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April 29, 2006

IN THEIR WORDS

Honoring the journey

Unitarian Universalists emphasize respect for one another, not creeds

Question: In general terms, please explain what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, and what is the basis of your faith?

Answer: The basis of UU faith is a core of shared values that affirm respect for freedom, reason, tolerance and the open search for truth in religion. In many other traditions, faith revolves around common beliefs, often called "creeds." Unitarian Universalism is noncreedal, maybe even "anti-creedal," in affirming that each person's religious journey is honored, and no specific creedal belief is required. What is required is respect for one another's journey and openness to new insights.

The question "What do UUs believe?" is not a useful question in understanding our tradition. We have within our churches people who hold diverse beliefs -- humanists, Christians, mystics, agnostics,

- Sliced skin lands in Bloomington burger
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🔍 zoom

Common beginnings: The Rev. Bruce Clear said many people who discover Unitarian Universalism after feeling alienated from the religion of their youth often comment, "I've been a UU my whole life without even knowing it." - DANESE KENON / The Star

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

- **Name:** The Rev. Bruce Clear.
- **Age:** 56.
- **Training/experience:** B.A., Anderson College; M.A., Georgetown University; M.A., University of Chicago Divinity School; D.Min., Meadville/Lombard Theological School. Served a church in Vancouver, Wash., for 10 years before coming to All Souls in Indianapolis in 1993.
- **Family:** Married to Nancy Renner Clear. Six children/stepchildren.

ABOUT the CHURCH

- **Name:** All Souls Unitarian

Buddhists, atheists, Jews, those with an "earth-centered" spirituality, and many who prefer no particular label for their beliefs but think of themselves simply as "searchers."

The more fruitful question is "What do UUs value?" Regardless of the "label" one affirms in our community, we share a common covenant of respect for the free search of others on our journey. Those who are unable to embrace that kind of respect are self-excluded from our religious community.

Q: What do you think Unitarian Universalism offers people?

A: Unitarian Universalism is a religion for people who are comfortable with ambiguity, who see religion as a journey more than a destination, and who are willing to keep their minds open to new ideas.

For such people, our churches provide an intergenerational community of support and encouragement for their quest. Ours is a "this-worldly" religion in the sense that it is concerned about human destiny here and now. Our churches, I hope, are places where people can become energized and inspired to live out their values in the world with the best of their integrity.

Unitarian Universalism is not for everyone. Those who need a religion that offers certainty in their answers will not find what they need with us. We wish them well. But for those who are looking more to expand their understanding than to discover some absolute and final truth, Unitarian Universalism is a tradition that affirms their quest.

Q: How did you come to be a Unitarian Universalist?

A: The majority of UUs were raised in other religious traditions but found creedal requirements to be too constrictive. I, too, grew up in a traditional Protestant church and continue to hold respect for the people and the tradition, though I couldn't bring myself to accept the beliefs that were required of me. When I found the Unitarian Church as a college student, I found freedom and encouragement to pursue my own religious ideas. Many people who discover Unitarian Universalism after feeling alienated from the religion of their youth often comment, "I've been a UU my whole life without even knowing it."

Q: How do you view sacred texts like the Bible and the Quran?

A: We honor all sources of spiritual truth, and the scriptures of all traditions contain important insights. There are no boundaries on the search for truth, even if there are roadblocks and dead-ends along the way. Wisdom can be found in many places -- science, literature, history, poetry and inspirational writings from all cultures. I recently gave a sermon on "The Wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita," trying to understand how this ancient Hindu text could be so influential in the thinking of people like Thoreau and Whitman. We look to all scriptures as we would any other source, trying to understand how its historical context and the passions of its authors influence its passages.

We share the spirit of John Robinson, the leader of the Pilgrims in Holland, who spoke to those on the

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Church.

• **Address:** 5805 E. 56th St., Indianapolis.

• **Web site:**
www.allsoulsuindy.org.

• **Denomination:** Unitarian Universalist Association.

• **Service times:** 10:30 a.m. on Sundays.

• **Typical weekly attendance:** More than 200.

Mayflower setting sail to America in 1620 and declared, "The Lord hath more light and truth yet to break forth." (The Pilgrim Church in Plymouth eventually became Unitarian).

Q: In being so open to all views, some might question whether your church stands for anything. What would you say to that and those who don't consider your beliefs to constitute a religion?

A: This is a common perception, though it tends to come from those who equate religion with creed. I think that to be a rather narrow understanding of religion.

Here is one example of how religion is deeper than mere belief. The Unitarian Universalist Association has adopted a statement of principles that express our UU values. The first principle is to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." This affirmation "stands for" quite a bit.

It means that people of all races have equal value, and any form of racial discrimination is not acceptable. It means women should have the same privileges and opportunities as men. (There are today about an equal number of men and women clergy in our movement, and the Universalists were the first denomination officially to ordain a woman in the U.S.) It means those of all sexual orientations deserve respect and to be welcomed with equal status in our churches and society. (UU ministers have been officiating at same-sex services of union for decades, and our churches work to be welcoming congregations for all sexual orientations.) It means people with disabilities are people worthy of respect and equal opportunities to everyone else.

Affirming the inherent worth of everyone is a religious conviction, based not so much on a prescribed creedal "belief," but on a conviction of the heart, a set of values implanted in the human soul.

Q: What is your church's view of Jesus in terms of his divinity and his teachings?

A: Historically, Unitarians and Universalists have made a distinction between "the religion of Jesus" and the "religion about Jesus" (or between "the religion Jesus taught" and "the religion that is taught about who Jesus was.") The religion Jesus taught was one of love and compassion, and he demanded no specified metaphysical beliefs about such notions as the trinity.

The religion about Jesus (that he is God) came mostly from Paul and John. Unitarian Universalist Christians are committed to following the religion Jesus taught rather than what Paul taught about who Jesus was. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who began as a Unitarian minister, taught that Jesus was divine only in the sense that he taught that everyone is a child of God. We all have a spark of divinity within us.

Q: How can Christians, Jews, Muslims and people of other faiths get along and still hold to their respective beliefs?

A: America is more religiously diverse than it recognizes. A few decades ago, the religious landscape could be summarized, simply, as "Protestant, Catholic, Jew." Today other traditions thrive -- Buddhist and Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, New Age mystical religions and so forth.

Diverse faiths can learn from one another only under the umbrella of mutual respect. That can happen to the extent that people recognize that certain religious values about tolerance and love of neighbor (as Jesus taught) are more important than any creed.

Q: Your church just participated in the city's Earth Day celebration. How important are environmental concerns to Unitarian Universalist beliefs?

A: One of the principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association is "respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." There is a new consciousness arising about the relationship between human beings and nature. It used to be that we saw humans as separate from nature and ruling (having "dominion") over it. The recognition that we are inseparable (and our destiny is inseparable) from nature has extensive religious significance about what it means to be human.

All Souls has participated in Earth Day celebrations for at least 15 years. Our youth perform their "Earth Day Song" at Earth Day Indiana Downtown as well as a Sunday service devoted to Earth Day. It has become one of the more important holiday services of the year, and a major

intergenerational celebration.

Q: What is one thing most people don't know about Unitarian Universalism?

A: Unitarian Universalists have made a significant impact on the world. Some of the greatest humanitarian organizations were born in our churches. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was an active Universalist who founded the country's first anti-slavery society, the first hospital for the poor and the first hospital for the mentally ill. His work for mental health was continued a century later by Unitarian Dorothy Dix. The American public school system was largely designed by Unitarian Horace Mann. Unitarian Susan B. Anthony inspired the movement that led to women's equality.

-- Robert King

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