

Say It Loud! Say It Proud!

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ September 30, 2007

I'd like to ask you a question. When was the last time you practiced your elevator speech? Excuse me, you might say. Elevator speech? Some of you may recall President Sinkford's article on the subject in UU World awhile back. I loved it. And I vowed to change my ways.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the concept of elevator speech, let me explain. Picture yourself in a tall, many storied building. You, along with several others, get on the elevator and one of them innocently asks "What religion are you?" Some of us are right out there and we state loud and proud, "I am a Unitarian Universalist." Others, and I've seen this many times, kind of turn our heads and mumble "I'm a Unitarian Universalist." Why do we do that? Are we ashamed of our chosen religion, of our beloved community? No, certainly not. I truly do not think so. Then, what is happening? I think I know, or at least I know what is true for me. It is because we know what's coming next, that NEXT, almost inevitable QUESTION. "Unitarian Universalist, what's that?" Bam! there's the question. Someone pushes the elevator floor button and the car begins its ride up. You now have less than two minutes to tell all of these people just what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. About two minutes to answer the really easy questions like: Do you believe in God? Are UUs Christians? Just what do Unitarian Universalist's believe? Too, often, unprepared, we struggle through and afterwards feel slightly uncomfortable, almost ashamed, because the words did not come easily.

Why is it that this task is so difficult for us? To explain, I'd like to ask you to do something for me. Would all of you who have grown up as Unitarian Universalists please stand up. . . This is true in so many congregations. Most of us were not raised in this faith. Often we come from another faith; sometimes we were unchurched, just hadn't attended any church for a long while, maybe forever. We have so much to learn, to absorb and reflect upon as we each decide what beliefs are true for ourselves.

I am a Unitarian Universalist. But, I admit that until I entered seminary, I did not know much about our heroes and our heritage. I did not know much about our roots. I became convinced that I needed to learn more about our heroes and our stories. It became part of my spiritual path to find out more. I invite you to come share some of this journey with me.

For some of you, this is old hat, a refresher to the learning that you have already integrated into your spiritual database. Perhaps as you listen, new insights will emerge, ready for exploration.

Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious. "Heresy" in Greek means "choice."

During the first three centuries of the Christian church, there were many beliefs about Jesus and persons could choose. Perhaps Jesus was sent by God on a divine mission. People who believed this were "Unitarian," because they believed in the oneness of God. Others believed that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation. This was a "Universalist" view, a belief in salvation for all. However, in the year 325 Christianity lost its element of choice. The Nicene Creed was established and the Trinity was made dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

Yes, I'm proud to be a Unitarian Universalist, a heretic who wants to make spiritual choices for myself.

Throughout history Unitarians and Universalists have been persecuted. During the Protestant Reformation in the fifteen hundreds religious persecution in Europe was extraordinarily

widespread. Many people died. Truly think about this. Would you be willing to die for your faith? What would you say if you were point blank asked, “Do you believe in the Trinity?,” knowing that the wrong answer most certainly could spell your death?

One of the many martyrs during that time was Michael Servetus. As a teenager, Servetus studied the bible and found that nowhere was the doctrine of the trinity explicitly mentioned. In his early twenties he published two books which he hoped - no, he was sure - would persuade others to re-think their Trinitarian positions. Imagine his shock, dismay and horror when, instead of being affirmed, he was hunted by the Catholic Inquisition. He had not expected this turn of events. He changed his name, moved, and spent over twelve quiet years as a physician. But he really thought that he had something important to say, so during that time he also wrote a major theological work called *The Restoration of Christianity* and he struck up a lively and often unfriendly correspondence with John Calvin. When both the Catholic inquisition and the Protestants again came looking for Servetus it was John Calvin who led them to him. Servetus was convicted of anti-trinitarianism and opposition to child baptism. At the age of 42 he was burned at the stake with his book of beliefs tied to his leg.

Yes, I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist and Michael Servetus is one of my heroes. I believe that study, questioning and sharing are good ways to discern my spiritual beliefs.

On a more pleasant note, let me tell you another 16th century story. It is the story of Isabella, the daughter of Queen Bona and King Sigismund of Poland, As a child, Isabella was taught that women among royalty should take a keen interest in the world around them because their welfare and their future would depend upon their ability to make informed decisions. (Think how modern her parents were!) When John Zapolya became king of Transylvania, he married Isabella and she became queen. Unfortunately, the king died shortly after his son’s birth, and little John was named King of Transylvania at the age of six months. In 1551 the country was seized. Queen Isabella and young King John were forced to return to Poland. There for the next five years of exile, mother and son developed a game that they played for hours on end. The question posed was: When we return to power, what kind of rulers will we be? What would be the best possible way to rule? For each topic they asked; “Will this plan work? Is it good for the people?” In the 1500s most rulers decided on the religion of the country, John and Isabella, having seen all the death and destruction of the Reformation asked themselves: “Why shouldn’t each person worship God in the way that seems best for them? Why not have a country where the people could read, debate and choose for themselves?”

And so it was. When Queen Isabella and King John returned to power in 1556 they issued a decree which has come to be known as the Edict of Torda or the first “Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience.” This edict which clearly separated church and state was absolutely unique in that era. Then, they convened a series of religious debates, the last was a 10 day marathon in 1568. Debating religious merits were a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Calvinist and a Unitarian. The Unitarian, who, by the way had been a Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist before choosing Unitarianism, was their court preacher, Frances David who argued that “We need not think alike to love alike.” After the debate, although raised a Catholic, King John converted to Unitarianism and became the first and only Unitarian king. Within the next 10 years over 500 churches became Unitarian.

Yes, I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist. Like Isabella, I believe that I have to stay engaged in the larger community so that I can make informed decisions. Like our first Unitarian rulers, I respect each person’s right to choose the path that best meets their spiritual needs.

American Unitarianism and Universalism are deeply rooted in Puritan New England. In New England in the 1700s each town was REQUIRED to establish a congregationally independent church that followed Calvinist doctrines. But over time the strict Calvinist doctrines of original sin and predestination were passionately questioned. In 1777, several members of the First Church of Christ in Gloucester, Massachusetts, began to stay away from Sunday services because they were listening instead to the radical preaching of John Murray. John Murray did not believe that only some people were going to be saved. He thought and preached that everyone would be saved. In 1779, these early Universalists formed the Independent Church of Christ in Gloucester. But they still had to pay taxes to support the First Parish, the church that they had left. When they refused, their possessions were confiscated and sold to pay the delinquent taxes. The Universalists brought the case to court, and in a landmark decision handed down in 1786, they were recognized as a distinct religious community exempt from paying taxes to support the church of another faith.

Yes, I'm proud to be a Unitarian Universalist. I believe in standing up for my beliefs and using democratic process to solve problems.

The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and that dignity and worth is innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class. John Murray's first church, for example, included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became one of the first denominations to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown. Olympia Brown believed that freedom of religious thought and a liberal church would supply the groundwork for all other freedoms." After many years in the pulpit, she resigned to become more active in the women's suffrage movement. When the suffrage amendment passed in 1919, she dedicated herself to promoting world peace and became one of the original members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Yes, I'm proud to be a Unitarian Universalist I actively support equality for all.

Both Unitarians and Universalists became active in social justice movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unitarian/Transcendentalist preacher Theodore Parker was a prominent abolitionist, defending fugitive slaves. Universalist Charles Spear called for prison reform, and Clara Barton, the Civil War "angel of the battlefield" later became the founder of the American Red Cross. For the last two centuries, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of movements working to free people from whatever bonds may oppress them.

Yes, I'm proud to be a Unitarian Universalist and to champion social justice.

As early as the 1830s, both the Unitarians and the Universalists realized that lasting truth is found in all religions. By the beginning of the twentieth century, humanists within both traditions advocated that people could be religious without believing in God.

Yes, I'm proud to be a Unitarian Universalist. I believe that there is truth in all religions, with or without God.

In 1957 the Unitarian and Universalist youth groups merged. Then, in 1961 the two denominations formed the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. When, in 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote to ministers urging anyone that could to come to Selma Alabama and march for justice, 20% of the Unitarian Universalist ministers responded. Many of us remember that one of our ministers, James Reeb, was murdered in Selma, Alabama. For me, it is just as important to also remember that many Unitarian Universalist members also responded to King's call. Two weeks after Reeb's death **Viola Liuzzo**, a UU from Detroit was also murdered. When President Johnson called Viola's husband Jim to offer condolences, Jim said "My wife died for a sacred battle, the rights of humanity."

Wow! Yes, I'm proud to be a Unitarian Universalist.

These are our some of our heroes, these are some of our stories. It makes me proud. I know that we have good news to share! I invite you, too, to help others learn our truths, our joys and our hopes.

I urge you to try out your elevator speech. See what phrases are comfortable for you and in what areas you may want to study a little bit. Try out your elevator speech this week, - practice it with a friend, with a neighbor, with a mirror. Write it down if that is helpful. But do get ready, so that when that elevator appears in the market, on the bus, at work or in school, you will be ready to say it loud and say it proud "I am a Unitarian Universalist,...and let me tell you what that means." May it be so.