

**Faith Formation 2020**  
**UU Metro Atlanta North**  
**September 9, 2018**  
**Dave Dunn**

I have an integrated approach to weekends that draws on established best practices and incorporates actionable insights that I purposely ignore. – Facebook post

A friend of mine humorously posted this on Facebook several years ago and I saved it knowing that I'd someday be able to use it in a sermon. It works with the topic of today's service.

If one were to replace "weekends" with "my Unitarian Universalist faith", they'd be left with the following sentence:

I have an integrated approach to my Unitarian Universalist faith that draws on established best practices and incorporates actionable insights that I purposely ignore.

And here we have one of the more popular critiques of those who call themselves Unitarian Universalists.

The critique is that despite having this rich tradition and history, our faith is ultimately ignored when it comes to provide meaning to our lives. There's no real meaning.

Again this is simply the standard critique. It may not be a valid critique. We have standard critiques for our political parties. Republicans only want to cut taxes to benefit the rich. Democrats only want to raise my taxes and offer unwarranted entitlements. Libertarians want everything but don't want to pay for it. These are overly simplified critiques and as a result, not completely valid; but they are critiques nonetheless.

Are we merely "spiritual tinkerers" – a mile wide and an inch deep? With no set creed do we merely believe in whatever feels good at the time - changing from one religious philosophy to another like we change clothes? Do we believe in "whatever we want?"

Rev. Christine Robinson believes there might be some validity to this critique when she says, with tongue firmly in cheek, "Unitarian Universalists are free to believe whatever we want to, and most of us don't (Rev. Christine Robinson)." And to borrow a quote from author Mignon McLaughlin that might apply to UUs, she writes, "I've been hiding from God, and I'm appalled to find out how easy it is."

What constitutes the "integrated approach" to our faith? I would say that our reliance on our direct experience, the first of our six sources of our living tradition provides our integrating approach. Our first source reads, "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

I believe that this is our integrating approach. What we believe must be integrated with our experience of this thing called life.

And what might be our “best practices?” Our reliance of bring reason to religious thought? The intellectual rigor we often apply to matters of faith? The other five sources of our living tradition? The remaining UU sources: 2) Words & Deeds of prophetic people 3) Wisdom of the Worlds Religions 4) Jewish & Christian traditions 5) Humanist Traditions 6) Earth-Centered teachings. These might be called our best practices.

What about our “actionable insights?” Might these be summarized as our UU principles – our belief in Inherent Worth, Justice, Acceptance, Free and Responsible Search, Democratic Process, Peace, Liberty Justice, Respect for Interdependent Web?

Few could argue that we don’t have an integrated approach, best practices or actionable insights. The question is: Do we do anything with them? Do we leverage these in the formation of our faith? Or do we “purposely ignore” them and let them all slide down the slippery slope of religious nihilism?

Ultimately, I think that you’ll need to be the judge as to how Unitarian Universalism informs, or doesn’t inform, your own life.

Looking at it from another angle, compared to other denominational and religious traditions, consider the responsibility we must bear for our theology. We are solely responsible of our own personal theologies. We aren’t told what doctrines to believe. We aren’t told which doctrines are “right” and which are heretical. We aren’t told what is sacred and holy. We aren’t told what is worthy of reverence and what is not.

When people casually critique Unitarian Universalism and say, “Being a UU is easy, you can believe whatever you want.” I’ll push back and say, “I don’t believe in what I want to believe; I believe in what I have to believe. Based upon my experience of this life, as limited as that experience might be; (“my eye reaches but little ways (Theodore Parker)”); and based upon the reason and rationality that I can bring to bear upon that experience; based upon what I can learn, as best I can, from the experiences of others; and yes, based upon some things that are difficult to explain and can’t be reasoned - I simply can’t believe in whatever I want.

Being a Unitarian Universalist is quite a responsibility!

Think about it. What’s easier? Believing what you’re told to believe by the church fathers or being the captain of your own ship, squaring your own religious ideas and beliefs with the experience of your being? Being a devout UU involves a lot of critical inquiry; it involves a lot of work! You can’t be lazy and be a UU.

I may have related this story before but I first became a Unitarian Universalist in a speech class that I took in college. Now I didn’t even know what Unitarian Universalism was at the time but

it when I first became a UU in spirit. Now I attended Villanova University – a Catholic university and this speech class was taught by a former nun.

One of the speeches I had to deliver had to express a personal statement - a statement that expressed who I am. (Or technically, who I was at the time.) I can remember almost everything I said in that speech. It started like this:

As of today, as of this very moment, I no longer consider myself to be a Roman Catholic. I consider myself to be a member of a religion that has only one member – ME!  
Religious faith is something too important to be “born into”. It is something that one must discover for oneself. It is not easy to do this but it can be no other way. It is what I must do.

...jaws dropped all around the room.... The teacher, sitting in the back of the class, looked horrified! (I received an A for that speech!)

It was the beginning of my own little personal manifesto of religious freedom. Emerson would have been proud! My little manifesto was also freshly naïve. My religious thinking has evolved over time. Among other things, I’ve widened my circle and realized that, for me, religion can’t a religion of just one member. I now see religion and my spirituality as being communal; and even though what I believe might be significantly different from what you believe, we can be of one faith community.

A few weeks ago I said that “an ever-increasing number of people see participation in our culture as isolated individuals having individual needs rather than as an integral member of a cohesive community pursuant of the common good.” This is an idea, one among many regarding our culture and religious institutions, put forth by the research of John Roberto in his book “Faith Formation 2020.”

This book attempts to address, to stem the tide of what many believe to be our culture’s steady descent into isolated individualism and religious nihilism. It hopes to address this through Faith Formation. I like to think of it as Faith Evolution or Evolving Faith. (Remember, we call our faith a Living Tradition.)

What are you doing to evolve your faith? What are we doing communally to evolve our faith?

To begin to evolve our faith, we will be embarking upon an courageous Adult Enrichment program. Beginning today, and almost every Sunday through next May, we will be offering an Adult Enrichment program here at UUMAN from 12-1PM.

For four weeks in September, I will be teaching Unitarian history in a course entitled “The Epic of Unitarianism.”

Then, for three weeks in October and 1 week in November, our friends from Roswell Community Masjid will be teaching an Introduction to Islam course.

Then as we approach the holiday season, for one week in November and three weeks in December, Dwana Bush and Donna Melcher will be leading us in "Life's Excellent Adventure: Naming and Claiming Your Whole Person Health.

There will be more to follow in the spring.

But there are also other avenues to explore for evolving our faith. One thing that they taught us in seminary, from start to finish, was that to change people's minds, you have to change their hearts first..

And you can't tell people to change their hearts, their hearts must have an experience. Heartfelt experiences are the seeds of change. The seeds of growth.

For example, our week with our with our Family Promise guests is a week of heartfelt experiences. Yes, it is also a week of chaos, it's inconvenient and somewhat wacky at times. It's all that. But our Family Promise work is also changing hearts. It's changing us....little by little...week by week.

If you're missing our Family Promise work, you're kind of missing out!

Some people kid that as Unitarian Universalists our symbol, instead of being a flaming chalice, should be a question mark....and I get that; because to form your faith, to form our faith; we don't provide answers here, only questions. We don't sell fruits here, only seeds.