

## “Great Expectations: The Challenge of Liberal Religion”

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It was a few minutes before a committee meeting was to start and one member of the group had not yet arrived. With the five of us sitting together in silence – more awkward silence than meditative silence – I asked my favorite question in times like these: “Who has any new jokes?”

Everyone was out of new jokes but we did have an interesting conversation about comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Andy Griffith. Did you know that Andy Griffith did stand-up before he became the sheriff of Mayberry? Then our last member arrived and we began the meeting.

The next time I find myself in one of these moments in congregational life, wanting to fill time with something lighthearted, perhaps I will ask a different question: “Who has any new *Unitarian Universalist* jokes?”

You may not know there is an entire genre of UU jokes. Here are a couple classics:

What do you get when you cross a UU with a Jehovah’s Witness?

Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason.

How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb?

We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against light bulbs. However, if in your own journey, you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem about your personal relationship with your light bulb. Present it next month at our annual Light Bulb Sunday Service, in which we will explore many light bulb traditions, including fluorescent, 3-way, long-life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.<sup>1</sup>

Jokes bring us the gift of laughter. They also, in their own way, tell a piece of the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/what-is-unitarianism/uu-humour>

If you are visiting for the first time, perhaps your first visit to any Unitarian Universalist congregation, these jokes reveal the truth that this is a place where we honor spiritual diversity. We are gathered by promises – covenants, like the one created today between our governing board and congregation – and not creeds. Through committing to engaging the world with open minds, we strive to create places where different histories, different identities, different beliefs, practices and cultures dwell together in harmony. Especially today, when the nation is so painfully divided, this way of being is needed. “Unity amid diversity” is a prophetic, counter-cultural approach to being human right now.

This is Unitarian Universalism at its best. But, when Unitarian Universalists laugh at themselves, the humor reflects the worst interpretation of the tradition – that UUs are so open there is nothing definitive about the religion. Perhaps Unitarian Universalism cannot even be called a religion if “religions” require clear theological declarations.

The best example of such a joke is in an episode of *The Simpsons*. Lisa Simpson is at an ice cream social at the local church. Standing next to Rev. Lovejoy, she reads all the flavors available: “Blessed Virgin Berry, Commandmint, Bible Gum...” The pastor then hands her a bowl, saying, “Or...we also have Unitarian ice cream!” Lisa, looks into the bowl and replies: “There’s nothing here.” Rev. Lovejoy then...says: “Exactly.”<sup>2</sup>

Next April, I will have been Unitarian Universalist for twenty-four years. So I affirm there is a “there there.” There is such a *something* in the bowl – or the chalice – that I have committed to serving Unitarian Universalist values as my vocation. I have turned a good part of meaning-making in my life over to Unitarian Universalism.

As we reflected on “expectation” before this month, I thank our music director, John Kramer, for asking a provocative question. When I think of “expectation,” my mind turns to what *we* expect from life. But John asks “what is expected of *us*?” Specifically, this morning I ask us, what does liberal religion demand? As a Unitarian, I attest no one needs a savior to be worthy and to belong. As a Universalist, I attest that if there is an afterlife, everyone goes to Heaven. To put a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/blueboat/voices/unitarian-universalists-hiding-in-plain-sight>

fine point on it, if you don't come to worship you can still be considered a moral person. And yet, Unitarian Universalism does have "great expectations" of those who live and practice according to its Principles.

Without a creed, beyond the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, these expectations are hard to articulate. So transmission of the tradition is often through celebrating Unitarians, Universalists and UUs who did amazing things in their day to make the world a better place. Let's call this "gospel through biography."

When I lead a workshop on Unitarian Universalist history, I often begin by asking people to "name their favorite famous Unitarian Universalist." These classes are often attended by newcomers so it is rare for a participant to think of someone. So I have short biographies of famous UUs on slips of paper, passed around in a bowl like dinner mints. Participants select a biography and read the brief description. This is a fun and efficient way to become acquainted the "liberal religious saints."

Through this exercise, we learn that people from architect Frank Lloyd Wright to writer Ray Bradbury to Tim Berners Lee, creator of the internet, were Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist. We learn that at least three US presidents – father and son Adams plus William Howard Taft – were Unitarian. Thomas Jefferson proclaimed Unitarian beliefs but did not have a local church. Considering Jefferson's hypocritical views on human liberty, modern Unitarian Universalists may be more likely to lift up that Barack Obama attended UU Sunday school as a boy in Hawaii.

But the one Unitarian Universalist biography that sparks the most interest is that of actor Christopher Reeve. Yes, Superman was Unitarian Universalist.

Okay, I know that an actor is not his character. But the more I think about it, the character of Superman illustrates the challenge of a liberal religious faith. Stay with me!

In this morning's reading, renowned Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams reminds us that "our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon processes not of our own making." In the interests of time and in recognition that there may be few theology geeks among us, I will

simply recognize that Adams' understanding is an example of "process theology," the belief that the Holy is found in the dynamic that emerges when at least two entities connect. In the simplest terms, "God is a verb." But Adams makes a point of affirming that the word "God" is too loaded and too limited. He writes, "It is that creativity which works in nature and history, under certain conditions creating human good in human community." It is, as we often say around here, simply "the Spirit of Life."

What does "the Spirit of Life" have to do with Superman? In brief, Unitarian Universalists – along with people of all other faiths and no proclaimed faith at all – are vessels for the force of creation. We possess human agency that, while limited, especially in dynamic collaboration with the actions of others, changes the world. Our choir just sang, "everyday we create the world together." This is our superpower.

But agency is not unique to Unitarian Universalists and requires positive intent. "Everyday we create the world together" and we can create this world through an infinite expression of beliefs and values, some that honor human beings and the earth and some that serve Empire and its hallmark greed. But like Superman, Unitarian Universalists have a strong moral code.

If you recall the story of Superman, he landed on earth when his planet, Krypton, exploded. Orphaned and alone, Jonathan and Martha Kent adopted him and claimed him as their own. The ethical lessons they taught him through his childhood and adolescence inspired him to serve humanity and actively disrupt the workings of evil.

Here we find echoes of Adams' Tenets of a Free Faith: "the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality finds its richest focus in...free, cooperative efforts for the common good...A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring people to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility." In this way, both a theologian and a comic book character affirm that values of justice and love are only made real when they become actions. Drawing on the superpower of the Spirit of Life, we are called to make a conscious choice and create and recreate the world in the vision of benevolent creation. This is a great expectation.

Another connection with Superman is that, as Superman was Clark Kent by day and transformed into the superhero by changing in a phone booth, Unitarian

Universalists are often anonymous. Much of this is through numerical reality – there are about 200,000 UUs in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Compare this with, say, the 3.5 million Muslims in America<sup>4</sup>; Unitarian Universalists are a small tribe.

But, in a more meaningful way, Unitarian Universalists at their best serve the common good without ego or agenda. I am grateful to Standing Committee member Patty Cameron who shared a powerful story in her summer sermon, “Living Our Faith.” Patty spoke of traveling to New Orleans to help residents rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. The primary task for the volunteers was, in the words of trip leader, the Rev. Mary Harrington, to ask “what does ‘help’ look like to the people we serve?” Patty writes:

On one particular trip with a college group, our assignment was to help Miss Donna organize her garage. She had already gutted her home and salvaged what she could and it was all stored in her garage. She had hired a contractor who began...rebuilding but then took off with all her money. She was now re traumatized. But she thought getting her belongings sorted and organized by room, would help her move on. It was what help looked like to her.

But when the carload of college girls arrived they called me and said there was so much more Miss Donna needed – her lawn needed mowing, her home needed so much work...I explained organizing her garage was what we were asked to do...So they grunted and groaned but went to work...

That evening, when Miss Donna returned from work, she called sobbing, saying “thank you” over and over again. Saying now she could see her kitchen, her bedroom, her living room because her belongings were all sorted by the rooms they belonged in. She could move on. Well...now the girls were all in tears too and understood “what does help look like to you?”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, I recall hearing stories about service trips to the Pine Ridge Reservation, Oglala Lakota territory. The Reservation is marked by extreme poverty<sup>6</sup> and so,

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian\\_Universalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Universalism)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_the_United_States)

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, Patty. “Living Our Faith,” August 18, 2019, Winchester Unitarian Society

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pine\\_Ridge\\_Indian\\_Reservation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pine_Ridge_Indian_Reservation)

many faith-based groups come to provide direct service. When a Unitarian Universalist group arrived for a many-day stay, after awhile the residents asked when the UUs would proselytize as this was a familiar experience with visiting church groups. The Pine Ridge residents were confused when the group replied that they were just there to work and to get to know the residents. This was, in a way, how they proclaimed their faith.

There is, however, a significant difference between Superman and Unitarian Universalists. Besides Superman's friendships with Batman and Wonder Woman and his civilian relationship with Lois Lane and others, Superman acts alone. He takes on the responsibility of fighting crime and moral corruption by himself.

But James Luther Adams names community as one of the three tenets of a free faith: "the achievement of freedom in community requires the power of organization and the organization of power...The free church is that community which is committed to determining what is rightly of ultimate concern to persons of free faith. It is a community of faithful and a community of sinners. When alive, it is the community in which [people] are called to seek fulfillment by the surrender of their lives to the control of the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality."

Indeed, you could go skiing or play soccer every Sunday morning of your life without moral injury but you would miss the inherent lessons available through the blessings and hard work of living in covenant. And of equal importance, every time you choose to not participate in congregational life, you deny others the unique ways you "create the world," limiting the congregation's wisdom, compassion and hope.

When we affirm at the beginning of each service that "this sacred space is made more sacred in this moment by the presence of each and every one of us," we affirm that it takes all of us, together, to truly transform abstract ideas like love and justice into a created and changed world. So we are expected to be here on Sunday mornings and beyond, to literally and figuratively show up for what and who we believe in so we may turn the world as it is towards how it should be. Transformation does not work without us or without others.

Please spread the word to your friends who are not here this morning.

Perhaps this was a silly thought experiment. Perhaps we find out that...Spiderman is Episcopalian – so what?

If comparing Unitarian Universalism to Superman does not work for you, perhaps we can just turn to the words of actor Christopher Reeve. In response to the question of what he has in common with his superhero character, he replied, “I believe we are all one family and we need each other in times of grief and gladness. And I believe in the power of human ingenuity and people of goodwill to make a difference in the world.”

I would never be confused for Superman and this pulpit looks nothing like a telephone booth. But my testimony this morning is that there is a superpower that shapes and changes the world. I commit again to drawing on this energy to join others in “creating the world together.”

This world we seek to create is a world where love plays no favorites and has no borders. And I attest that I need you – all of you – and you need me because if we are going to make it happen, we must draw on “the power of organization and the organization of power.” We can do it together. May it be so.