

CORE VALUES OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

A Sermon By
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Who are we? And what do we care most about? What should we be doing in the world, really?

These are questions humans have been asking for, perhaps, as long as we've been aware of ourselves and wondered about our place in the universe.

I think we will be asking them for as long as humans exist, not because there is no answer, but because the answer touches upon both the universal and the everchanging aspects of life.

I found a story about who we are. It was in Don Miguel Ruiz' book, *Los Cuatro Acuerdos*, or, *The Four Agreements*. Ruiz is a healer and a *nagual*, or shaman who guides people to personal freedom, in the ancient wisdom tradition of the Toltecs of Mexico. He tells a story in the introduction that begins like this:

Three thousand years ago, there was a human just like you and me who lived near a city surrounded by mountains. The human was studying to become a medicine man, to learn the knowledge of his ancestors, but he didn't completely agree with everything he was learning. In his heart, he felt there must be something more.

One day, as he slept in a cave, he dreamed that he saw his own body sleeping. He came out of the cave on the night of a new moon. The sky was clear and he could see millions of stars. Then something happened inside of him that transformed his life forever. He looked at his hands, he felt his body, and he heard his own voice say, "I am made of light; I am made of stars."

He looked at the stars again, and he realized that it's not the stars that create light, but rather light that creates the stars. "Everything is made of light," he said, "and the space in-between isn't empty." And he knew that everything that exists is one living being, and that light is the messenger of life, because it is alive and contains all information.

Then he realized that although he was made of stars, he was not those stars. "I am in-between the stars," he thought. So he called the stars the *tonal* and the light between the stars the *nagual*, and he knew that what created the harmony and space between the two is Life or Intent. Without Life, the *tonal* and the *nagual* could not exist. Life is the force of the absolute, the supreme, the Creator who creates everything.

This is what he discovered: Everything in existence is a manifestation of the one living being we call God. Everything is God. And he came to the conclusion that human perception is merely light perceiving light. He also saw that matter is a mirror -- everything is a mirror that creates light and images of that light -- and the world of illusion, the *Dream*, is just like smoke which doesn't

allow us to see what we really are. "The real us is pure Love, pure Light," he said.

This realization changed his life. Once he knew what he really was, he looked around at other humans and the rest of nature and he was amazed at what he saw. He saw himself in everything -- in every human, in every animal, in every tree, in the water, in the rain, in the clouds, in the earth. And he saw that Life mixed the *tonal* and the *nagual* in different ways to create billions of manifestations of Life.

In those few moments he comprehended everything. He was very excited, and his heart was filled with peace. (pp. xv - xviii)

I chose this story for you because I know it to be a true mystical experience which he expressed as a story. I know it because I had one as well, and I have heard the experiences of others, and the clues within the tale, of oneness and becoming one with everything and the sense of peace, are common to mystical experiences no matter what faith tradition one is or whether one even believes in a god or is an atheist. And I was captured by Ruiz' statement, that "the real us is pure Love."

The belief, or rather, understanding that life is love, or god is love, and that we are love, is very old. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Mo-Tse, founder of a religion based on a vision of universal love, said that "When all the people of the world love, Then the strong will not overpower the weak. The many will not oppress the few. The wealthy will not mock the poor. The honored will not disdain the humble. The cunning will not deceive the simple." (601)

The concept of love as the universal core value has remained strong, through Jesus' proclamation that Love is the most important commandment (Matthew 22:37-39), and the apostle Paul's repetition that "the greatest of these is love," to today's near holy icon, John Lennon, and the Beatles who proclaimed, "All you need is love!"

This summer, Curtiss and I went to Las Vegas and saw the Cirque de Soleil's performance of the Beatles' *Love*. It was amazing, with color and people flying through the air and doing all kinds of acrobatics and dance with wild costumes and psychedelic lights, all to the music of John, Paul, George and Ringo. It threw me back to the sixties, and I realized that I had been shaped in my spiritual growth as much by the songs of the Beatles as by the hymns of my Unitarian Universalist church.

I hadn't realized that when the Beatles sang "Love, love, love...love is all you need," I heard it in my heart, took it in, and added it to the doxology which we sang in my church, which went, "From all that dwell below the skies, let faith and hope with love arise, let beauty, truth and good be sung, through every land, by every tongue." I added it to the covenant we recited, "Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, to serve humankind in friendship, thus do we covenant."

I was raised through the decade that proclaimed that "God is Love," and even though I wasn't necessarily aware of the long heritage that value or belief had, I took it in and it became a core belief for me.

We Unitarian Universalists base our religion on values, not beliefs. This makes us different in a critical way from most other religions, but not all. I was sent an email from a quaker who found a sermon I had written on "Honoring Our Theological

Diversity,” and he had quoted it and written a commentary he had posted on the internet which pointed out that quakers base their faith not on a set of beliefs, but a set of values. He quoted the story I had told of Moses climbing the mountain and bringing down, not a set of beliefs, but a set of values, called the Ten Commandments, and that it is common values that enable people to live together in peace.

We are not at all alone in realizing that values are what are most important, especially love. Ancient Chinese, ancient Toltec, and the long Jewish and Christian heritage that imbues our worship, show that love is probably the most important core value we humans have, through all of our existence, and if people would only love one another, as Mo-Tse said so long ago, the world might be a better place.

There is a reason we have not achieved such a holy place in life. There is a great amount of fear in the world, and greed, and pain, and apathy. My colleague, Tom Owen-Towle, told us at my installation a decade ago that he thinks courage is the most important human virtue, because “without courage we don’t risk love.” He goes on to say that “without courage we neither build much justice nor share much joy.”

We Unitarian Universalists have a long heritage of courage, just like any other religious tradition. Ours started, mainly, with a group of people who read the bible during the Reformation, and discovered that there was no Trinity. Now, in those days, people argued about amazing nuances of whether and how God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit might exist, separately, within each other, of the same substance, and Unitarians got into that argument to the point that some were burned at the stake for their Unitarian belief, or the belief that God was singular, a unity, not a trinity.

In writing our Unitarian history, Earl Morse Wilbur said that our most important values have been “freedom, reason, and tolerance,” and we’ve been trying to understand how those values have shaped us ever since. The freedom to believe and to practice one’s own faith are foundational values, as is the use of reason in religious matters, to use the mind that, as they would say, “God gave us,” and decide for ourselves what is right, and true and good. And to tolerate other’s beliefs is critical to living together with each other, in peace.

It was ministers like Channing and Parker and Emerson who moved Unitarians away from total dependence on the Bible, and to consider that the divine was in all things, all existence, to be discovered in nature. This transition of Unitarianism led to a realization that truth exists in many forms and in many faiths, and we began to look around, further and further from the Jewish and Christian stories and traditions that first shaped us, to find that wisdom, even as far back as Mo-Tse, and farther. And in this process, we found and collected the wisdom of the ages, as did many other people of other faiths, and discovered the core values that underlie our different beliefs.

One of those is the Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is found in many religions. I have a bookmark listing six, but I saw a handout at a UUUN conference once that listed almost twenty, if I remember right. This, in my opinion, is a code of behavior that is based on the universal value of love. It is as old as Mo-Tse, and I would guess, much older, perhaps created by those men and women, those shamans, those leaders of tribal humanity, who learned very early on that love was necessary to human survival. It still is.

We have developed covenants and songs to help us remember that love is the greatest of all, and we have created a set of Principles and Purposes that explain what

living a life of love really means: promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance and encouragement to spiritual growth; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; a world community of peace, liberty and justice for all; and respect for the interdependent web of existence. These are principles we hold dear, and they guide us in our lives, but the core, if you take some time to ponder it, what feeds our concern and ability to live these principles, is the core value of love, and the most important virtue of courage.

If you want to speak metaphorically, poetically, spiritually, who we are is Love. And what we care most about is Love. And what we should be doing, really, is loving one another, with the kind of courage that Life demands, that compassion demands.

We are approaching our twentieth year of existence as a congregation, and Betty Meikle pointed out at a meeting the other night that we are going through an identity crisis. Who are we, really, as a congregation, and what do we care most about, and what should we be doing together, as a collective core ministry?

We're going to give you the opportunity to be part of that discussion, and that decision, because we don't want to just keep on talking, but we want to put our values into action, just as the covenant that I grew up with said: "And service is [our] prayer." Or, as the newer version in the hymnal states, "And service is [our] law." I find that fascinating, that a UU would say that we, of such a liberal tradition, have a law. Hmm. But, maybe that is what it takes to get us into the trenches even better, to reach out to one another and invite each other to act on those principles and purposes, to live the life of Love that is the core value of humanity.

On Saturday, September 27, in the afternoon, we will gather for our first all-congregation retreat that we've had in a long time. We're calling it "20 Years: What's Next?" We'll reflect on who we are as a congregation, who we want to be, and choose what we want to do together, at this point in time. I hope you all can find a way to participate in this discernment of our ministry to the world and each other.

About eight years ago, I thought I was doing pretty good with figuring out what we UUs are all about and sharing that in sermons. And one Sunday, after the service, a visitor pulled me aside and said, "Where is Love in your congregation? I can't find it in anything!" I never saw her again, but ever since, I've been looking for love in all the right places, and believe me, I'm finding it. I have dug it out of the ancient books and tried to insert it into every sermon, and I've come to think, atheist that I am, that that woman was some sort of angel, appearing to point me in a better direction, toward a clearer path, into an ancient way of holy living. I'm grateful to her, and I hope she did find love somewhere, and that it saved her life.

Who are we? What do we care most deeply about? And what should we be doing, really? My answer is Love. How we decide to manifest that Love is something we should all take very seriously, for our lives, and the Life that is the world, which are, in the most profound of Truths, the same thing, depend upon it.

May love be your guiding light in all things, in all ways.