

Faith of a UU Minister

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(Read at the service by Susan Larrabee)

Perhaps only in Unitarian Universalism would a minister be asked to list our “awards, honors and publications” before being asked about our theology. It’s true. The third question on the ministerial record; a form that all ministers complete and use when in search, asks us to list our “awards, honors and publications.” Twenty-two questions later we are asked about our theology.

To be fair, there are outstanding questions on this record—things related to all parts of our lives. The record, comparable I suppose to a CV, paints a thorough picture of a minister.

AND—I still find it odd, that we are not asked about our theology until the very end.

There are other theological oddities that come with being a Unitarian Universalist minister. I’ve had people unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism ask me, for example, “If you don’t talk about God as a minister, then what *do* you talk about?”

Fellow clergy colleagues are either in utter awe, or terror, when they realize that we don’t preach from the lectionary or liturgical calendar of the church year.

Yes, the faith of a UU minister is somewhat different than in traditional religious practices. Which is why I want to take a few minutes and share my thoughts about why it actually is very important, and encourage you to check yourself to see if you have religious biases that might presuppose things about a minister or close you down to getting to know them and loving them as your minister.

Faith and theology are, in fact, quite different. I understand faith to be that which inspires us and gives us reason to keep on *keeping on*. Faith is about meaning-making and connection to something—people, divinity, nature, and/or practices—that take us out of ourselves and affirms for us that we are part of something much bigger.

Theology includes religious beliefs, worship styles, creeds, doctrines, practices and tradition. For the purpose of today, let’s consider the role that both of them have in the life of a minister, and for that matter, all of our lives.

A Unitarian Universalist minister needs faith, spiritual practices and an understanding of their theology for three reasons. All of these are important and will impact your relationship with them, regardless of whether you share the same beliefs.

First, a minister, UU or otherwise, needs faith, spiritual practices and an understanding of their theology so that they can walk beside you and support you in your own faith journey. A minister who has not grappled, doubted, questioned, been awestruck, desperate and afraid—in other words, a minister who hasn’t lived their own faith journey—is much less able to authentically support you in yours.

You may or may not be at a place in your life right now when this seems important to you—a faith journey—however, the day will come when you find yourselves in the pit, the joy, the journey, the mystery of faith, and you will want and deserve a minister who can bear witness, walk beside you and say, “I understand. I’ve been there too.”

Secondly, UU ministers need faith so that they can be rejuvenated. Ministry, like all of life, is at times exhausting. Discouraging. Overwhelming. You want a minister who knows how to support themselves and their personal wellbeing. Spirituality and faith, whatever that looks like, is a key part of one’s wellbeing. Whether it’s running, praying, doing service, going on retreats or meeting with trusted confidants, ministers need to have a net and network in place that offers renewal on a daily basis.

UU minister Reverend Alex Holt speaks of the importance of this when he writes: “Unitarian Universalism felt like home because I could reject dogma and Christian exclusivism in the company of kindred spirits. Then it all hit the fan... in this crisis of faith, I couldn’t find a spiritual practice of discernment in the religion I loved... Where was I supposed to look within my faith for support and guidance?”¹

Lastly, we UUs can be a tough flock to shepherd. Among us are those who have been dislocated from, or who have misidentified ourselves from, other faith communities. We may never have been churched, or we may have been hurt by the religion of our upbringing.

We are also deeply committed to the work of justice and activism. In doing that work, we will partner with others. Many of whom have their own faith traditions, which are crucial to their identities and their ways of approaching social justice. As such, we need to come from a reconciled or resolved or at least intentional place within ourselves regarding our faith as UUs to form true partnerships with others. When we are building genuine relationships with people whose faith is key to their justice work, we owe it to them and the work of justice to bring our most healed, best selves to that work.

I understand a key part of my and any minister’s job to be helping congregants heal, discover and claim their spirituality. I can only do that authentically inasmuch as I have done that same work myself, which is the third reason why it is important that a minister understand their own faith. It is not a matter of arriving, for I do not experience faith as a static endeavor. It is, however, about being awake and attentive to our own spiritual journey.

When you consider your next minister, don’t be concerned about what their faith and theology *is*—whether or not you agree with it is irrelevant. Often, we learn the most from those who share other beliefs. What is important is having a minister who can walk the spiritual path with you, who knows how to care for their own spiritual wellbeing and who has reconciled or is reckoning within themselves the place and role of faith in their lives and their ministry.

None of us will ever be done with this work. It is the work of a lifetime. Where better to do it than in church?

¹ Buddhist Voices in Unitarian Universalism, Skinner House Books, 2013. p. 90.