

# UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF UTICA

## Unitarian-Universalism: A Religion of Questions Instead of Answers

by Judith A. Jerome

The comedian, Lenny Bruce, is reputed to have said "I know my humor is outrageous when it makes the Unitarians so mad they burn a question mark on my front lawn." If you don't understand why this joke is not particularly funny, you wouldn't be alone. But for those of us who do self-identify as Unitarian-Universalists, this joke makes us smile more than just a little.

More often than not when casual conversation turns to the usually off limits topic of religion and I have responded with "I am a Unitarian-Universalist", I am met with a blank look and sometimes a politely phrased question, "Is this a new cult?" It is then that I feel I have permission to explain my chosen faith which is neither a cult nor new. In fact, Unitarian-Universalism is centuries old and was the cornerstone spiritual choice for many early Americans.

UU's embrace diversity of all kinds. Perhaps you were raised in a traditional Protestant denomination or are Roman Catholic or lean more towards Buddhism or Islam. Perhaps you are agnostic or atheist when the issues of belief are discussed. Perhaps you favor earth-based expressions. Whatever your background or belief, you will be welcomed into the community of Unitarian Universalists.

Melissa Harris-Perry, host of a popular MSNBC weekend show and professor of political science at Tulane University and a lifelong UU, nails it with these words: "We are the certain and the seeking, the lifers and the newcomers, the beloved and the broken hearted, the insiders and the rejected, all of whom have found a home in the extraordinary, yet intimate communities of Unitarian Universalism."

So what do UU's embrace? What are the affirmations which create those ties which bind? Yes, we do have some, called the Seven Principles, but it is important to note that they are not dogma or doctrine. They are the guidelines for those of us

who choose to participate in Unitarian Universalist religious communities. They also provide incredible insight into the people you will meet if you choose to attend a UU church. Those principles are:

Unitarian-Universalists affirm:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Here in the Mohawk Valley, we have several Unitarian-Universalist congregations which meet regularly. I am a member of the Utica UU church which is situated in a lovely shaded grove of trees off Higby Road near Genesee St. Our church began in 1802 when a Universalist preacher, Nathaniel Stacy, established a church within what later became the city limits of Utica. But Unitarianism and Universalism which merged into a single religion in 1961, goes back centuries with roots deep in the European religious Reformation of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Michael Servetus (1506-1553) was a unitarian martyr who questioned widely held trinitarian beliefs. Widespread aversion to Servetus's death has been taken as signaling the birth in Europe of the idea of religious tolerance, a principle now very important to modern Unitarian Universalists. Other famous UUs include Charles Dickens, John Adams, Buckminster

Fuller, Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian Minister and author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Burns, national poet of Scotland, Herman Melville, Paul Newman, Florence Nightingale and many, many others.

No, Unitarian-Universalism is not a cult and it is most certainly not new.

However, in that cocktail party conversation, when I discuss in greater detail exactly what UUism is, it is usually my metaphor of the stained glass window which anchors the explanation for listeners. Let's picture a beautiful stained glass window and you are standing very close to it. You see individual glass pieces of varying colors. There are blue bits, yellow bits, red pieces and they all come together in a whole which creates a beautiful image, although you don't see that image until you move back and view the entire picture. Now picture light shining through all of the various individually colored pieces. Unitarian-Universalists are these assorted colors and shapes which when coming together, create a beautiful whole.

Suddenly the light bulb comes on. Unitarian-Universalism is a wonderful idea, they say, and I nod in agreement. If you are ready to join a community which will provide you not with the answers, but, as Lenny Bruce noted, only with the questions; if you are searching for meaning within the principles of peace, justice, democracy and connectedness; if you are looking for a place of tolerance and acceptance for both yourself and your children, I would like to invite you to visit the Unitarian-Universalist church at 10 Higby Road in Utica. Browse the website at [www.uuutica.org](http://www.uuutica.org). You will find a welcome. © 2014 Judith A. Jerome, All Rights Reserved