

## **What We Believe**

Sermon by Deane M. Perkins

After our service last Sunday I drove to the Boston area to attend a dear friend's 95<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration. Ronny, who is a Black, American Baptist minister became a mentor and second mother to me when I was a teenager. In spite of the fact that I did not go into the ministry as a Baptist early in my life as I had planned, and that years later I did become a minister as a Unitarian Universalist, Ronny has supported my journey for close to 50 years. And Ronny is now dying from a debilitating cancer.

As I was waiting in the receiving line, along with over two hundred other people—this was taking place in a large Baptist church—I was well aware that this community had once been my own. I knew the names of some of the Baptist ministers that

had been spoken; I knew some of the summer camps that were being talked about around me; and I know—in fact he is another dear friend of mine—the new President of the American Baptist Association. I found myself grateful for this community that I had left, for it had fostered within me a love for the sacred around me. Besides, I had been saved at least three times while being a Baptist!

And yet I was also well aware that this was no longer my religious or faith community. And I started thinking about what it was I believed that made me different from probably everyone else there.

The second Sunday in September when I am in the pulpit I always talk about Unitarian Universalist identity—it is something we UUs struggle with, and probably always will. So this morning I am going to tell you what it is we UUs believe.

Yes, this may be one of the most audacious sermons I will ever give! Here it goes:

1. We believe that anything I say about our beliefs is open to questioning and critical thinking. We feel in tune with our hymn when it says, “And in our search for peace, maybe we’ll finally see: even to question is an answer.”

It is a relief, while at the same time difficult for those of us who want concrete, absolute answers, to go through life with this kind of openness, where the search for truth is never-ending. We believe, then, that the paradoxes of human existence, and the ongoing search for what is true and just and good and of beauty, are gifts of life itself.

2. We believe that human beings are born with innate worth and dignity. In fact, like our reading this morning, we symbolically say, “I bow to the light within you,”

anytime we say “hello” to one another or give one another a hug. While we might not literally bend down and touch someone’s feet, we acknowledge the sacred nature of each and every human person. As the the UU joke goes: “The fundamentalist Christian said to a UU, ‘I hear you deny the divinity of Christ.’ The UU responded, ‘No, that’s not true. We don’t deny the divinity of anybody.’” *(The Church Where People Laugh ed. By Gwen Foss, pg. 37)*

3. We believe in the preciousness of our world, and, as such, we are called to be its stewards. The needs of humanity, of our world, and of our environment cannot be separated—all must be respected and protected.
4. We believe that, given the sacredness of life, of humanity, and of the world, we must continue to strive for ever greater justice and compassion within ourselves

and our world. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” (MLK)

5. We believe in a vision that ensures the well-being and health of our children, our grandchildren, and all children world-wide for all generations.
6. We believe that **all** faith communities have a common tenet centered around compassion, and that “doing unto others as you would have others do unto you” is a fundamental principle. As such, both the ends and the means of any ethical or moral decision must themselves be ethical. And
7. We believe that, though there are different ways of expressing that which is ultimate, transcendent, or immanent, the “ground of being” is love. We also believe that love between two persons, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, is to be celebrated.

I happen to think, then, that we do have some beliefs as Unitarian Universalists, though none of these is doctrinal. But the bottom line is this, and it was said by our Association President, Rev. Peter Morales: the question of what people believe is the wrong question. The real question is, “what is it that you love?” *(UU World)*

I have to admit that when I finally got to the head of the reception line at the Baptist church and started to talk to Ronny and give her my best wishes, I was no longer thinking about differences, different beliefs, and how I was separated from my former faith community. I just wanted to tell Ronny how much I loved her. And I did. And then I told Ronny that this may be the last time that I saw her, that I will miss her dearly. And she responded, with her beautiful brown eyes wide open, “I know. I’m dying! But I will never be gone.” In front

of two hundred people, tears came flowing down my face. And through the tears I said, “You will always be in my heart.” And I gave her a big hug, because I knew the light and the god inside her.

Blessed Be. Amen.