

# Finding What We Believe

Unitarian Universalist Principles affirm “the free and responsible search for meaning.” This is core to what defines us as people of faith. We don’t expect each other to proclaim a common creed. This freedom of individual belief can be difficult for some to reconcile with traditional ideas of what *religion* means. *Can Unitarian Universalists believe anything they want? Does belief matter in Unitarian Universalism? Without common belief, what unites Unitarian Universalism and makes it a religion?*

In this pamphlet, I’d like to answer these questions from my own perspective as a faith-full Unitarian Universalist.

Unitarian Universalists are not required as a condition of belonging to our faith to accept any theological position as true and binding that does not resonate with and originate within our own spirits, but that doesn’t mean individual Unitarian Universalists are without belief. Everyone believes something about the nature of reality and the meaning of our purpose in it, right? How does one believe nothing? For us, the absence of a creed means that we each believe what we find ourselves compelled to believe. Every Unitarian Universalist I have spoken to about belief either knows precisely what they believe about some of the ultimate questions or they place themselves somewhere on a path of discernment, discovering which beliefs resonate with them and which do not. Unitarian Universalists undertake the quest to name those beliefs for ourselves and choose to remain open to discovery as we move through life, learn about other people’s beliefs, form relationships, and have experiences that shape our personal credos.

For myself, I believe that God is present within everything that exists, and that we all exist within God. I believe that God is not a person, and yet I believe that I am personally connected to, related to, indebted to, enamored with, and dependent on God. I believe that everyone else is, too, but that we each speak from our experience and background, and thus use the words of our own language to describe what we can only describe very poorly, perhaps ineffectually. I believe that I, with God, can make a difference in people’s lives, including and perhaps especially my own.

Do I believe these things because I want to? No. I believe them because I must. I believe them because they help life make sense to me. Every fiber of my being tells me that they are true. I would be in perpetual despair if they were not. If I could believe in whatever I wanted, I would believe that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, the Father Almighty in Heaven, that he is my Lord and Savior and that he came to Earth, suffered, died for my sins, and rose from the dead to offer me eternal sanctuary with him now and at the end of days. I’d want to believe these things because most of my family believes them and I don’t like conflict. Sometimes it gets lonesome being on the outside of the in-group and life in the United States of America might be just a little less rife with tension if I believed as many others claim to believe. But I do not believe these things, and I cannot believe them.

## Doing the Work

Being a Unitarian Universalist is a tough job. We each, on our own, have to figure out what we must believe. Within our faith, we learn by attending to what others believe, accepting ideas that evoke in our spirits a sense of the transcendent, and sifting out those that do not. Our institutions do not determine or prescribe what those precise ideas might be, but we collectively share Principles for the journey. We agree to walk with one another on the journey, in love. Sometimes that walk is exciting and filled with joyous discovery and revelation; sometimes it is challenging or mundane. But the point is that we do it together and we’re in it for the long haul. On any given day, the path I tread with other seeking souls might provide that life-changing and life-affirming moment that I or they might need to make a connection with what I call the Divine. Who am I to deny them that possibility? Who am I to deny it to myself?

## **A Community of Diverse Beliefs**

Other Unitarian Universalists do not believe any of the things I just named. Others still may believe those things which I cannot. But Unitarian Universalists in general are convinced that we can still share faith together in community. How we treat one another is more important to us than the beliefs we seek or hold, more important than the words we choose to express our beliefs. And I believe how we live in the world is a better indicator of the presence of God in our lives. Unitarian Universalism is a saving faith. In community, we invite one another to uncover what our minds and hearts and experiences clearly call us to believe. I believe the more ways and opportunities we have to connect to the Divine, the better. Hallelujah!

## **For Reflection**

- Do you agree that Unitarian Universalists do not believe in “anything they want to”? What beliefs do you feel are antithetical to the values and Principles of Unitarian Universalism?
- The author says, “How we treat one another is more important to us than the beliefs we seek or hold, more important than the words we choose to express our beliefs. And I believe how we live in the world is a better indicator of the presence of God in our lives.” How do your experiences in UU congregations and communities bear witness to the presence of that which you revere?
- Being part of a faith community with many different beliefs can be challenging. When has it been hard for you to accept that your fellow journeyers believe something quite different from what you believe? What values in your faith help you to accept differences about belief and stay in pluralistic community?

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## **For Further Reading**

(available at [uua.org/bookstore](http://uua.org/bookstore))

Wayne Arnason and Sam Trumbore, eds. *Buddhist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2013.

Forrest Church and John A. Buehrens, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Beacon Press, 1994.

Leah Hart-Landsberg and Marti Keller, eds. *Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2014.

Peter Morales, ed. *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*. Skinner House Books, 2012.

Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Religion in the 21st Century*. Skinner House Books, 2005.

Kathleen Rolenz, ed. *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*. Skinner House Books, 2006.