

# FINDING LANGUAGE FOR OUR FAITH

A Sermon by

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## **Musical Mediation:**

*Holy Now* by Peter Mayer

## **Sermon:**

There have been several stories in the news lately that have caused a bit of a stir among those who are concerned with preserving traditional Protestant and Catholic religions here in America. Perhaps you've seen the articles in the newspaper or heard these stories discussed on NPR. Our own Post-Crescent recently ran a story with the headline: "Survey: Americans switch faiths early, often".

The particular Pew Forum survey<sup>1</sup> cited in that article showed (among many other intriguing pieces of data) that about 44 percent of U.S. adults have left their childhood faith and either switched to another religion, or a significant percentage have become religiously unaffiliated altogether.

Another study conducted by a separate research institute tells us that when asked, close to 3.5 million<sup>2</sup> people in this country now identify their denominational affiliation as "none." And that number is steadily increasing; it is nearly double what it was less than 20 years ago. The "no religious affiliation people" now represent about 15 percent of the population. In fact, that same study noted that when you add in the respondents who either declined to answer that question or said they didn't know their denominational affiliation, the researchers concluded that about 1 in 5 Americans now claim no religious identity at all. This is a rapidly escalating number over the last two decades.

For those who identified themselves as part of the "no affiliation" category, two reasons were frequently cited. The first was that they had become disillusioned by the insincerity, hypocrisy and judgmental attitudes they felt existed in organized religion. The second one was that these people had come to understand and personally believe that while many religions are partly true, none are completely true.

Now, to me, those sound a lot like factors that might draw someone into our faith, if only they knew about us. Don't get me wrong regarding that first point. I'm not naïve enough to think that we Unitarian Universalists somehow lack our own share of people

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<sup>1</sup> Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S. (April 27, 2009), Pew Forum Report available online at <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=415>. Last accessed May 2, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> American Religious Identify Survey 2008, Trinity College, Hartford, CT. Available online at [http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS\\_Report\\_2008.pdf](http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf). Last accessed May 2, 2009.

who are hypocritical and judgmental, but we do make a constant effort toward intentionally living lives of integrity. We know full well that we must make our walk and our talk match if there is to be any value in our spiritual pursuits.

That second reason cited (that many faiths are partly true while none are entirely true) sounds like the very thing that has been a central teaching of Unitarian Universalists for ages. We accept - we celebrate - that what we “know” is always partial and incomplete; and it will always be thus. We know that the core teachings of all faiths hold much more in common than their often fractious, sometimes violent, clashes would indicate. This is why we Unitarian Universalists hold no creed of faith with which we all must agree. We know that whatever creed we might come up with would inevitably be inadequate.

Honestly, reading through both these survey reports has been both a frustrating and a hope-filled experience. I can't help but believe many of those disaffected people would like to be a part of a community such as ours, if only they knew we existed. If only they could find us.

There are only about 300,000 Unitarian Universalists world wide; over 2/3 of those are here in the United States. If not previously known, those numbers can be startling because it seems true that people of our faith have influenced history and society far beyond what our small numbers might suggest. And, for being so few in number, we even draw a lot of comic attention from folks like Garrison Keillor and shows like the Simpson's. Just this week, in fact, there was a Unitarian joke on 30 Rock. So, somehow, despite our relatively small percentages, our presence is felt.

But I am, frankly, baffled about why we remain so small. Not that numeric growth of our congregations or our Association is ever a goal in and of itself, it just saddens me to know that many people have walked away from religion altogether because they have despaired of ever getting their spiritual needs met in that arena. What an unfortunate irony.

I am convinced that there is a great need – and a great desire -- for our brand of spiritual community in this world. Not that this faith is for everyone; but it is clear that the old religious answers are obviously breaking down and that large numbers are finding their prior religious instruction inadequate to address their current lived experience and their ongoing spiritual needs.

It seems to me that Unitarian Universalists are uniquely positioned – right now in this age - to be able to offer folks the inspiration and the comfort that only a faith community provides, without the narrow theological boundaries that increasing numbers are finding too restrictive and flawed. It seems unfortunate that for lack of knowing who we are and what we believe, many (who would like to have a religious community) are walking alone through life believing that it simply is not available for them.

Perhaps we find it challenging to speak of our faith because Unitarian Universalism blurs the typical concept of a “religion,” which most understand to be a codified set of beliefs pointing to one creator or one spiritual leader. By that way of thinking, we don't quite fit. But, in fact, the word “religion” is derived from the Latin word *religare*, which has as its core meaning “to bind together.” Religion gives us a way to tie up our loose ends, to make our lives, our values, our beliefs coherent with one another, within the context of community. Religion binds us to one another as well.

Leo Tolstoy reflected on this subject and he gave us this thought: ... *The essence of any religion lies solely in the answer to the question: why do I exist, and what is my*

*relationship to the infinite universe that surrounds me? ... True religion is that relationship, in accordance with reason and knowledge, which [one] establishes with the infinite world around him, and which binds [one's] life to that infinity and [which] guides [one's] actions.*

We are a certainly a religious community by that definition. And we are one with enthusiasm for the most expansive mysteries and questions of human existence and, at the same time, we try to never lose sight of the practical implications of our personal explorations. We constantly look to see what our theological wranglings mean when translated into the mundane tasks of our daily lives. We believe –very firmly - that the value of looking at theological or religious ideas is to see how they translate into our behaviors. We know that how we live each day matters a great deal.

- \* The tone of my voice when I encounter a slow, fumbling cashier matters.
- \* The way I drive, even when I'm late for an appointment matters.
- \* The amount of time I find to give contribute within my community matters.
- \* The generosity of my heart in responding to others in need matters.
- \* Love matters. As we sang in our opening hymn, above all else, love matters and our faith is firmly planted there!

Our concern for how lovingly we live each day also translates for us also into our respect for the interdependent web of existence. We know that what we do to our earth has ramifications for generations and generations and generations. We know that what happens in one corner of the world, undeniably affects all the rest. My spouse, Rosie, just pointed out to me that this current flu threat we're hearing so very much about is certainly a case in point. Indisputably, what happens in Mexico impacts Germany and the United States and Israel and Spain and on and on. We are certainly and assuredly – for good or for ill - all in this together.

So, we are a faith of **love**, toward each other and toward our world. We are a faith of **action**. What we do matters far more than what we say. And we are a faith of **reverence**.

Unitarian Universalists believe it is neither fruitful nor possible to try to nail down theological truths, to confine things of the infinite into a single container or one sacred book. But that does not mean that we are not enchanted by the questions.

I have a great fondness for the Peter Mayer song we played just before the sermon. Peter is a Unitarian Universalist from the Twin Cities and the experience he describes in this song seems close to my own. For me, finding Unitarian Universalism took all the unrequited longings for spirituality and for community from my past and pushed the walls out! It blew the lid off, so that I began to understand that I indeed had the freedom – and the responsibility – to go beyond my rejection of things I no longer believed in, and to look forward in celebration and recognition of the true holiness that exists in all that is. I am now called to walk this earth with a new reverence because the sacredness, the beauty, the miracles are absolutely everywhere, every day, only awaiting my notice.

We honor myriad sources of inspiration: poetry, music, sacred texts, nature. None is large enough to contain it all. Knowing full well that this is a never ending journey, we encourage one another along the path of this free and responsible search for

truth and meaning. As one Unitarian Universalist writer so cogently puts it – ours is a faith where we “undertake our solitary journeys *together*.”<sup>3</sup>

I think he captured it well. This solitary togetherness is one of the greatest sources of hope I have. As we walk our solitary journeys together, we live the beauty of religious pluralism every single day. We, here, in this one room, are peacefully and gratefully gathered as UU-Humanists, UU-Christians, UU-Pantheists, UU-Buddhists, UU-Agnostics, UU-Taoists, UU-Pagans, and everything beyond and in between. If we can do this here in Appleton, and thrive in the doing, maybe there is hope that we actually can find a way to do it in the state of Wisconsin, and in the United States, and in Palestine, and in Ireland, and in India, and on and on. The lived pluralism of our faith is one of the greatest sources of hope I carry and it invites us to imagine that perhaps we have a unique role and opportunity – even responsibility - in the religious world to help create bridges between faiths, rather than simply rejecting and walking away from them.

In one way, what we believe seems so simple. And, yet, I think one of the stumbling blocks that prevents us from effectively sharing our faith is that many UU’s have left some set of doctrines and beliefs behind. They have come in here to find to their great relief that we can, indeed, together breathe the fresh air of free thought coupled with reverence for the most grand and inexpressible mysteries; and we do so with all the magnificent benefits that being part of community brings. Hallelujah!

But an impediment for some, it seems, is that it’s easy to get stuck in that rejection phase and the former faith becomes a domineering wall that the person keeps pushing against and pushing against - still allowing it to overshadow their current spiritual growth. I have a mental image of this where that past wall of orthodoxy is over here and a person can get so consumed with the frustration and anger about what they were formerly told was true - they’re so busy pushing against that unfulfilling and unmoving wall - that they haven’t yet fully turned to dig deep into their new spiritual experience. They’re impeded from fully embracing the brightness, the spaciousness, that UUism offers.

I don’t know how many of you might remember the sermon I did about a year ago on forgiveness. But in that sermon, I told a fable that likened grudge-holding to carrying around a sack of rotting potatoes. I will spare you the full retelling here, but I am mindful that grudges against old religious constrictions can also be a weight that can hold us back from fully enjoying the beauty and the hope that is available in Unitarian Universalism. We have within our ability to move beyond the rejection of empty orthodoxy and to turn our face to the sun of the freedom, the acceptance, the use of reason, the joy of community, the inspiration of spirit that we find so abundantly available here.

I must believe that in those studies I cited, many of those who were quantified in those growing numbers of the disaffected would love to find us, if they only knew. So how do we tell others? I’ve heard many here relate finding their way here through one circumstance or another and being so gratefully surprised (we hear this all the time), “I had no idea such a faith existed! I wish I had found this years ago!”

It was that way for me, too, years ago. I wasn’t really looking for anything in particular. But one day, as I was speaking with a co-worker about my values and beliefs,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Grigg, *To Re-enchant the World: A Philosophy of Unitarian Universalism* (Xlibris Corporation, 2004), p. 21.

he said, “Hey, have you heard about the UU? Something tells me that you might really fit in there. Why don’t you come with us on Sunday? I just think you’d really like it.”

I remember chuckling and telling him that I thought I had already exhausted every faith I knew of. I kind of felt like a variation of that Groucho Marx joke: With everything I then knew about religions, I didn’t think I wanted to belong to any congregation that would accept me as a member! Still, I had respect for Kim, and his wife, too, and so I thought that if THEY liked this place, maybe it was worth a shot.

Like so many of us, on my very first visit I discovered that this was unlike any religious community I had ever experienced or imagined. I learned very quickly that the reason my other attempts at diving into one denomination or another had felt inadequate in the long run was because I was, apparently, a Unitarian Universalist long before I had any idea what it was!

All it took was a kind invitation. When Kim shared his faith with me, he did that because he had an inkling that my life might feel better to me if I was embraced by this faith community just as he and his family were better for being here...and he was so right.

We share our faith with others not because we wish to add to our numbers or to get a gold star of any kind, but because there are so many people out there who believe as we do and would love to have a community in which to grow and learn and share. It makes it pretty simple, no pressure whatsoever. We don’t have any desire to argue people into embracing our liberal faith. It shouldn’t be any more intimidating than sharing about the other things in your life that you appreciate: your kids, your alma mater, your home state, your family stories.

I was thinking that perhaps a useful framework for such a conversation would be to simply focus on the question as it is often posed when people learn we are part of this congregation. Frequently, the person will say something like, “UU? What do you believe?” Maybe the simplest thing to do is to answer that question directly – what do YOU believe? - because that’s the whole point of our faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we have the freedom, and the duty, to responsibly search out our own beliefs – and then to live out of those beliefs as fully as possible while supporting others as they walk their own path of searching.

So, then, the question is yours. What do you believe? What are your values? When someone asks about your faith, perhaps something like this might seem appropriate,

“I am Unitarian Universalist and I believe that what I do here and now matters far more than what may or may not await me after death.” - or -

“I’m Unitarian Universalist and I believe that there is no single “truth” with a capital T – but at the same time, I have an appreciation for the countless ways people find to connect with the holy.” - or -

Here’s one that I picked up along the way from a source I can’t recall, but it is one of my favorites: “I’m Unitarian because I believe all names for God point to the same unknowable mystery. I’m Universalist because I believe we’re all absolutely in this together.”

Rarely, I think, is our would-be questioner asking us about the history of Unitarianism or Universalism, how many hundreds of years we have existed or who our first prophets and theologians were, although that's very interesting stuff. The stories of Arius, Origen, Servetus, David and others are inspiring and challenging. But it seems that if people are initially intrigued by our faith, it is probably not a theology or history lesson they're looking for, at least not at first.

It's probably better, when asked, to focus on why this faith has meaning to you. That makes it so simple. All you have to do is talk about what you and your family have found that meets your personal needs. You don't have to be a scholar or a philosopher – just one sincere person sharing with another in case our beliefs are something that would ring true for them too. No persuasion, no coercion, just sharing your beliefs about this faith community you love that celebrates together religious freedom, reason, diversity of persons and theologies, and which accepts each individual's responsibility to walk this life with integrity. Like our banner out on Calumet says, those folks you talk with just might genuinely be seeking a place where they, too, can nurture their spirit and help heal the world!

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