

Growing Our Spirit
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Evangelism. Evangelism. What is it that comes to your mind when I evoke the word Evangelism?

Yes it is OK for you to answer the question.

In your mind is it positive or negative?

Was what we just listened to, the voices of two of our members, Maija Talso and Lee Warner, an example of Evangelism?

(Allow time to respond)

The word evangelist comes from the Koine Greek, the original language that the Bible's New Testament was written, word "euangelion" via Latin "Evangelium". The Greek word originally meant a reward for good news given to the messenger and then later simply understood to mean "good news". As a verb evangelism therefore refers to the spreading of "good news". I imagine that when the Koine Greek word was first used by a writer they were not considering the likes of Brian Williams, Charlie Gibson, Katie Couric or for those who prefer the non-profit news hour, Jim Lehrer as being spreaders of good news. Given the current state of politics and the economy I am not so sure that anyone would consider them as good news spreaders. Growing up on a farm in Saskatchewan we had a different sort of spreader that mom and dad used to fertilize the vegetable garden. I wouldn't be surprised if many of you use that kind of a spreader as a metaphor for the news!! But I digress.

Unlike the four news spreaders that I just mentioned, there were four earlier, much earlier spreaders of good news in and of their time. They were known by those who read words attributed to them as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It was under these names that people discovered a message that may have seemed new to them, a message that they considered to be good news. This message included stories of a teacher whose name we now know as Jesus. Some of the good news encapsulated in those words that have come to be known as scripture, is that people can rise above the hate, bigotry and jealousy of others. The mythology of this Great Teacher suggests that the power of love, love for those who we want to hate and love for those who already hate us can help us overcome those feelings of hate, bigotry and jealousy. Love rather than hate and one surely would find the path to freedom, peace and happiness. It seems like such a simple message. Another aspect of that simple message or that particular manifestation of good news was the powerful notion of forgiveness. In striving to love we may sometimes fail to meet our own high standards. When we do fail it was and is suggested that we come to an understanding of our weakness or shortcoming and also forgive ourselves. To forgive ourselves and others is to allow healing and the possibility of moving beyond our sense of pain.

I have just presented to you the Cliff's Notes version of one mythology that people considered to be "good news". Of course many of us have witnessed the myriad of ways that these fundamental teachings can be manipulated in the name of power and control. It was because this good news WAS so powerful that it became over time a focus of those who discovered that by manipulating this version of good news they could control others in various ways. One obvious example for me is the idea that salvation is reserved only for individuals who hold a very very specific belief about the nature of God and what the mythology of the torture and death of Jesus really means. That idea was then further manipulated by religious leaders who suggested that one could be guaranteed to be saved simply by paying them for the privilege. Suggesting that someone can be saved for a fee continues to this day. I think of the myriad of products with very dubious claims that are on late night television. With only a little investment we can be saved from being overweight, being poor or even from simply being unhappy.

Despite what I see as the problematic and often times disturbing manipulations of the simple message that was attributed to a character named Jesus it was for many good news. People found that this message for them had deep and significant meaning in their lives and in fact changed them at their core, in their deepest being. I can imagine that given the impact of such a powerful message on one's life that one would want to share that good news with others. Evangelism is born out of a desire to share with others those ideas that have the power to change lives for the better.

Do you think that as Unitarian Universalists we have good news to share? Is there something about this religious community that is so deeply meaningful and life changing for you that it becomes impossible to keep it to yourself and therefore you must share it with others? On this Association Sunday where congregations and their members all across the nation are celebrating our relationship to each other I am reminded that our two faith traditions that have become one, Universalism and Unitarianism both have their roots in interpretations of the good news that were captured in the words of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Those who were labeled Unitarian during the European reformation believed like the other two Abrahamic traditions that there was a unity in God. Therefore they rejected the trinity and the idea that Jesus was equivalent or equal to God. When William Ellery Channing embraced the term Unitarian while preaching a sermon at an Ordination in Baltimore amongst other things he was embracing the notion that the divinity of Jesus was the same as the divinity of all human beings.

Part of the Universalist good news was the radical idea of Universal Salvation! It was and is the conviction of Universalists that if there is a god, god is loving and therefore would not damn anyone to hell. By embracing the divinity of all people and not just Jesus and by knowing that nobody could be condemned to an eternity in hell our forebears were laying the foundation for one of our beloved Unitarian Universalist principles. We covenant to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person. No exceptions. These ideas were revolutionary and both figuratively and literally are good news!

I wonder, do you think or feel that we who are the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Nevada have any good news to share whatsoever? Did any of you hear good news in Maija and Lee's words? What for you is the good news that you want to share with others about your experience of this religious community?

(Allow time for sharing.)

It would seem that we have plenty of good news to share. I therefore am going to be so bold as to brand both Maija and Lee, without even checking with them or getting their permission to do so, as evangelists. Lee and Maija the evangelists! It has a certain ring to it doesn't it. Soon, very soon, you and we hope thousands more will be hearing our good news as the message that we just listened to will be ringing through the radio waves in and around northern Nevada! Starting on October 20th no fewer than three Reno radio stations will be carrying our good news to the minds and we hope the hearts of many listeners. People will be also seeing messages in print that will be included in issues of the R and R. Postcards will soon be sent to select households to share with others what we have found here in being together. This sharing of our faith is made possible by the generosity of Unitarian Universalists like you and I all across the Pacific Central District of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Our Fellowship received over \$11,000 from a program called Chalice Lighters to purchase these forms of advertising. The Chalice Lighters program was established to "Promote and Strengthen Unitarian Universalism" by facilitating congregational growth. Individuals participate in Chalice Lighters by making contributions to the Chalice Lighters fund three times a year. The donated money goes to fund growth projects planned and implemented by congregations in the Pacific Central District such as our effort to share with others our good news! Isn't it wonderful that this collective effort and sharing of resources can help to grow our spirit!

It is so appropriate to talk about our collective evangelism on this our Association Sunday. The vision for Association Sundays is that through them, our sense of connection will be strengthened, and we will become more effective in growing our faith and in helping to heal a wounded world. I believe that it is in joining together that we in fact become religious. Religion as Unitarian Universalist Minister Rev. Forrest Church says is "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." Religion is the vessel in which we are forced to ask and seek answers to life's largest and deepest and sometimes darkest questions. Yes we can ask those questions of ourselves alone and in isolation but for me it isn't until we share our questions and struggles for answers that we truly become a religious people. I have wondered if that is what people mean when they say, "I am spiritual but not religious," that they would prefer not to be accountable to a religious community in their search for truth and meaning?

For many of us one of the first things we do when asked by others about our church is to share the seven principles. For those of you new to Unitarian Universalism the seven principles are a covenant that the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association make with each other. I know that many of you have found those principles to be very meaningful as a guide for your life. It is important to know that those seven principles were not conceived and created as a guide for our individual being in the world but for our collective. If you read the preamble to the principles it says that, "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association Covenant to Affirm and Promote". We are not asked as individuals to covenant to these principles but asked as congregations as religious communities. For me this speaks to the deep importance that we place on our accountability to one another.

One of the questions that I often hear from people asking me about UUism is, "Is it true that you can believe anything you want?" It worries me when I am asked this as I think that somehow the questioner has gotten the sense that Unitarian Universalism promotes a kind of anything goes mentality. For me this is certainly not the case. Yes we are challenged to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning but this simply does not mean that anything goes. We must remember that we covenant to a responsible search for truth and meaning as a whole congregation and not as individuals. By understanding that our meaning making happens together as a collective it negates any possibility of the anything goes here mentality. This is because as members of a congregation we become accountable to each other in our meaning making. Our ideas, understanding and beliefs are tested, challenged, scrutinized and most often accepted with love and gratitude as a part of our collective understanding of whom we are as a religious community. Much like as individual members we hold each other accountable for our being in the world; this is true for the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association. As a member congregation we become accountable to all other congregations. There is no hierarchy in this relationship, no ruling party that dictates this relationship. It becomes our responsibility to create meaningful ways to be accountable in our being together as Unitarian Universalists.

Scott Alexander writes that, "The congregation that primarily looks inward for the discovery of meaning, wholeness, service, and spirituality (and does not move out beyond its walls to visibly live its religion in the wider community) will not experience growth and depth". This is our challenge and we are taking it up with great enthusiasm! The hope is that as people here our good news and we move out beyond these walls that we will experience growth and depth. In the next months many people will be discovering the good news we have to share and joining us for Sunday worship. I deliberately selected Hospitality for our worship theme this month so that each of us may reflect upon our own notions of hospitality and collectively be prepared for our many guests.

As we join this morning with thousands of Unitarian Universalists across the nation to celebrate and strengthen our connections to each other and to indeed Grow Our Spirit, let us be reminded that each of us has found the good news right here in this space and all the spaces that we create together. Let us be reminded of the joy that we feel in being together and be grateful for this place of love, hope, challenge and justice. May we each become evangelists for our saving message and find the courage to share this truth with others. Let us not share this truth because we think that it is better than or superior to or the one true answer, but because it has meaning in our lives and is deeply important to us. No we are not out to cajole, bully, or manipulate people into becoming a Unitarian Universalist, but that does not mean that we must remain silent. I encourage to share with others the good news you have discovered here.

May we all be evangelists as we nurture our spirit and help heal the world!!

Indeed let our light shine!!

May it be so, blessed be and amen.

