

My wife said that her father was attending this new church. “Tell me more,” I said.

She said that the church loves everyone, accepts everyone...it doesn’t matter. And I say to myself, “Ok, I’ve heard that before. They say we’re all children of God yet people of color have their own church within the denomination. They say that LGBT folks are loved here, and if they’d only come on in, we’d be able to straighten them all out.”

She said that this church has no particular theology or creed to which one must subscribe or profess. And I begin thinking, “Ok. Let me guess...they’re likely one of those solitary mega churches not affiliated with any particular denomination who’ll say ‘We don’t have all the trappings, hang-ups and complexity of institutional religion. It’s much simpler here: Our preachers tell us to simply believe in the literal word of God and the prophets put forth in the King James Version of the Bible. And that all who fail to believe what we believe will be cast to eternal hellfire and damnation as their rightful fate.’ Or, as could possibly be the case, that in this church there likely isn’t any particular theology to which one must subscribe because the preacher only wants his congregants to adhere to his and only his particular cultish theology; and all agency and self-determination is thoughtlessly handed over to the preacher or sanctified leader.”

She said though that one of the threads of this church was that they believed God would never create people simply to be damned in hell. I then thought, “Oh...in that case they’re likely just one of those prosperity gospel preaching churches where they tell you that ‘God is always in your corner pulling for you. God wants you to go big, be rich, get that promotion....That you deserve all that. More than anything, God wants you to win....going away! Because in God’s eyes, its all about me.’ ”

During this episode, my thoughts betrayed my true skepticism, pre-conceived notions and my hurtful stereotypes of churches that claim to accept everyone. It’s not right for me to assume these things but it’s what came to mind in the moment. But the fact of the matter is that if you’ve listened to many first-person stories of people’s faith journeys, you’d know that there is a lot to be skeptical

about; that a lot of damage has been done under the auspices of religion. It’s plain to see even on a superficial level. Look at how it has tainted our use of language. Because of this damage, we’re uncomfortable with words like worship, faith, church, ritual, prayer...and yes...even money.

We’ve all seen the TV preachers endlessly asking for money.

My wife said that her father was attending this new church. This was 1991.

“What’s the name of the church?” I asked.

“I don’t know...something like Universality Utilitarianism.”

I thought, “Yep, sounds like a cult. They’ll probably be trying to launch themselves into space soon.”

For some reason I went to their service the following Sunday!

Unitarian Universalists try to be open and accepting. Historically it may not have always been this way, and even now we could do better, but on that first Sunday that I attended, it was clear that the LGBT community was welcomed. It was clear that they were looking to find new ways be multi-racial and multi-cultural. No we’re not perfect and sometimes we truly don’t know how to proceed yet we are trying.

Our Universalist forebearers believed that God would never create people simply to be damned. UUs believe that people are imbued with inherent worth and dignity; that they have no original sin; and that they needn’t be born again because they...and you...were born just right the first time.

Unitarian Universalists don’t have a particular theological creed to which one must subscribe. And instead of abdicating theology to a particular preacher, leader or book, we take full responsibility for growing in our own spiritual and religious theology. That’s quite a responsibility!

And in terms of being a cult...that’s laughable! We are completely the opposite of a cult. Rather than having power and authority patterned after a top-down

pyramid scheme. We are radically democratic: we own our own buildings, call our own ministers, ordain our own clergy.

Just the other night I was talking with Jennifer Ratcliffe and Gus about The Mountain, the UU retreat and conference center in western North Carolina. Jennifer said that 25 years ago, she had a gay friend who had started a group where gay men could informally gather and share their struggles and experiences. Then her friend then sought to have formal conference and began looking for a venue.

He looked and looked yet no one would have them. A conference of gay men? Sorry, but no. The Mountain, the UU conference center, was the only place that would open their doors and welcome them.

We may not be perfect but we have a lot to be proud of as Unitarian Universalists.

I am so proud to be a Unitarian Universalist. We still have a lot to work on but we've generally been ahead of the curve on so many issues: the founding of this nation (John Adams and Thomas Jefferson), the abolition of slavery (Theodore Parker), women's suffrage (Susan B. Anthony), civil rights (Rev. James Reeb and Viola Luizzo they were both murdered at Selma).

Unitarian Universalism and UUMAN: What's it worth? The founding of a new nation – the United States, the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, civil rights....what's that worth?

We are here gathered – descendants of this tradition! We have a lot for which to be proud!

But what's that worth to you? Well, I know I've said this before but I hate to break the news to you but of all denominations in the U.S. "[although] UUs have 2nd highest earning income, [they are] last in giving (Vail Weller, UUA Annual Program Fund)."

It is often said that in Hinduism there are many, many gods; or many, many manifestations or avatars of the primary gods; often quantified as 3 and 3 hundred

and 3 and 3 thousand. (Lots of gods.) Anyway, although I forget the details, there’s a story that goes something like this:

A man was on a boat in the ocean and a tempest overtakes him and his boat capsizes. He’s fighting for his life in the raging sea and he calls out to the gods, “Save me! Save me! I am in need of your help!” The man drowns. He enters Nirvana and angrily confronts the 3 and 3 hundred and 3 and 3 thousand gods and says “Why did you not save me?” The gods, stunned, dumbfounded, look around at each other, pointing to one another saying, “I thought you had this!” and “No, I thought you did!”

I have to shake my head when I hear Unitarian Universalists bemoan financial stewardship, a requirement for membership in this congregation, when they say, “We’re all about the money!”

Please! They’re exactly right though if what they mean by this is that we’re all about not having it! 😊 We stretch very hard to pay our staff fairly (and I appreciate that!) but after that, there’s embarrassingly little left over to do any shared ministry within our walls or beyond.

I called down to our bank, the holder of our mortgage, the other day and I asked that instead of paying our mortgage this month, could we come down and volunteer for a few hours, answer the phones, do some filing, tidy up, make some coffee, do a donut run. They thought about it for a New York minute and said that although they’d greatly appreciate all these things, our time and talent, they’d generally prefer that we just pay our mortgage with money. I tried!!! 😊

I don’t want to beat around the bush here...but membership, for each and every one of us, requires a balance of giving time, talent AND treasure. And actually, most of those here at UUMAN who give the most treasure are also giving the most time and talent as well.

When we try to pay our bills, we literally can’t afford to be stunned, dumbfounded pointing to one another saying, “I thought you had this!” and “No, I thought you did!” It is a breach of our covenant with one another to allow others

to pick up the slack and pay our bills. It is a breach of covenant with those within our walls and beyond not to fund our ministries.

In changing times and in times of changing generational demographics, I truly believe that we are poised to be the faith of the future. I believe that we, the Unitarian Universalists, more than any other denomination in the United States, are poised to be that denomination that will one day begin to build the world we dream about.

There is a lot of work, shared ministry that we must do to begin building this world... and it will take resources, stewardship, to do this. This is important. And, “...as a sign of our gratitude,...the essential question is not how much we can afford to give, but how much we can afford to keep (Stephen Gray, from Beyond Fundraising by Wayne Clark, p1).”