

Journeys

The Many Paths to Unitarian Universalism

Edited by Edwin C. Lynn

Every individual is on a religious journey. For some, the journey is an exciting adventure, for others it is barely acknowledged as a part of their existence. As Unitarian Universalists we help each other give expression to our journeys and to become more aware of our beliefs. Unitarian Universalist minister David Parke writes, "Unitarian Universalism's greatest strength lies in its conviction that the journey of the human spirit is one that each person must make for her- or himself. The range of liberal religious experience is limited only by the seemingly infinite variety of human characteristics."

In this pamphlet, eight Unitarian Universalists share the paths they have taken to join with us. These journeys, our journeys, are important. They represent personal life stories which integrate changes in values and beliefs. Some individuals have left an ortho-dox faith to find a new direction. Others have found renewed inspiration by reinterpreting their traditional heritage. Each story has its own origins, dead ends, detours, smooth paving, and destination. Each has its own pace.

The philosopher Alan Watts reminds us, "No one imagines that a symphony is supposed to improve in quality as it goes along, or that the whole object of playing it is to reach the finale. The point of music is discovered in every moment of playing and listening to it. It is the same, I feel, with the greater part of our lives, and if we are unduly absorbed in improving them we may forget altogether to live them." Being raised in a Unitarian Universalist church, or finding one in later years does not end the journey. At every stage of life, new questions and responses arise. Our congregations provide stimulating and secure places where each of us can continue our individual religious quest.

A SPIRITUAL LIFE

Marilyn Bolin
Clarksville, Iowa

I was brought up in the Lutheran church. During that upbringing I completed all the required rituals but was never an active member. After my marriage, my family was not active in church, even though the children went to Sunday School. When our oldest child reached confirmation age, I started questioning my beliefs and what I expected of my children.

Freedom to choose and honesty seemed to be the two values I held most dear. After a year of concentrated involvement and searching in the Lutheran church, I felt restrained from exercising those values and I left the church completely.

After about a year it seemed there was a real void in my life and although I had my family and friends, I felt very alone. Somewhere I had heard of the Unitarian Universalists, so I found their address and decided to go one Sunday, even though it was thirty-five miles away.

It was stimulating and exciting. I was warmly accepted and found people willing to share themselves. I never felt put down for my ideas and I went home feeling like a participant rather than an observer, and much more alive and aware. For the first time in my life, I discovered the need for community, and I find that need being met. I now feel I have a spiritual life and am free to explore it in any way I see fit. I have found a church that fits me, rather than me fitting the church. I am home!

LIVING, LOVING AND GROWING

Peter Van de Bogert
Beverly, Massachusetts

Attending a Congregational church in Maine was one of my early memories. Because of its thick stained-glass windows and its dark walls and ceilings, the interior always seemed dimly lit, whether it was sunny or cloudy outside. My parents' infrequent Sunday attendance contrasted sharply with their message that church was important.

Upon reaching adulthood, I channeled my active mind and social conscience into counseling emotionally troubled children. I was spiritually restless, however, until eight years ago, when I found acceptance, empathy, and integrity at a Unitarian Universalist Church: acceptance of me, empathy for my restlessness, and integrity in a consistency between belief and action.

Here people believe as they do and do as they believe, yet there is a genuine respect for our many differences of belief. My questions are still unanswered, but I have found a warm and responsive climate in which to ask them. I attend services and participate in the church community because I want to, not because I should. The church's connectedness even has its tangible aspects. During a service I can look out at the white snow or green leaves while listening to a reading about the changes in life. Or I can hear the wind blow or the birds chirp while meditating on the natural order of things. The natural order of living, loving, and growing-this church, my young family and I all seem to be integrally part of that process.

REALITY OF HUMANITY

Gwendolyn Thomas
Aurora, Colorado

I became a Unitarian Universalist because I found a community for my sons and for myself-a community in which I need not defend my doubts, but may pursue my own truth.

I found a community where I can express my rage, or outrage at inequity, injustice and irrationality in human affairs; a community that assumes wrongs should be righted, and where the quality of life for all people is each person's concern; a community where the principle of diversity endorses the acceptance of all races and cultures.

I found a community aware of the scope of human identity-on the one hand, the brevity and uncertainty of life, and its weakness be-fore natural forces-on the other, the emotional, spiritual and intellectual potential for unlimited growth.

Within this environment I confront the mystery of divinity and the reality of humanity-a Unitarian Universalist in a Unitarian Universalist enterprise.

IDENTITY AND MEANING

Wayne L. Dorris
San Antonio, Texas

During adolescence I began thinking about my religious beliefs. I found little gratification or meaning in the religious mandate to attend high holy day services, belong to the Temple, or socialize exclusively within the Jewish community.

During this period I first attended a Unitarian Universalist service. Here I was, sitting in a church with gentiles on a Sunday morn-ing. It was an act that not only was unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but induced considerable guilt and fear. The minister gave a sermon about the frustrations and concerns of people trying to find meaning and fulfillment in life. I thought he was talking directly to me, that he understood me-at the time, I was looking to become active in promoting social justice.

Since that first service, I have become very active in Unitarian Universalism, and much more aware of how my Jewish background contributed to my religious and social philosophy. For me, that involvement was a logical progression in my development, for it enabled me to match my actions with my religious beliefs. It helped me overcome the schisms between my religious beliefs and my social and political behavior. It helped provide unity with the here and now; fulfillment in the present with a universal context. It provides the identity and meaning I was looking for during adolescence and has continued to be important as I have grown older.

SUSTAINED AND COMFORTED

Betty Mills
Bismarck, North Dakota

In Robert Bolt's play, "A Man For All Seasons," Sir Thomas More's wife urges him, "Say the words of the oath, and in your heart think otherwise." That is what I did until I found Unitarian Universalism. Because I am moved and changed by words, I cannot spend my religious life in a translation exercise, rearranging the words of an ancient creed. Unitarian Universalism freed me to let go of the old words and beliefs.

In Unitarian Universalism I found the opportunity for integrity of belief and its expression. Unitarian Universalism sustains me by allowing me to share with others the joy of discovery, the excitement of honest disagreement, and the satisfaction of working toward realization of a common ideal. When I grieve, it comforts me in words that need no translation. We Unitarian Universalists may not share an identical faith, but we add a strength and vision to our mutual search that we could not find in solitude. Thus I am inspired by the words of my church, challenged by its ideas, and changed by its influence. But most of all, I am sustained and comforted by its freedom.

IMPROVING THIS WORLD

Charles Rzepka

Melrose, Massachusetts

I was raised a Catholic in a blue-collar suburb of Detroit where Catholicism was considered almost the state religion. The logical contradictions of my religion did not pose problems until I entered a Catholic high school. In public schools, doctrine had not been made a daily issue, but in Catholic school I constantly confronted such challenges to my faith as the Trinity and the bodily Resurrection.

At sixteen, I became a humanist. For me, "God" is but one of the grand myths the human mind has conceived in its quest to make sense of the world and of our place here. I respect and revere the human spirit that can express its striving and longing and power in such sub-lime works as the Bible, but I cannot accept such products of the human imagination as statements of the ultimate, binding truth.

For many years, I remained unchurched and anti-religious. Even after I married a Unitarian Universalist, I took pains to distinguish myself from that religion. But as I became more familiar with its basic respect for freedom of individual belief, its faith in the deeply human origins of all sacred emotions, and its conviction that improving this world is a more religious endeavor than getting saved in the next, I came to see that I had been a Unitarian Universalist all along. As I learned the inspiring history of Unitarian and Universalist men and women of conscience-activists and peacemakers, holy scientists and heretical saints-I became convinced that the religious tradition to which they belong spoke to me as well.

QUESTIONING AND SEARCHING

Sunny Carroll Madsen

Salt Lake City, Utah

I was born in Utah and became a Mormon church member at the age of eight. I grew up very active, becoming a teacher at fourteen and always thereafter holding one or more church-related positions. I was committed and devout, believing I belonged to "the only true church." At twenty-one, however, I began to question the contradictions that I saw within the theology. Eventually this led to my questioning Christianity, and then theism.

For many years I was without any church affiliation. Philosophically, I felt no need for organized religion. But as the years went by, I missed the fellowship and activities of church attendance and membership.

My husband had been a Unitarian in his teens, so when we married, we held our ceremony, which we wrote ourselves, at the local Unitarian Universalist church. We attended services for a while, but transportation difficulties and sleeping late drew us away. When our children reached an age for religious education, Unitarian Universalism became important to me again. I wanted a place where my children could find acceptance and practice tolerance and religious intellectualism while experiencing organized religious structure. Since then I've become involved in many ways with the local congregation, and have found it very fulfilling and satisfying. I have the fellowship and community I missed. I have a place where questioning and searching are encouraged, and where there is tolerance of my own personal brand of mysticism. After many years, I have at last found a church where once more I feel at home.

ENJOY THE JOURNEY

Patricia Yates

Prince Alberta, Saskatchewan

I was raised in the Church of England and attended a church school to the age of eleven. This meant that I attended church at least twice a week. I had a lively imagination, but my questions were discouraged, so I eventually stopped asking them. Still, I continued to attend church, and became a Sunday School teacher.

When I was twenty-three years old, I emigrated to Canada. Although I continued to consider myself an Anglican for a while and joined a church choir, there was something missing. I stopped attending church, but this left a void in my life.

At a party one evening I met a Unitarian Universalist, and because of her, I attended the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver. What I heard on that first Sunday breathed life into a lusterless corner of my being. I knew-more than anything I'd ever known-that I belonged; that I was a Unitarian Universalist; that I'd come home. Here I found a place where my questions, if not answered, were at least welcome. This new beginning was at the same time a kind of arrival.

During the last ten years, I have learned to enjoy the journey and the company of others who have chosen the same road. I have learned that how one makes the journey is perhaps more important than reaching a destination. There are still questions, but they are not so important now. Each step of my path has been both a setting out and an arrival. When there are no more departures and no more destinations, that for me will be the end.