, my reason tells me that is not likely. Their memory, however, will always be in my heart and I treasure the time that they shared with me during this life.

In nature, I experience the perfection of life. The serenity of the mountains, the glory of a beautiful sunset, the beauty of our National Parks, and the sound of waves sweeping onto the ocean shore,

all renew my spirit.

I realized when I came to UUFA that my beliefs are consistent with those of Unitarian Universalism. My search for a spiritual home had come to an end and my need to be an active part of a spiritual community promised to be fulfilled. I NEED to be part of something bigger than myself. To contribute at levels that are greater than I can as just one person. I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I believe in justice, equity and compassion in all relations. I believe in showing respect, being accepting and acting with love. And I'm still very much in process working toward all of these.

I am so very grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this beloved spiritual community and take part in the work we do in our greater community.

Thank You

Joy Carroll

I had a typical "Christian" upbringing. But at the age of around 13, I started questioning just about everything. Especially the part about being saved. I was baptized so I'd go to heaven but my friend, Rena, who is not saved, will go to hell even though she's the sweetest, most giving person I know. That didn't make any sense to me and I didn't believe we just lie in the ground until Gabriel blows his horn. What if he forgets to blow it or loses his horn?

Around the age of 19, one day, my mother said she had just been to a Spiritualist Church. I didn't have a clue but she filled me in about the service having a similar format as our regular church, but at the end a Medium would take the podium and give out short messages from departed loved ones. Okay, this sounds a little creepy but I was fascinated and wanted to learn more.

In trepidation, I went with her one Sunday to experience it myself. One service and I was hooked. My whole world was about to take a sharp turn. Spiritualist believes in God, but God Is too big to be labeled or identified so each person defines God through their own personal relationship. I read their 9 Principles and the 8th was a light bulb moment - "*We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any soul here or hereafter.*" No eternal damnation in hell, but a natural life, where the opportunity for growth and progress to a better, higher and more spiritual self is open to all. One small example of this happened one Sunday, *my Mother told me that the medium brought in my Dad, who had passed 2 years prior. She said he was standing behind Mom, "giving her violets and asking for forgiveness"*. He wanted her to forgive him for what he had put her through in their 20+ years of marriage. They divorced when I was 7. My dad was making amends for his actions here on earth. Up to that day, I never even knew that violets were actually my Mom's favorite flower and the medium didn't know my Mom at all.

I began to attend regularly and started sitting in a development class for Mediumship. After a time, I was able to understand and hone in my gift of Clairaudience. And eventually I took a turn at the podium to give short messages to the congregation. As I developed, I began to be more and more receptive to spirit communication and guidance in my daily life and in others. I wouldn't say that I

ever totally converted to the Spiritualist Church, but I felt at home there.

In 1995, when I moved to Georgia, I had no idea there were no Spiritualist Churches in the entire state! In Indiana there were a lot and even Camp Chesterfield which is similar to Lily Dale in New York and Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp in Florida. Then I found UUFA and their principles which fit in nicely with my Spiritual beliefs and I was home. Our purpose here is to evolve spiritually and to use that to be of service to others as we continue to evolve even after the change called death, which I'd rather refer to as transitioning to the next plane. No matter the adversity, it's always been my faith that gets me through the difficult times and my faith is continually evolving.

My wife, Lisa, and I go to Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp every year. Lisa is less skeptical now especially when the medium says things that neither of us knew about the other. And especially after her brother, James, committed suicide, the Medium brought him in with *even the same mannerisms he had in life here*. It was a very big deal for Lisa and for me to be more open with her.

If you want to get an idea of how a true medium works, look up Tyler Henry on "Hollywood Medium." He's the real deal.

Lee Cornell

I identify as a UU Dude. For those unfamiliar with Dudeism, it is a modern form of Chinese Taoism, blended with concepts by the Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, and presented in a style personified by the fictional character of Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski, in the Coen Brothers' 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*. Dudeism is a real religion, and I am an ordained Dudeist Priest.

I believe that life is a sacred thing that will not happen again. The unique events, individuals, and circumstances that occurred to create the "you" and the "me" here today are statistically unlikely to repeat themselves. As such I believe every life is valuable, beautiful, and should be treasured. I feel that to honor the gift of my life I need to live it authentically and abidingly. For me that means my decisions, actions, practices, and relationships reflect my personal truths; and that I accept things as they are and strive to let go of how I think things should be.

I believe that everything contains a unique spirit that is reflected in the nature of the individual. I believe that the spirits of all things are connected in an interdependent web and I identify those connections as being made either with love or without love.

I do not know what becomes of the spirit after life ends and am not worried about mine. As Epicurus said, "When we exist death has not come, and when death does come we do not exist." or as another Great Dude in History, Mark Twain put it, "I do not fear death, I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it." The me that stands before you this morning is not the me that was 30 years ago, the me that will be in 30 years, nor the me that will live on in the memory of my family and friends after I'm dead.

I believe that we live life through our relationship with others, with the natural world, and with one's self. And that the purpose of life is to live fully in this one moment of time and fill our relationships with love. I fill my relationships with love by being of service to others. My greatest sense of joy in life comes from knowing that my actions or, when necessary, inactions may have brought a bit of peace, joy, or comfort to another.

I believe that “good” and “bad” are labels individuals use to define the way they perceive their interaction with a person or event; and that those labels do not define the truth of the person or event. The person or event is what it is; and each individual has a responsibility to find their own way to the truth of their relationships.

I believe in Unitarian Universalism and our shared belief in the free and responsible search for personal truth and meaning. I treasure our coming together in worship, sharing our diverse beliefs and perspectives, standing together in support of our common principles, and celebrating life through rituals and ceremonies. These activities help me stay on my path.

These are but a few of the “personal truths” that I have come to through contemplation of the teachings of others and by questioning my own reasoning and experiences. But mostly I have come to these “personal truths” through trusting my intuition. I can feel it physically, emotionally, and spiritually when I have strayed from the Tao that is correct for my life. When this happens I stop and remind myself to, as we Dudeists say, *“Just take it easy man, and roll with the cosmic flow.”*

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. How would you describe human nature; or what does it mean to be human?
2. What are your experiences with death and how have those experiences affected your views on life, death, and the possibility of an afterlife?
3. What “ah-ha” moments have defined your personal truths or theology?
4. How do the concepts of “good” and “evil” as you define them fit into your personal truths?