

**The Ups and Downs of Elevator Speeches:
Articulating and Sharing Our Faith
A Sermon Offered on February 8, 2009
at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia**

Readings

Our first reading comes from the deep and solemn tomes of the famous anonymous in answer to the question which is not quite timeless but began in 1879.

Q: HOW MANY UNITARIANS does it take to change a light bulb?

A: This statement was issued: "We chose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that's fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb (or light source, or non-dark resource), and present it next month at our annual light-bulb Sunday service, in which we explore a number of light-bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life, and tinted--all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence."

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

Three - one to write a solemn statement which will affirm the following: This light bulb is natural, a part of the universe, and evolved over many years by small steps.

There must be no discrimination against dark bulbs in any form, and means must be found for all "dark" bulbs to take their place alongside light bulbs on a basis of equality. We affirm the right of all bulbs to screw into the sockets of their choice regardless of the bulb's illumination preference.

UUs seek for each light bulb the fullest opportunity to develop itself to its full electrical potential.

A second UU to read this statement, even if s/he is the only person to do so, and then write the obligatory criticism and dissent.

A third UU to light a candle instead of cursing the darkness.

Finally: as a historical note:

It was a Unitarian, Lewis Latimer, who helped found the Unitarian Church in Flushing, New York and was the only African American chosen as one of Thomas Edison's Pioneers – who made the lightbulb practical and long lasting. From UU World Magazine: After hundreds of experiments, Latimer the same year develop(ed) long-lasting, inexpensive carbon filaments. He also improved almost every component and step in light bulb production: a threaded socket; the oven, chemicals, and glassblowing equipment; a new switch. He oversaw installation of public lighting systems in New York, Philadelphia, Montreal, and London. How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a lightbulb? Apparently: One.

Words of the Reverend David Baumbaugh

"This church is dedicated to the proposition that beneath all our diversity, behind all our differences, there is a unity which makes us one and binds us forever together in spite of time, and death and the space between the stars."

"It will not be enough to offer people the opportunity to "build your own theology." They must be offered the freedom to build their own theology in the context of a community which is asking serious and probing religious questions, and has the courage to make deep and profound affirmation -- questions and affirmations rooted in a sense of who we are and what we care profoundly about."

Sermon

So, there you are. You're headed down the elevator – from the 45th floor and someone gets on and overcoming normal reserve, looks at your chalice pendant and says "that's a pretty necklace". In that moment you have a choice – you can say "thank you" and leave it at that, knowing that you may be letting this person stumble on through life in ignorance of Unitarian Universalism or you can come out of the faith closet and say "thank you, it's a flaming chalice, symbol of my religion. I'm a Unitarian Universalist."

There're a lot of different directions that the conversation might go from there, but for the time being we're going to ignore the possibility that this person is baiting you or that they've picked up some tragically mistaken ideas about Unitarian Universalism – though we can come back to that later.

But there you are – you've outed yourself and they respond. Something to the effect of "oh – I've never heard of it – what's it like?" Or "what do you believe?" When people ask – "what do you believe" much of the time they're really asking "do you take Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" It's good to be aware of that – but it's important to look beyond it anyway.

So, what do you answer? It's often lamented that Unitarian Universalists can't put into a formula what this religion is about. And that makes people question whether or not this really is a religion after all.

If you stop and think about all this while trying to respond to your curious fellow traveler in the elevator – you're going to be in trouble. Still we can think about it a little bit now – since we're together for a longer ride.

For most of our history Unitarianism and Universalism and Unitarian Universalism have been religions – organized gatherings of persons centered on matters of ultimate meaning and providing support for life's journey in the face of our humanity and of our yearning for understanding and meaning where it can be found and made. We aren't a university nor are we social club.

It's not just the outward things – a lit chalice, somebody preaching from a pulpit, not even our history – rising out of two historic church traditions – that defines us as a religion. It's our concern with matters of life and death, with leading an ethical life, our yearning for meaning that presses us together in community, the fact that we celebrate life's significant events as part of recognizing that life is precious and brief, the sort of support we offer one another, the holidays that we celebrate and the fact that – underneath it all we feel, we think, and we know that there is something that beats at the

heart of Unitarian Universalism that holds the truth and draws us close – even if we can't easily put it into words.

But that's what this person is looking for – words of some kind. At this moment – they're wondering – what Unitarian Universalism is and whether it can stack up against – or at least hold its own with the world's great religions.

I suppose that's a lot to respond to in an elevator. Of course, there's the famous anecdote about Rabbi Hillel who lived in the first century of the Common Era. He was asked if he could teach the Torah standing on one foot. He responded – Be good to one another – the rest is commentary. Brief enough for an elevator ride – in a time before people were in such a rush to get from one place to another – unless they were being driven out. And it's compelling – especially for its time – early human life was fairly savage – and here was a set of teachings that had, at its core, kindness to others.

It's an assertion about the world – and our place in it. It is positive – rather than negative. Like – he didn't say: the Torah says the other gods are wrong, or don't worship idols, or God is on our side and no one else's. He didn't quote Leviticus or Deuteronomy and say – don't do this long list of things or else. He could have – but he didn't. He chose to make a positive assertion.

What's at the core of Unitarian Universalism and why should we tell someone about it in an elevator or anywhere else?

We are about something – this isn't just the church of those who don't believe in a literal hell, original sin, a cosmic man with a beard, or salvation by grace instead of works. We are about something.

And yet, one of the miracles of Unitarian Universalism is that it defies carving into stone or snipping into shorthand expressions of faith. We are a religion that embraces the complexity of the human condition. We have a fundamental belief in change – in the evolution of human thought. That isn't to say that we're all sure that human thought or life on earth is developing toward some particular goal – some of us might and some might not. But we are sure that human thought changes over time -- famously we say that revelation is ongoing – which means that we believe that the holy book is the book of life – containing all other books – and that it is never sealed. Therefore the realities of human existence and even the rules by which we live may change over time. For example – while there may have been a time when an eye for an eye was considered a fair punishment – we no longer want our prisons and world filled with people maimed by the legal system. We also know that, our capacity to deal with crime and illegal behavior needs to change so that we can find positive ways of encouraging people to live better lives and of teaching them new ways of being if they have made terrible choices. Unitarian Universalists -- we don't want our code carved in stone – but available to new insights over time. At the same time we seek ways of being that guide us toward lives of harmony, fairness, and peace.

We say that we are not creedal – we don't have a creed you recite – though it would be simpler. What Unitarian Universalism at its best offers is to formulaic religion as Bach is to elevator music or 5 star cuisine is to my cooking – only – and here's the big catch – you can have help, you will certainly have companionship – but you have to prepare it yourself. But we don't really have a religion for the spiritually lazy. We want to go trekking after it – test it against our lives, consider it from every angle.

So – we’re challenged in the creation of our elevator speech by the fact that human life and, therefore, our own faith defies simple sentences. We don’t want it captured and bound. We want our faith alive, growing, and free.

To make sure that your answer as well as our faith is alive I want you to look at yourselves first. How did you find Unitarian Universalism? Did someone tell you about it or did you stumble over it? Was it easy or hard to find? And when you found it – came to your first service or a forum or program – what finally convinced you to stay? Was there a moment when you felt an aha! Often people will say – “I was Unitarian Universalist all along but I didn’t know it until I found it. Perhaps it was while someone was giving their affirmation – a tradition in this congregation when someone gives a very short – though not elevator short – version of their spiritual journey or their credo. You might have been sitting there and thinking – wow – that reminds me of my own story – I must belong here! Or you might have been thinking – wow – that’s nothing like my own story – I must belong here – they embrace many stories. It could have been the words to a hymn or reading or the fact that our children learn about the world’s religions with respect; or something else that surprised and affirmed you and you felt a kinship here – a desire to keep delving into your own inner life in the context of this faith. Something that nourished a place inside you that had been hungry in some way.

So they’re waiting and they’re really not all that interested in a canned speech – they’re probably secretly hoping to hear someone else be authentic for a change – to know what makes someone else feel alive – to know where or if someone has found meaning. So this is a good time to, in a modest and measured way – let out your living faith.

Okay – you respond – but what am I going to SAY?

Well – be patient. You have to have your wits about you – but you don’t want to be a talking head – “Unitarian Universalism was formed from two religious groups – the Unitarians who had roots in the cities of New England and back to”... well – you see ... This is a time to be person to person.

They’re looking at you expectantly --

Here are the questions to ask yourself now – what do we stand for? Does it enrich your life or the lives of others? And how?

The Reverend Bill Sinkford, when asking himself for an elevator speech – came up with this one – One God, no one left behind. I like it - -sort of – but it doesn’t really say quite enough about what excites me about Unitarian Universalism. And one problem is that what I like the most about Unitarian Universalism is that it asks something of us – it does not simply offer formula that may feel like food – but leaves us hungry – it offers to those willing to engage fully – the nourishment of real meaning – beyond dogma – discovered, grown and shared in covenantal community. At its best it imparts a deeply satisfied feeling and a desire to taste that richness again: the richness of tradition partnered with innovation, deep connectedness partnered with individual spaciousness, recognition of the life of the spirit balanced with a full engagement of the mind. Hmm... good. Auntie Mame said: Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death. I think she was a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it.

In the elevator, over the counter, sitting in the airport, politely letting the Jehovah’s Witness at my door know that I am deeply grounded in a vibrant faith, I know that the words will come to me to – just right for that moment. They won’t cover

everything – but it'll be enough to answer the question and, perhaps, whet the person's appetite for more.

When Reverend Sinkford called for people to send their elevator speeches to the UU world Magazine one of the responses was this from Melvin Mackey of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Vashon, Washington. Unitarian Universalism embodies religious freedom. We do not provide the answers to life's great questions. Instead, we provide a beloved community in which individuals, working together and alone, are encouraged to find answers that are meaningful in the context of their own lives. We draw upon all sources of knowledge—including experience, authority, intuition, reason, and faith—in the search for answers. Ours is a living, dynamic religion. We are always free to develop and change our beliefs as we acquire new knowledge and insight concerning truth, reality, and the meaning of life.

I offer other examples:

Unitarian Universalism believes that there is a life-affirming, common thread that runs through the religions of the world and can bring humanity together in peace. Beyond creed, We gather to explore and experience that common thread and to worship together to honor it. With a belief in our shared power to heal the world – we are dedicated to the salvation of our world through peace, justice, and understanding.

Unitarian Universalism invites all humanity onto a holy, loving common ground that embraces our diversity. We welcome the truths of the world's religions and the insights of human life. And we encourage every person to engage in a deep journey of spirit and mind – where we experience the sacred in its many forms, find it within ourselves and are connected with all of life.

You'll need to find your own words. I believe in this faith – it has saved my life. It gives me the whole world to worship, pushes me to speak my heart and walk my talk. When I was a small child lying in bed and testing myself with ethical puzzles – like the famous – if I had to choose between my pet turtle and my sister – what would I do – if I had to choose between my stuffed dog, Wimpy, or my sister what would I do? if I had to choose between my pet turtle or my stuffed dog, what would I do – I never dreamed that there might be an actual religious community where people care about asking themselves – not those questions – but ones that reflect the challenges of human life and who would relish teasing out the answers. In your elevator speech you can share some of the joy of sharing the journey – in covenant groups, study groups, in conversation, and worship.

Now – having thought through a few aspects of what you might consider and say on the way down from the 45th floor – let's entertain what you might do if you are being baited or if the person has some tragic misconceptions about our faith.

If the person asks you if you or we take Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior – you might delicately say: well – many UU's would and many wouldn't because – remember we are diverse and committed to that diversity. None of us would hold that He'd be the only possible Savior for all people. We believe that God – or the Divine – is too great for that and has appeared around the world to people in the form of many wise teachers.

Another challenge came from a Catholic dictionary and probably other sources which alleged a number of years ago that Unitarian Universalism was a cult. If this comes up – while we could take an entire sermon to talk about cults – suffice it to say this – simply thinking about the nature of our faith should give you some clear answers. Since

cults are characterized by thought control and ideology – Unitarian Universalism would, in fact, be the polar opposite of a cult. The critical thinking that we nurture in our children and practice throughout life is a sort of inoculation against cults. Our young people are less vulnerable to charismatic leaders and to cults because they know how to question and are taught to value their questions.

The other misconception is that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything. First we can have faith in anything – Henry David Thoreau said that he had Faith in a Seed. Second we demand of ourselves that our beliefs stand up to reason, experience, and the test of the heart. Clearly – our commitment to the spirit of love – which is embodied by Universalism – creates an imperative to keep beliefs that affirm and promote life and the things of life which bring healing, peace, and justice.

Well – I could go on for hours about talking with spiritual fruits and religious nuts – but – by now – you have found your own words – or are about to.

And it's essential – because all around us is the evidence of what narrow religion can do – we have a calling in the world just as surely now as ever before – a calling to help humanity embody the divine, instead of simply worshipping it. It is essential because human thought needs to be free now more than ever – as our world is challenged and our lives are being tested by history – it is time for things of deepest value to be recognized. It is time to set aside the toys of commerce and take up the tools of human growth and global healing. And we have them in our faith – we have much to learn – and much to teach.

I can turn again to my elevator companion – because I want this person to know all that I have found along this religious path – and I want them to know you. My heart and mind are in concert and I can answer in all sincerity

Many lives, one humanity, many traditions, one religion, many hearts, one love. One Earth – many hands to heal her, ourselves, and one another. Great freedom, mutual responsibility. Body, mind, and spirit reconnected, our faith can make people whole again in the embrace of a covenanted community. This I have experienced – that is the core of my faith. That is my Unitarian Universalism.