

**The “Good” UU**  
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Today is one of my favorite days of the year. This morning, when we welcome our newest members and celebrate the commitment they are making to join this congregation, I am reminded of the day eleven years ago when I joined my first UU congregation and began calling myself a Unitarian Universalist. I am reminded of the courage and hope the act of becoming a member demands. For some of our new members this is the first time they have ever joined a religious community; for some this is the second or third congregation they have joined. For some today might be the beginning of a five or six generation commitment to this faith tradition; for others this will be a three or four year experiment. Time will tell.

One thing today is not; today is not a guarantee that our new members now have a slot reserved for them in heaven. I hope that this is not a surprise to you. Sometime I wish it was. I wish I could stand up here and promise that by joining this Fellowship, by becoming a Unitarian Universalist, you are guaranteed eternal peace and joy.

Instead of giving high fives, I would punch a ticket, or maybe give out a membership card that would get you inside the pearly gates. If I could, we probably would have a whole lot more new members than we do today. Of course most of us are not sure if there is a heaven, and if there is, our Universalist ancestors would tell us that the religion we practice doesn't matter because everyone gets in.

But imagine if it happens like this. After we draw our last breath our spirits are whisked through the tunnel that so many people have written about, towards the bright light. When we get to the bright light we find out that it really is a giant parking lot, just like the one at Walt Disney World. A friendly host or hostess welcomes us and asks us what religion we practiced when we were alive. Maybe we are a little surprised by the question but we answer it and then are put on a shuttle which takes us to the department of heaven that best matches our religion. Of course one of the good parts of saying we are Unitarian Universalist is that the line to get on the shuttle is a lot shorter than the Southern Baptist, Catholic or Muslim line!

The shuttle takes us to the ticket booth. Let me stop for a moment and let you know that since I was a little boy Disneyland has been one of my favorite places on earth. I proposed to Kathleen in Disneyland. When we visited Disney World in 1989 I realized that Disneyland would be heaven's waiting room and that Disney World would be the real heaven. Maybe your heaven looks different but this is my story!

The heaven that awaits us on the other side of the ticket booth looks different depending on which religion we practiced. This is what Unitarian Universalist heaven looks like. When we walk down Main Street and under the giant question mark arch, we find a store selling bumper stickers with catchy phrases like "I'm Straight But Not Narrow" and "Question Authority", there is another store that sells t-shirts with the names of 100 famous UUs on them and flaming chalice jewelry. There are at least ten or fifteen bookstores waiting for us. There is a natural foods store with vegetarian, organic and lactose-free food so tasty it makes Whole Foods look like McDonalds. Recycling bins litter the streets and are so plentiful it is hard not to bump into them.

Each day there is a different parade down Main Street; one day a peace march, the next day a parade for equal rights, the next day one for animal rights. People with petitions greet us on every corner and banners proclaiming justice and peace hang from every doorway. There are potlucks every day (I'm told there is lots of Southern food) and a coffee hour, with free trade coffee, every hour on the hour. But only the extroverts show up. There is an NPR station where the finest symphony orchestras perform and Terri Gross and Garrison Keiler walk around signing autographs all the time. Of course, there are seven or eight universities and dozens of libraries where you can learn and get as many degrees as you want. There are town hall meetings every night where most of the founding fathers hang out, and congregational meetings each week for those who enjoy debating and arguing. There are committee meetings five times a day and Board meetings - with or without policy governance - six nights a week.

There is a nature park that has a replica of Walden's Pond and lots of trails to hike and trees to sit under. There are gardens to tend, places where you can howl at the moon each night and celebrate the solstice once a week. There is a big cafeteria where you can go to learn and practice a different religion every day. You can attend a Sunday service in a cathedral with a steeple just like in New England or in the

round, with or without spoken joys and concerns, with or without announcements and with or without applause.

Every day there is something new to do. There is even a place where former ministers, and those who want to argue with them, go to give and hear sermons every hour on the hour. Choirs practice around the clock and every musical instrument known accompanies them. You have your choice to sing hymns with the new words or the old words. People walk down the streets hand in hand, arm in arm – unless you aren't the touchy-feely type. Everyone is accepted, welcomed and loved. There is no bigotry, no oppression, no injustice. I am told it is an amazing place. Everything that we want to do for eternity awaits us if we can only get a ticket in.

This morning I invite you to reflect with me on a question that the ticket taker might ask you, if you found yourself in the Unitarian Universalist line into heaven, **were you a good UU?**

Before I offer my current list of the ten traits of a good UU, let me tell you why I think it is important for us to ask ourselves the question. The question, or maybe the answer to the question, can help us lead better lives whether or not we ever find ourselves in the line for heaven.

I was reminded why this question is important when I preached at another congregation a few years ago. I was preaching, as I like to do from time to time, on evangelism, about how we can share the good news we have found as Unitarian Universalists more freely and more often. During coffee hour a man said he liked my sermon but that he did not think we would ever grow very much because Unitarian Universalism was really religion “lite”. And he suggested that most people who practiced Unitarian Universalism or thought about practicing it, would never take it seriously enough to talk to others about it.

I have heard different versions of this argument before. Most of our congregations ask very little from its members. Many people do not even call Unitarian Universalism a religion. I have met people that have attended and/or been members of congregations for decades, and who will never call themselves Unitarian Universalists let alone tell someone else about us.

Stephen Carter, in his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, asserts that many people do not take their religion seriously. He's not speaking only of UUs when he writes: “Religions are more and more treated

as just passing beliefs – almost as fads – rather than as the fundamentals upon which the devout build their lives on. If religions become inconvenient, give them up! If you can't remarry because you have the wrong religious belief, well, hey believe something else. If you must go to work on the Sabbath, it's no big deal! It's just a day off! And through all of this trivializing rhetoric runs the subtle but unmistakable message: pray if you like, worship if you must, but whatever you do, do not on any account take your religion seriously. This attitude exerts pressure to treat religion as a hobby."

There will always be people in our congregations who treat religion as a hobby. People who think we are religion lite, a place to come on Sunday once in awhile because we are interesting places to be when they are not skiing, golfing or reading the New York Times in bed (reasons that I have heard from people on why they sometimes do not come on Sunday morning). Of course we welcome everyone who comes here whether it is once a year or once a week but in my experience there is a difference that happens in our lives when we make a commitment to go deeper.

Maybe that commitment is to come every Sunday morning. Maybe it is to sign up to join a covenant group or to study our seven principles. Maybe it is to pitch in and help make coffee. Maybe it is to sign the membership book and become a member. Maybe it is to become a Worship Associate or a Pastoral Listener or an RE teacher. Or maybe it is to make a checklist on what it would take to be a good, or at least better, UU. Not because these things will get you into heaven, but because they will help you be a better person and live a happier, healthier and more meaningful life.

The first item on my list of how to be a good UU is to be a **seeker & learner**. This is the first item on the list because if we are not someone who is curious and wants to explore the answers to life's big questions, and even its little ones, we probably won't feel comfortable being a UU. Ours is a religion that does not give pat answers that fit everyone; instead we encourage the perspective that revelation is continuous. I quote our UUA website: "Since human understanding of life and death, the world and its mysteries is never final, we endorse the free search for truth, or more precisely, unfolding truths, over time." The good UU is constantly seeking to learn more about life, about the history and traditions of Unitarian Universalism, and about how to be a better person.

The second trait of a good UU is that he or she **shows up**. A recent survey conducted by City University of New York found that 629,000 people define their religious beliefs as Unitarian Universalist. Interesting, since we only have about 160,000 adult Unitarian Universalist members in this country. Those are the people who show up. We may not believe that missing a Sunday service is a mortal sin but to be a Unitarian Universalist is to believe in the power and possibility of community. We may not recite creeds here but we do covenant and promise to one another our mutual trust and support. How do we practice mutual trust and support? By showing up. By being here for each other. By fully participating in a congregation. We won't get brownie points for heaven by showing up but we do get the opportunity to serve, to practice, to learn, to care and to grow.

The good UU **practices service** – regularly. This service can take many forms. It might be serving food to the homeless, or working for human rights. It definitely includes doing service in your congregation – helping with coffee, teaching our children, chairing a committee, planting flowers, or greeting newcomers on Sunday. We live in a time and in a consumerist society where most people look at life, and religion, to see what's in it for them. We ask of our restaurants, our stores, our religious communities how will you serve **me**? And when we don't like how we are served, we leave and find another restaurant, store or religion. Unitarian Universalism, as do most religions, reminds us that we are called to serve *at least*, if not more, than we are served. A good UU doesn't forget.

A good UU **shares**. This is similar to serving but actually is a little different. A good UU is liberal – not in the political or religious sense of the word but in the original meaning of the word: to be generous. Good UUs share their money, their time, their selves with their congregation, their association, their friends and the world - liberally. Good UUs are not afraid to share their good news about being a UU with others as well.

To be generous it helps to be **open**. A good UU seeks to be open. Open minded, open hearted, open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. Good UUs welcome everyone with open arms, and do their best to avoid fundamentalism in how they think, act and believe. Yes UUs can be fundamentalists too. A good UU can argue passionately about something and then listen just as passionately and respectfully to someone with another perspective. The good UU is open and then practices tolerance, respect, sometimes even acceptance for those who sees things differently.

Good UUs **believe**. They believe in something and they can tell you about it in words that are clear and understandable. Although they may have a long list of things they do not believe in; especially when it comes to religious symbols and ideas, they spend more time talking about what they believe than what they do not. While their faith may sound and look different than those of other religions, they have a burning flame inside that guides their lives. They put their beliefs into action and if you followed them around in their day to day life for awhile, you would find that they practice what Thomas Jefferson (a Unitarian who rarely showed up) said: “It is in our lives and not in our words that our religion must be read.” Putting beliefs into action leads us to trait number seven.

The good UU **acts with integrity**. The reason that the ticket taker at Heaven won't only ask us if we were good UUs is because it is against the principles and history of our tradition to strive to be a good UU and not be a good worker, a good father, a good grandmother, or a good citizen. A good UU strives to act with integrity in his or her entire life. To be honest. To be trustworthy. To treat each person with respect and dignity at work and in committee meetings – and to demand the same of others. To be part of the interdependent web of life on Sunday mornings and on Tuesday nights. Good UUs sleep well at night because their words and their actions, their values and their religion are consistent.

Good UUs are **engaged in the world – and work to make it a better place**. Good UUs don't practice their religion to escape the realities of the world, they use it to help them become more grounded in those realities and to learn how to do something to make a difference. Good UUs are compelled to find ways to bring more justice into the world and they are inspired to do more by being part of a religious community. One of my former congregants, Hugh Fordyce who has been a UU for over 30 years, put it this way: “It is important to support a religion that offers hope and support for our finest principles of truth, justice and compassion. Yes, I could have been much the same person without being a Unitarian, but the church has given me support and championed important causes more forcefully and effectively than I could have done alone.” Being a good UU means that we must never need to act alone.

The good UU **engages in a spiritual practice**. Good UUs know that while being engaged in making the world a better place is critical to living our faith, so is being engaged in practices that, in UU minister Scott Alexander's words, “significantly deepen the quality of relationship with the miracle of life within and beyond you.” Engaging in a spiritual practice reminds us that there is more to life than doing,

and connects us to the wonder and mystery that surrounds us. Good UUs practice prayer, meditation, music, gardening, hiking, writing and they practice them in an intentional way which feeds and nurtures their spirits on a regular basis. They are rarely too busy to take the time to replenish and renew themselves and because they do, they seem more grounded, more peaceful most of the time.

Tenth, and finally for today, the good UU believes in, and practices, **transformation**. Good UUs know that showing up in a religious community, engaging in the world, having a spiritual practice, learning, sharing, serving, acting with integrity, believing and being open transforms. They know that being a good UU not only transforms individuals' lives but that it also has the power and potential to transform the world as well. Being a good UU offers the possibility of an ever surprising, ever changing, ever expanding experience and vision of wonder and mystery, of God, of love, of what it means to be a fully alive and whole human being.

Transformation, or the hope of transformation, is one of the main reasons we come to religious communities and I suspect it is what the ticket taker in Heaven really cares about. The question we will be asked, or that we should be asking ourselves, is not whether we were a good UU or a good Catholic or a good Christian. No, the question we need to answer is what did we do to become the best person we could be – and how did we help others become the best they could be.

I have committed my life to the belief that being a Unitarian Universalist is one of the best ways to answer that question and live the best life I possibly can. I hope you have too. May we teach each other what it means to not only be a good UU, but even more importantly a good human being. Maybe one day we can watch a parade on Main Street, shop at the Flaming Chalice jewelry store or practice yoga together in Heaven. But even if we do not reach that great UU Disney World in the sky, we, and the people we leave behind, will be able to say we lived good lives and that we made a difference.

May it be so. Amen.