

The world is so full of a number of things,  
I'm sure we should all be as happy as Kings.

-Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses*

I'm here today to tell you a little about my search for spiritual meaning and how I've used the lens of Unitarian Universalism to assist me in that exploration. As an introduction, I must give you a little background. I'm not a classic Unitarian Universalist, in that I don't really enjoy discussions, especially about politics, religion, or other controversial topics. Do you remember the old joke about knowing how to spot a UU? You put up two signs, one pointing to "Heaven" and the other pointing to "Discussion: Does Heaven Exist?" Of course, the joke is that all the UUs would prefer the discussion. Frankly, I would probably just head to the coffee line instead. I wouldn't really want to discuss it, and I certainly wouldn't be in the Heaven line because I'd have several more things on my "to do" list before I'd be ready to go.

The short poem that I opened with was a favorite of the dear friend and mentor who shepherded me through my last years of college and into graduate school and beyond. It has come to represent for me a time in life when I was learning about the marvels of history, literature and art, and delighting in the beauty of the world. This one sentence has also become a short reminder of all those perplexing life questions: Is there a God? Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? What happens when we die? What is our purpose? Are we here to bask, child-like and secure, in the bountiful garden of a beneficent God? Is the price of this security a life of dutiful obedience? If so, how can I tell the real list of duties from the fakes? And do those of us who pick the wrong list, or were just born to be wild, really burn in hell for eternity? If I have intractable pain, or suffer the loss of a child, is it God's will? What kind of God, or universe, sets up a world where every creature suffers and dies in its earthly form and then many, or most, proceed to everlasting suffering? And what about dogs? Do all dogs go to heaven? What about gorillas? Bonobos?

My religious questioning began when I was a young child. I learned early to keep my questions private, away from the ears of my wiser family members, thus avoiding any chances that they would correct my errors of logic, or—worst of all—find my questions amusing. I knew somehow that Heaven was "up there" so I reasoned that it was just a matter of a thorough search. My family specialized in long, boring trips and that is when I conducted this research. Where was heaven? I searched. I scanned. Across Kansas and eastern Colorado there was little else to see other than sky, nothing to obscure the horizon. I inspected every cloud, particularly the ones that blocked the sun, creating those dramatic rays of light streaming out. Surely that was a little bit of heaven that was shining through. I knew, too, that God would be there, and perhaps I'd get a glimpse of him, too. Remember how television stations used to sign off to conclude the broadcast day? One of the Wichita stations signed off with the same short film: a jet raced across a sky filled with "sunsplitted clouds" while a man in the background read the poem "High Flight" by John Gillespie Magee, Jr. (I've included the poem on the last page). The piece concluded with a particularly glorious cloud, sunbeams bursting out in all directions,

while the man intoned: “put out my hand and touched the face of God.” That one dramatic image and phrase was a staple of my preadolescence, but also a bittersweet reminder that in all my childhood years of research, those thousands of miles of careful observation, I’d never had a sighting. No door, no throne, no glimpse of His face, no inkling of an opening, zip. I gave up, doubtful.

By adolescence, I had become fairly astute at sizing up the adults in my world. In a few stark cases, there were discrepancies between their self-proclaimed religious “goodness” and the sense I had of them. Unfortunately, these were the same people who were my Sunday school teachers. I nursed my skepticism. My parents insisted that we attend church and Sunday school through high school, but afterward I never went back. I was a fairly bitter refugee and didn’t need any of it. I couldn’t understand how any educated person did.

That attitude continued through several years of graduate school. Once I left school and turned my energies to marriage, family and work, my spiritual pursuits were shaped by my personal needs for guidance based on my unique circumstances. Having married someone from another faith, there were questions to be answered, traditions to be negotiated, and children to raise. We tried those things in a vacuum, and our mistakes propelled us into a search for a common spiritual base. We had to undo our habit of verbalizing what we did not believe so that we had something positive and life-affirming to teach our children, and try to help them fit into a community where everyone expected everyone else to be Christian. We knew we were in trouble when Jeff came home from kindergarten and announced his discovery: not every child there had one parent who was Gentile and the other who was Jewish!

We found this UU group soon after Jeff started school, when Ronn and Linda opened up their home to others who might be of like minds to share the journey. For the rest of this talk, I’ll tell you a little about my personal search for meaning as it has evolved over my years of membership in this faith community.

Does God exist? How do we account for the fact that a need for/or belief in some kind of ultimate authority exists in every culture and in the vast majority of individuals? I do believe in some unknowable sort of life force, but I don’t need to know it. I don’t want a God I can understand. I don’t even want a God that Ronn Smith could understand! I would have to describe an ultimate source as a kind of process rather than a supreme being. This creative mystery is, by definition, beyond my capacity to comprehend. I have grown most comfortable with the notion of religious naturalism, and my understanding of this has deepened over the past several seasons thanks to the presentations of several of you. My experience of the natural environment, human relationships, my own existence in time and space, the birth and growth of my children, my friendships, all are miraculous occurrences in a splendid array of miracles I can’t begin to explain. Science, including evolution, seems eminently satisfying in its explanation of life processes. I have no appetite or longing for supernatural explanations. On the other hand, I do believe, as we have discussed in other presentations, that we as a species are hard-wired to seek explanations and interpret events in terms that evoke a supreme being of some kind. It is so much a part of who we are as creatures; it is hard to

reformulate an image that has more power than a parent, particularly when we are sick or afraid.

As you know, childhood habits die hard, so I'm going to indulge in a playful digression here. A month or two ago, Victor changed the wallpaper on our computer monitor. We now see Hubble's sharpest view of the Orion nebula every time we fire up the computer, and I have good news to report: I've found him. God is in the picture. He's right there, in profile. He's on the right half of the screen, about halfway down the page. (Check it out at [www.spacetelescope.org](http://www.spacetelescope.org)). I was surprised at his white hair, too. I didn't expect him to look so, well, God-like. When I told Victor, he wasn't surprised. He'd seen him too, but incredibly, he hadn't even bothered to mention it. Maybe it's because the light has to travel 1300 years to get here, and the picture is five years old. Somehow I doubt that God is still in the Orion nebula all these years later, but I finally got a glimpse.

But what about a personal God? A friend here in the fellowship told me once when I was ill that she'd pray for me. We both knew that she didn't mean she'd turn to a personal God to request a favor, but rather, that she'd offer her thoughts out to the universe. As she said, when we're helpless to intercede, "What else is there to do?" What she was also doing, of course, was expressing her love and concern for me, and her fervent hope for a good outcome. In my experience, I have seen no evidence of a personal God, so I have no expectation of Divine intervention. In a world where there is no God to turn to, we have each other. The love and hope expressed by that friend is enough. It's everything.

The lack of evidence for a personal God seems to provide the answer to the next question: Is there a Heaven and Hell? If there is no one watching and keeping score to cast us up or down, it's a moot point. There's no evidence of either, as far as I can tell. It seems like potent mythology, but is that where we should focus our attention?

So what does happen when we die? I asked my 97-year-old mother if she thought that she would go somewhere like Heaven and be with Dad after she died. "I don't know," she replied sweetly, "I'd like to think so." She lived through the Great Depression and World War II, lost her spouse 20 years ago, and has faced whatever came her way without complaints. I hope for her sake that she's right. But for me, in this time of diminishing resources and expectations, I'm OK with being recycled as a bit of organic matter, or a drop of water. I've heard that many people become anxious about their end of days as they feel it getting close. If that is my fate, I hope for a few kind people to provide comfort and companionship in those final days.

Why are we here? What is our purpose in this life? Without a personal God, the hope of heaven or the fear of hell, what is there to guide me through this life? Obviously, those forces would not be a constant. As a child, the structure of family is the first system I learned, followed by larger sphere of social influences and the world of ideas I discovered in college and beyond. In my case, my coming of age in the 60's shaped my life just as the Depression forever changed my parents' reality.

I can trace my spiritual evolution along David Rankin's Ten Beliefs that UUs Share (see last page). Some of them are easy; some have made sense only as I have matured across my life cycle. The ones that I rely on most for my understanding of spirituality are #3-5. Those that seem most automatic are #1 and 6. The toughest one, for me, has been the last one. You can understand it based on my personal style. I am a little commitment phobic. I don't like conflict and I don't like to stick my neck out and risk being "wrong." I generally choose to defer rather than stand my ground. I have tried going it alone, avoiding groups or staying on the periphery, quick to withdraw when conflict flared or demands made me uneasy. Was I successful? Yes, but I missed a lot, and my growth as a person and as a spiritual being has suffered.

Over a long process that has included considerable approach/avoidance behavior, I've stuck with this group (this probably has a whole lot to do with Victor's unswerving commitment to it). In the process of showing up here, I've slowly realized that I don't glean the most important spiritual lessons from the texts of our wisdom traditions, or even from the spoken word of prophets. I learn the most by watching us live together. I finally know that, if I have only one life to live, I want to live it in community.

Here's a list of what this group has taught me over the past 27 years.

1. We're all traveling the same road. Some travelers are so restless they just can't stick. They join us and in a year or two they're gone, continuing their search somewhere else. Sometimes it feels like we're "just" a way station. And of course we are! We're all hitchhikers in this magnificent galaxy, sometimes searching for the way, other times just needing a friendly place to rest, take nourishment, enjoy the company of others before continuing. Most of us have contracted to continue the journey together and are in it for the long haul. We've recognized that by pooling our resources and skills, we're better prepared to face the rigors of the trip, and ever so much less lonely. And that takes me to my next point.

2. We don't always agree with each other, and that's OK. The fact that we sign the membership book annually (and not once) is a bookkeeping necessity, partly because we do serve as a way station for those very, very restless searchers I described above. Carrying inactive members is costly, hence the annual signing ritual. But I've heard others say, "I don't want to sign the book because someone may say something that I don't agree with." (Really??) Without a creed, and as a group of self-proclaimed seekers on their own journey, we don't offer unanimity. What we aspire to offer is a safe, respectful community where each of us is free to express our personal reality. Over time, I've also learned (and read) that it's our responsibility to protect the community against the tyranny of a single individual who demands that their every sensibility be protected. "If you say the G word, or refer to G as 'him' I'm out of here." Garrison Keillor jokes that you can tell you're in a UU church if the only time you hear the words Jesus Christ is when someone falls down the basement stairs. We grow from the constant need to balance each person's right to self-expression with the health and well being of the group. The most vivid image of how we do this is a school of fish or flock of birds: no individual touches another, but the whole school moves first one way, then another, in a

fantastic zigzagging ballet. Some invisible membrane contains and shapes their progress without impeding or damaging a single member. Each member of the flock is clearly cooperating and working within some sort of constraint, because they are not flying off in a random direction.

3. We have become a healthy community. I learned my latest lesson about community during all the years of meetings and negotiations about acquiring a building and remodeling it. Strong feelings were expressed, opinions of surprising intensity surfaced. At one point (trying to help) I tried to abort our recent garbage disposal debate by suggest that we defer to the anti-garbage disposer members because they felt so deeply about the issue and their hearts were in the right place (environmental concerns). The response from a strong anti-garbage disposer advocate was to decline my offer, and let it come to a democratic vote. The garbage disposer advocates won, and the issue was over. Not another peep. Democracy, although a long, occasionally strident, and messy process, is at the heart of our community. Throughout all these decisions over the past years, I'm not aware of anyone that left because they disagreed with the majority. We also sat together as board members as each one took the time they needed to reach a consensus on the purchase of the building. Some waited patiently for others to muster the courage to take the leap, but we all held back until we could jump together.

4. We are generous people. I was treasurer during and after the purchase of the building, and president during the most recent remodeling fund-raising. I am frequently touched and challenged by the generosity and commitment of our membership. On several occasions, individual acts of generosity have moved me to recommit my time to this group.

5. Individual acts make an incredible difference, especially over time. I'll mention Chuck Graves, although it could easily be Gib Leibinger. I sat on our Board over the years as Chuck pushed us toward that absurd dream he wouldn't let go of to acquire a building. When he shrewdly challenged the board members to pony up half of the total amount he named in the first fund drive, my jaw dropped. Did we dig deeper than I ever thought we'd dig? Yep. Did we do that more than once? Yep. Have we ever been sorry? Not once. In the days since Chuck's passing I've learned even more about his scrappy, persistent style, often lavished on unpopular causes, which left a mark on the state, on this community, and on our fellowship. We are in a much different place than we would have been without him. His life made a difference to many of us. I am a different person as a result of his being here. I'm more optimistic, a little gutsier, and more aware of the importance of taking the long view. He, like my mentor who blessed me with so many gifts of wisdom, is part of my notion of a higher power. That is the sort of a higher power that is my best self, and my best self is manifested in community, not in isolation. I am my best self when I'm challenged by what you are doing here, too. I have a heightened sense of the possibilities if I hold myself to a higher standard than just living for this day alone and just living for myself and my family alone. This fellowship is a tangible way we contribute to the community, to our future selves, and to others yet to come. People will gather here when Chuck's tree has grown large, and aren't likely to

give us a thought, but we will be making our mark in terms of their quality of life and their opportunity to grow in community together.

My purpose here today has been to share my private view of this world that is so full of a number of things: the grandeur of nature, the beauty of a child's face, a moment of authentic connection with another, human compassion and love, but also cruelty, tragedy, suffering and death. What I've learned over the past several decades is this: Perhaps the most wonderful part of life is that we go through it in the company of others. Although I don't fully understand how this gift of life is possible, I'd be a fool not to enjoy the wonders and delights of the world. Even if I have to leave this earth alone, I have companionship and guidance through life every step of the way. Joy loses its luster if it isn't shared, and some pain is only bearable when others step up to share the load. At a time when we lived in extended families maybe this was a lesson few had to learn. But today, in a fragmented world, some of us do need to review the material. Luckily, the price of a ticket for this learning is to show up in some meaningful community. Participation in meaningful community allows for the most profound wisdom to ripen slowly, in its own season. As the old Irish saying goes, "Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?" The answer, of course, is the more the merrier. I'll probably always gravitate to the edge of the action when I need a break, but I won't go home. Being in community is where the living takes place. I'm in it with you, and I'm so very glad we're here in it together.

## *High Flight*

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air.  
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue,  
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or even eagle flew -  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high untresspassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

*Pilot Officer Gillespie Magee  
No 412 Squadron, RCAF  
Killed 11 December 1941*

## Ten Beliefs of Unitarian Universalists

1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop a personal theology and to openly present their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.
2. We believe in tolerance of religious ideas. The religions of every age and culture have something to teach those who listen.
3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.
4. We believe in the search for truth. With an open mind and heart, there is no end to the fruitful and exciting revelations that the human spirit can find.
5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular.
6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice. No idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.
7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Inner grace and faith find completion in social and community involvement.
8. We believe in the force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which seeks to help and heal, never to hurt or destroy.
9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Church records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people might govern themselves.
10. We believe in the importance of a religious community. Peers confirm and validate experience and provide a critical platform, as well as a network of mutual support.

*David Rankin's statement of Unitarian Universalist Beliefs From A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism, by John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).*