

But I Can Believe Anything I Want!

sermon by Ken Jones, delivered March 12, 2017

This work is shared under a Creative Commons agreement¹

Does this scene sound familiar to anyone?

Hey, buddy, how's it going?

Not bad. Been really busy.

Really? Doin' what?

Oh, you know, the usual. Work, kids, stuff like that.

Yea, I know what you mean. Just gotta keep at it.

I haven't had a quiet night at home in I don't know how long.

Really? Not even home at night? What do you do every night?

It's different things. Work stuff one night, kid's school another. Then every night left it seems like I have some meeting to go to.

Meeting? What meetings?

Oh, church stuff, usually.

Really? Hey, I didn't know you went to church. You don't seem the churchy-type.

Oh, yea, I go to church, but it's kind of a different church. I'm on seven different committees, three task forces, and five affinity groups.

Wow.

Yea, it's a pretty big commitment.

So, what church do you go to?

The Unitarian Universalist Church.

The Unit... what?

Unitarian Universalist.

Ooohh. Say, are you those guys who do those really big weddings?

No, that's the Unification Church. We're definitely not them.

Oh. So what are you?

Well, we're a kinda liberal church. We're pretty diverse in what we believe.

Oh. But you're Christian, right?

Well, that's a hard question. We're not really Christian, but some of us are.

You mean, some of you are Christian, but not everyone?

Yeah.

Weird.

Maybe. Well, complicated.

What are the others? Those who aren't Christian, I mean.

Well, like I said, we're pretty diverse.

Well, then, what do y'all believe?

Like I said, we believe many different things. Some of us are Buddhist, some are Pagan, some are Jewish. But I'd say probably most of us are really agnostic.

I don't get it. If y'all believe different things, what makes you a church?

Well, we don't have a common creed or belief, but we come together because we all think that we each have to figure out our own beliefs.

So you all come together so that each of you can figure out for yourself what you believe?

Exactly!

So what do you need a church for? Hell, I can figure out what I believe just kickin' back on my porch with a beer.

But you see, we each help each other on our spiritual paths.

But how can you help each other if you don't believe in anything together?

Oh, it's pretty complicated. I'd like to stick around and explain, but I'm pretty busy. Gotta get to a meeting.

So, does this sound familiar? How many times have you tried to explain this most curious aspect of our tradition – that we all, to some extent, believe different things – to someone to no avail? This idea that we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth is, perhaps, the most notable characteristic thing about our tradition and one of the hardest to explain. But it is the one thing that makes us matter. It makes what we do here matter. It matters in our lives, and it matters in our world.

As many of you know, I have been doing a series of sermons this winter examining how we practice – or strive to practice – the seven principles adopted by Unitarian Universalist congregations as the covenant of our association. We’re looking at how we practice these principles because this is what our covenant asks of us: to affirm and promote. As the imaginary conversation I just shared with you indicates, this idea itself is often hard to understand in a culture such as ours that views religious identity in terms of faith alone. This cultural norm descends from the sixteenth-century Reformation’s idea of faith being the foundation of religion. It was Martin Luther who decreed five hundred years ago that it was faith alone, not practice or works, which determined one’s standing with God. While our culture doesn’t explicitly endorse this idea any longer, it still provides an underlying assumption that most of us live with on some level. When people ask us “What do you all believe?” we feel as though we need to have an answer to that question; or at least people unfamiliar with our covenantal religion seem to think we need an answer. That is why it is important for us to continue to try to learn how we *practice* our religion.

So, a bit of review. In the mid nineteen eighties, our congregations adopted what we now call our “Principles and Purposes”, which can be

found printed at the front of the hymnal, on the back of the order of service, and on all those little wallet cards that the more evangelical among us tend to carry around. There are seven broad principles, preceded by the phrase “We, the member congregations... covenant to affirm and promote...” You see it here already – these principles are here not for us to believe in, or to debate, or to recite as our creed. They are here for us to affirm and promote. You can also see here that this is collective work – we covenant as congregations to do this work, not just as lone individuals.

We talked about our first principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of all persons,” and struggled with the idea that it can often be hard to see inherent worth and dignity in people who do bad things or that we don’t like very much. But to affirm and promote worth and dignity is not to completely accept other people without reservation – it means we make a faithful assumption that affirming and promoting worth and dignity in all people facilitates greater potential for people’s worth and dignity to emerge. We also acknowledged that affirming the worth and dignity of all people does not imply an affirmation of the worth and dignity of all behaviors.

Our second principle calls for “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” an assertion that asks us to work toward building positive, healthy, and mutually beneficial relationships among people. We paid special attention to the vast inequality that exists in our world today, and how our religion can and should inform our participation in civic life and political affairs.

The third principle, “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth” gave us a chance to wrestle with the difficulties inherent in working to accept some people while inadvertently – perhaps – erecting

barriers to others. We know that we can't be accepting of everyone, but to be genuine about spiritual growth we need to be intentional about accepting in a way that may cause us to take a risk, to step outside of our own realms of comfort.

So now we're on our fourth principle "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." One of the arguments that I make about our principles is that they are not particularly unique principles – they are general values that most religions uphold. (Alger at ordination.) But more so than any of the others, this fourth principle is a bit unique. It is perhaps our key identifier. While most contemporary religions uphold that members can and should be free to find truth, we are unique in that we don't have a particular destination in mind. A contemporary Christian may uphold that no one should be coerced into finding Jesus as savior, or a Buddhist may believe that people should choose to follow the eightfold path of their own freewill. But our calling is to engage in this free and responsible search without any stated destination or goal, even if – strangely, some say – this path leads one out of Unitarian Universalism altogether. This peculiarity makes our search at the same time a bit easier but also more difficult than many other religious pathways.

The easy way to walk our path is to say, "We can believe whatever we want." In my work with young people in coming of age programs, I found that it is easy for a young person, even one who grows up in the folds of UUism, to learn about this principle as meaning exactly that. But the truth is it isn't that simple.

Many religious educators have struggled with this dilemma. An excellent resource in addressing this is in a curriculum for Youth and Young

Adults written by the co-ministry team of Rev. Jaco ten Hove and Rev. Barbara Wells, called “Articulating Your UU Faith”. Barbara and Jaco use our seven principles as groundwork in this task. They draw an analogy that they are like an arch, and the first, “the inherent worth and dignity of all persons” and the seventh, “the interdependent web of all existence” form the two foundation stones. The rest of the principles span between them and hold the whole thing together. I like this analogy, and in it, I see the fourth principle at the very top, as the keystone to the arch of our faith. Yes, it is a bit unique, and in many ways it is the key to understanding who we are and what we do in this curious but wonderful faith community.

It’s not that complicated to figure out how we practice a free search for truth and meaning. In our culture freedom is vastly exalted and in many ways we live an existence that Jean Paul Sartre described as one in which we’re condemned to freedom. In other words, you’re free to choose whether you want to or not. The exultation of freedom is something, like the emphasis on faith that I talked about earlier, that we inherit from the Western European traditions of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. As extremists in the Protestant reformation, and in the political upheavals of the Enlightenment, Unitarians and Universalists came to adopt the principle of freedom in our search for religious truth in the most profound way. Up through most of the twentieth century, our free search became the keystone of our faith; our unique place in the world of religion. We became extremists in freedom, those who, through many uninformed eyes, could believe whatever we wanted.

This is all fine and good. Our unapologetic embrace of freedom is something that I love about our faith tradition. I would like to believe that I,

like martyrs such as Michael Servetus who gave their lives to advance this freedom, would be willing to give my life to protect this precious gift.

But we're not just talking about freedom, we're also bound by the other descriptor of our search: responsible. What does it mean to affirm and promote a free *and responsible* search for truth and meaning? Our understanding of the word responsible usually brings to mind qualities such as trustworthiness, capability, and dependability. Those are all good meanings, but they don't offer much help in understanding what a responsible search for truth might be. To some, a responsible search may simply mean one that is guided by rationality. But here at the dawn of the twenty-first century we are starting to understand the limits of rationality; we can't rely on reason alone to help us understand a human existence that is not always rational.

To me, to understand what is meant by a responsible search we must look to the very literal meaning of the word responsible; that is, the ability to respond. How is it that, in our search for truth and meaning, we allow ourselves to respond to the mystery, to the world and the universe, to the divine and the mundane, to the suffering and injustice, and to the love that we witness and feel in our hearts? This is a very difficult thing to do, because our cultural emphases on freedom and rationality lead many of us to feel that we must work to figure this out, we must continue to think things through. But to allow ourselves the ability to respond to love and to mystery means we sometimes have to stop -- stop thinking, stop figuring, stop searching. The paradox is that in a free and responsible search we have to learn to stop and allow ourselves and our spirits to be open to the

universe, to the intuitive and the extuitive revelations that may come when we least expect them.

The liberal Christian writer Anne Lamott tells a wonderful story about the time, many years ago, she found herself in a profound state of despair – addicted to drugs and alcohol, suffering in an abusive relationship – when suddenly one night she found Jesus sitting by her, waiting for her to let him in. She didn't believe it at first, because her rational mind, of course, knew it wasn't actually Jesus, and if there were to be some supernatural spirit coming to her in her time of despair, it would certainly conform more to her image as an hippie-esque feminist liberal San Franciscan with dreadlocks. But she said it *was* Jesus, at least that's how she perceived it, and said that he started following her around, like a cat. "Everywhere I went, I had the feeling a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever." After a week or so, she finally gave in; she finally let the cat in. And that was her moment of conversion.

This story isn't relevant because it was Jesus that showed up in her life at the most opportune time – in fact, as a non-Christian who admires her work, I almost felt a little disappointed that it *was* Jesus. Maybe I would have liked the story better if it would have been an exotic Goddess or some cosmic energy like The Force from Star Wars who showed up unexpectedly in her room one night. But for her it was Jesus, and what was so moving was not Jesus' appearance but *her* transformation in letting Jesus in. This is the heart of spiritual growth: it is that moment when you stop trying to figure it out, stop trying to be in control, and stop trying to

reach a foregone conclusion that your life is changed. It is in *responding* to that which the rational mind can't understand, to be open to respond to what God, or the universe, or the love that others have for you in whatever way that may come about. In the phraseology of twelve-step programs, it is to let go and let God.

Or as the Buddha said: "My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the fermentation of sensuality, released from the fermentation of becoming, released from the fermentation of ignorance. With release, there was... knowledge."

This is, admittedly, pretty hard for us rational-thinking Unitarian Universalists. For when we say that we have no pre-defined destination as to where our spiritual searches will take us, we sometimes have great difficulty when we or those we love go down a path of more traditional religions that we don't understand. This is the dilemma that just about every UU parent must wrestle with: I want my child to be free to search, free to believe what he or she wants, but how will I feel if my child becomes an evangelical Christian? Or, for that matter, a committed atheist who has no need for church? And how do we feel when those among us articulate a faith or a spiritual search that makes us uncomfortable?

The answer to this is all in this simple, keystone principle: we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We have no creed or doctrine to guide us, only that which is available to us as human beings. But that, my friends, is a lot: it is the sum total of all our experiences, all that we learn of other's experiences, and all that we learn and know about the world. We can't predict where our search will take us; we can only stand on the foundation of our faith that freedom and

responsibility together will lead all of us to truth and meaning in our lives. It is important that we remember that our search is not only for that which is “true,” but also that other perhaps-overused word: “meaning.” The meaning we search for is the foundation of why our lives and what we do with them matter. Truth alone sometimes isn’t enough; our search is also to give us inspiration and comfort when raw truth leaves us cold and confused.

As we navigate the archway of our faith, it is at this fourth principle, when we are at the apex and furthest from the ground, that we are most vulnerable, most at risk. But it is also at this moment when we are most likely to be surprised, to have our lives transformed. If we take to heart the conviction that it is not the destination that is our ultimate concern, but rather the integrity of the path we follow and the lives we lead, then these unexpected destinations can be seen as important anchors in our lives and the lives of those we love.

So no, we don’t believe whatever we want. We believe what we *have* to believe, what is *responsible* to believe; based not on our personal wish for how things ought to be, but based on our experience and knowledge of the world as it is. Then we take that knowledge and build around it a structure of meaning that defines the essence of our lives.

Yes, it is difficult to answer the question “What do y’all believe?” when asked by an outsider. The answer, although unfortunately it is not a simple one, is found in our covenant. We agree to walk together in the same manner seeking out deeper truths, and responding to the needs of the world. Our own Healthy Relations Covenant is like this too – it is not a

destination but a journey. It is a journey in which we all strive to be our best selves. In our covenant, we promise to:

Treat each other with kindness

Celebrate each other's spiritual growth

Listen deeply to others

Speak with courage and humility

Share the ministry of this congregation.

None of us will magically do all these things all the time just because we happened to have written them down on paper. But like our free and responsible searches for truth and meaning, this covenant is the guide by which we strive to live in loving, respectful community. It is not the destination; it is the journey.

So take a risk. Let go and let God. Or the Universe, or love, or whatever word comes to you. Whatever you do, be ready to pay attention to the world. Be ready for answers that may come not from within you but from without. And be ready to be surprised. If you fall, we're here for you.



Sermons by [Rev. Ken Jones](#) are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).