

Mumbling in the Elevator

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As a minister, I am, on occasion, called upon to perform weddings. It is a point of etiquette for the happy couple to invite the minister to the wedding reception. I accept these invitations in part to delight in the newlywed's joy and in part as a hot opportunity for Unitarian Universalist evangelism. If people like the wedding service, they are likely to ask me about our tradition, and I am more than happy to go on and on ...and on about our faith. Now it turns out, for a minister, one of two things happen at a wedding reception. Either we are seated at or near the head table in a place of honor, or we are seated as an afterthought behind the potted plant in the back of the hall beside the photographer's date. I'm not picky, whoever is at my table is equally attractive in the art of faithful seduction.

Once, at one of those afterthought receptions, when I was seated with the dates of various support staff close to the kitchen's swinging doors, one of my fellow afterthoughts asked me that fateful question: "So what do Unitarian Universalists believe anyway?" This was just what I came for. Well ... I puffed myself up with pride, ready to blow him away with my irresistible and charming faith tradition ... I told him, "Well, we're not like other churches. We have no doctrine, no dogma, no creed, no central scripture and some of us don't even believe in God." His reaction wasn't quite what I had hoped for. Instead of getting all excited, panting to find out how he could sign up for such a soul-growing experience, he replied "No doctrine, no dogma, no creed, no scripture, and not necessarily God. I don't care what you don't believe. What do you believe?" And I found myself caught short, speechless, having spiritually fumbled the conversion ball in the end zone.

The idea of having an elevator speech is that if you entered an elevator with your friend on the sixth floor and, just as the doors are closing on the way down to the ground floor, your friend says, “Hey, you’re an Unitarian Universalist. What do you guys believe anyway?” You have forty-five seconds in the elevator to describe the breadth and depth of your faith community and what it means to you, how it fuels your passions, grows your soul, calms your troubled heart and lifts your weary spirit. What do you say? I mean, what do you say? Do you come out with a snappy, inviting, clear statement that sums it all up? Or are you like me, mumbling all the way to the ground floor and much of the way around the block? What is wrong with us? Just because we don’t have a creed, we can’t talk about what moves and shapes us? Heck, the Christians have it down to a simple code. All they have to say is: “*John 3:16*” and they all get it. It’s the verse that says that God loves us so much he gave us Jesus so we could have a more abundant life. One word and a couple of numbers. Talk about cool marketing.

So, what is our problem? Why can’t we do that? Where is our code? Our catchy phrase? Our lush language of fruitful invitation? Our good news writ large and short? The Uncommon Denomination – yawn. Or what about that old chestnut, “Join the Unitarian Church, you can believe whatever you want to believe.” As Kat Liu said in our reading today, why bother going to a church where you can believe whatever you want? You can do that on your own. Surely there is something more than *that* to our congregational life. So, what is it, what have we got, what is so elegantly divine and uniquely ours that it can dance like angels off our tongues in 45 seconds or less? How can we put an end to all our mumbling in the elevators?

This is what I think happened. Because we believe in freedom of thought and belief, because we believe that spirituality and theology begin with the individual, we've ended up hoisting ourselves by our own "I'm OK, You're OK" petard. We've allowed ourselves to get so fuzzy and flabby about defining our faith that we don't know who we are. The sky, the cloud, the wind, the wall, the mouse. We have forgotten that we are a cat. And being a cat is where it's at. So, I'm here to offer you three building blocks for your elevator speech. Three building blocks to focus your fuzziness and firm up your flab. If you can answer these three questions in small words and short sentences, you will not only have a ready elevator speech but also a much clearer understanding of your own faith: Who are we? What do we believe? And why does it matter?

For your convenience I've put together some helpful little cheat notes you can find in your order of service. Feel free to write on them as worksheets or give them to friends. Just please, please, please don't hand them to people when they ask you about your church. The only thing worse than mumbling hopelessly in the elevator is when someone asks you sincerely about your deepest loves, you hand them some reading materials. They don't want a piece of paper. They don't want an operating manual. They want you. They want to engage you in a real human connection.

So, first building block: Who are we? Which is really the question: why are we a religion? First rule, don't describe our church by what we are not. No doctrine, no dogma, no creed, no scripture. Describe our beloved community by what it is and who we are. We are a home for spiritual growth. Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams, once said that church was the place where we get to practice being human. This is the place where we practice being

human. This is the workshop, the art studio, the potter's wheel of our lives, the classroom of creating and learning how to live as best we can with each other and the world. Here you will find people who will listen, hold you fully present in their lives, and if you so desire, talk with you and help you handle life's burdens. We are community, a home, a welcoming sanctuary not a group of individuals.

Who are we? Why are we a religion? We are faith-filled, meaning-seeking people who fill our days with the Spirit of Life and Love. Yes, we pray together. We pray for peace, for our loved ones, and for our world. We sing together and laugh together and cry together and allow the spirit to break our hearts open so we can love the world more and more and more. Who are we? Why are we a religion and not a service organization or country club? I'll tell you why. Because we serve the world as we play together. We ask big questions about ourselves, our community and our universe. Now we don't always agree with each other on the answers, and really, that's part of the beauty of our community and how we help each other grow. We might not always come up with the same answers, but we always try to respect and support each other even when we disagree. Who are we? Why are we a religion? We are a home for soul growth, filled with the Spirit of Life and Love, questing for Truth and serving the world.

Next building block: What do we believe? We are a religion of the open heart. We believe every person everywhere is important. We believe that every person is good, can do good, is good at heart. Spend a moment with that. Imagine if everyone in the world could believe, really believe, that every person is important. Imagine if you could believe, really believe, that every person is good. What would the world be like?

What do we believe? We believe in the free mind. We believe that everyone can explore and discover new Truths. Heck, we go even further than that. We encourage each other, urge each other, prod each other into going boldly where your mind and spirit have not gone before. Try this truth on, it might just fit. We believe this is how our souls grow and thrive and how we find life more abundant.

What do we believe? We believe that everything we do affects someone or something else, so what we do and say matters. Somehow you and I and all of us and all the people of the earth, the trees outside, the concrete under our feet, the monsoon in the Philippines, the butterfly wings in Peru. Somehow, in ways we understand and ways we don't understand, we are all connected. We are all related. When you move your pinky you affect the world. We believe that we have a responsibility for who we are, what we do and what we say. This is about creating the beloved community, the time of mutual respect, and heaven on earth. We believe that if everyone and everything is important and that everything we do affects our world, then we have to be aware of how we live our lives. For our own sake, for our neighbors' sake, and for the sake of future generations.

What do we believe? We believe our religion is not just going to church on Sunday mornings or lighting the chalice. Our religion is the way we live our lives, the good we do, the things we learn. This isn't just a Sunday morning thing, it is the whole meal deal, morning to evening, evening to morning, from the moment we are born to the moment life leaves our bodies. The whole of life is our sacrament and we take it, worshipping with eyes and ears and fingertips at every instant. What do we believe? We

believe that all people are free, responsible, important and connected. And we believe this every moment of every day.

The final building block: Why does it matter? Why does our church matter? It matters because we all need a caring community that supports us in life's journey. We humans are social animals, and I'm not talking about parties and dances here. I mean that we *need* one another. We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted, when we are in trouble and afraid, when we despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. We need one another when we want to accomplish something great and can't do it alone, in the hour of our success when we look for someone to share our joy, in the hour of our failure when with encouragement we might just make it and keep on going. We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey. Our church community matters because all our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us. In our church, we are here for each other.

Why does our faith matter? It matters because the world is broken and hurting. I don't have to prove this to you, you know what I am talking about. Just look at the newspaper headlines. The world is broken and hurting and we believe that Love and respect can change people who are scared, angry and mean. Slowly, together we can help heal the world. Our church matters in the storm of hatred, oppression and fear, because we stand on the side of Love.

Why does our church matter? It matters because we are stronger as a church than as separate people. We ask better questions. We come up with more thoughtful answers. We make better choices. And we can make a

bigger difference. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community matters, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed. Why does Unitarian Universalism matter? Because we need one another to celebrate life and to cure the ills of the world with the transformative power of Love.

Get in the elevator. Press ground floor. I've got 45 seconds. Unitarian Universalists believe that every person is precious and that we are connected, in ways we may never even understand, to each other, to our wider and wider community and ultimately to the universe. We believe in faith-filled freedom and responsibility and the power of love to overcome hatred, fear and oppression. The elevator doors open. How did I do? This is a pretty good church, don't you think? I mean we have a pretty good thing going on here. Sure, we have room for improvement, but the basics of Who are we? What do we believe? And why does it matter? is good stuff. We could be offering our message of love and hope to all those who need to hear it. All we need to do is stop mumbling in the elevator.