

UNITARIAN IS AN ADJECTIVE
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To identify is to stand with, or for something or someone. To ‘identify’ is to “represent” and “show your colors.” Our individualistic society resists this. Individuality lures us into thinking of our identity as very personal, or something like a hat, or Seahawks blue/green face-paint that you put on and take off at will. Today I encourage you to expand yourself and identify as a Universalist.

As a child, I had no cultural identity. In recent decades I have learned that having no identity is part of the majority-white identity. But as a child, I identified with no one. I knew I was related to people from Canada, England, and Czechoslovakia, but those were very distant places. I had relatives in Ohio, who also seemed quite distant. My father had been raised Catholic, and he took us to Mass several times, but no one ever said we were Catholic. In fact, no one even said we were Christian. Eventually, my mom got involved with Unitarian Universalists, and when I became active in the Greeley, Colorado UU Fellowship, I told my mom, “This is the religion you and Dad raised me in, without even knowing it.”

I had found my people. About fifteen years later I went with some in my UU congregation to a city cemetery. We placed roses on the gravestones of all those who had founded our UU congregation one-hundred-and-fifty years before. As I was walking back to my car, I looked down at a row of simple stones with carved floral borders. On one was the name *Thomas Kirby*. I noticed the “Thomas” first. Below his name, and his birth and death dates, in clear full capital lettering, was one word: “UNIVERSALIST.” He was not a founder but had been one of the first ministers of the church that I was then serving. It was thrilling to uncover connections to a person who had died a hundred years ago. It moved me to think that the one thing he wanted people to know about his life was that he was a Universalist. I wondered what they would put on my memorial stone. Would “Unitarian Universalist” fit, and would anyone know what it meant?

The word Universalist is both a noun and an adjective. It arises from the Christian idea that not some but all are beneficiaries of God’s love, restoration, and salvation. It refers to those people who try to live in this world “as it is in Heaven” a place of radical inclusion. That means loving anyone, even the outcast. It means resisting laws and systems designed to make people illegal simply for being who they are. Those of us who identify as Muslim, trans or nonbinary, as a Person of Color, or legally undocumented, all know that we are targeted merely for being who we are. Universalism moves us to do more than accept such people; it insists that everyone deserves basic respect and dignity, even those who are trying to do you harm. In this divided and polarized culture, the ideas of Universalism are radically counter-cultural. Against the grain of “everyone-for-one’s-self” and “us-against-them” ideology we affirm that we are all in this life, world, and nation together. Over time, the Universalist definition of Christian salvation and God expanded, so that an atheist could be a Universalist if “Heaven” and “salvation” are understood as poetic metaphors of ideals that shape our mortal human situation.

The Universalist identity was always more expansive and more popular than the Unitarian identity. Sure, there are more famous names associated with the word Unitarian, but by the 1850s the Universalist Church of America was the sixth or seventh largest denomination in all of America. Universalist congregations everywhere, from Texas to Minnesota, from Main to California thrived, and

they were ultimately victorious. By the 1920s traditionally Calvinist communions, like Presbyterianism, moved Hell into the back closets and spoke more about community goods and loving one's neighbors.

The problem with Unitarian Universalism, as one children's book puts it, is that it is a very long name. Ten syllables. So, we often abbreviate it as UU, or we use the more familiar *Unitarian*, as a noun, dropping out Universalism all together. You may know that the Universalist Church of America began General conventions in 1778, and made a statement against slavery in 1780, while the Unitarians did not form an association until 1825. When we came together in 1961, a key argument was over which name came first. This debate was a reflection of real resistance to the merger. Some say that the Universalists feared being swallowed up, and the Unitarians feared indigestion. Yes, some Unitarians even worried about how these mush-headed, warm-hearted Universalists would change their noble and reasonable movement. We decided to become the Unitarian Universalist Association anyway.

Now, notice the power of punctuation. If I write, for example, "Some people enjoy cooking (comma), kittens(comma), and their families," then you have a few of my favorite things. But without the commas, the sentence becomes a warning about cannibals and animal cruelty. "Some people enjoy cooking kittens and their families."

The first time I saw the title of my sermon, "Unitarian is an Adjective" was in an article about "Claiming and Reclaiming Universalism," (by Helene Knox, July/August 1993 issue, *UU World* magazine.) In particular, Miz Knox noted about Unitarian Universalism:

"The name as it now stands, lacking a hyphen, proclaims that we are a Unitarian variety of Universalists and implies that the two strands of our tradition are unequal. *Universalism* is the noun, the identity, while *Unitarian* is merely an adjective, a qualifying attribute."

Furthermore, note that even for the early American Unitarians in the 1800s, the word "Unitarian" was an adjective modifying the word "Christian." Reverend William E. Channing, who with words and deeds crystallized the Unitarian movement within the U.S., preferred the name "*liberal* Christian," where liberal meant generous, open minded, and reasonably progressive. Liberal Christians were focused on social progress and developing compassionate character. Quickly, their insistence on the unity of God and the status of Jesus' as anointed but not co-equal with God, caused the more orthodox to name them "Unitarian" heretics and they embraced the label.

In the mid-20th century, Unitarians again took on a liberal label, calling ourselves "liberal religion." It is essential to understand that liberal is too vague of an identity. It is an approach to religion that sees truth as unfolding, rather than set. It sees religion as an agent of change and progress as much as a bearer of tradition. Liberal religion has an optimistic view of the future and seeks to establish systems and institutions of justice and equality and compassion here and now. Thus, there are liberal Baptists, and liberal Catholics, liberal Muslims, and liberal pagans. Liberal is thus an adjective, not a noun. Thus, it did not name an identity but an orientation. It gave no concrete identity. Thus, by the 1970s, only one in ten children raised in UU congregations identified with a UU congregation as an adult, though most remained actively liberal.

Issues of identity shape our lives. Lifted by the rising tide of "identity politics" has led many of us to proclaim that "Black Lives Matter." We understand that social identity can uplift, or limit and even destroy your life. At the same time, the increasing numbers of people who refuse to identify with any particular religious group undermine the idea that identity is of any value at all. The fact is

that our identity is never simply chosen. Society gives us adjectives from the binary of gender to the boxes of race, and even the slots of political opinion. We may want to shake these off. But something significant happens when you choose to accept an identity, to “be identified” with a particular group. The vast “universal” becomes anchored and tangible in the details of one’s life.

So, I am encouraging you not only to identify as a Universalist but as a specific type of Universalist, the Unitarian kind. We are Universalists who are also generative, ethical, reasonable, scientific and individualistic. Never merely concerned with creating rules of “right” and “wrong” unitarians have always thought about religion in light of ethics. Unitarians are those who decided to see the human Jesus not as a sacrifice in a cosmological scheme, but as an exemplar, model, and leader. In approaching Jesus as a teacher of principles, rather than an enunciator of doctrines Unitarians feel a strong need to work out the application of his principles in human living. We are non-creedal because we have such a strong commitment to personal integrity. That is one reason we have principles of action and not doctrines of belief at the center of our faith.

To be ethical, Unitarians developed a deep love of reason and affirmed the empowering values of the European Enlightenment. Unitarians in eastern Europe were inspired by those who used reason to push the Christian Reformation to its fullness. Unitarians in England and America were inspired by the methods of German Biblical Criticism to apply reason and education to all matters of religion and faith. Thus, Unitarians have always been very comfortable with science. From the Universalist Joseph Priestley’s discovery of oxygen to Berner Lee’s shaping of the internet, we have been interested in the results of science and the uses of technology to further human ends. Always we want to use all of humanity’s capabilities to affirm and promote our principles.

Unitarians want to embody our ideals and principles in this world, in this life. So, they tend to be generative leaders, the creators of institutions. Five US Presidents identified with the word “Unitarian” at some point in their lives. The unitarian Dorothea Dix did not just pioneer a new way of caring for the mentally ill but created new institutions to embody it. Many Unitarians have also been creators of Public Education, and creators of art and architecture. I had a best friend from when I was in third grade until our lives slowly drifted apart as adults. We both became Unitarian Universalists in high school. We were talking about where our faith came from when he spoke of his father. His dad was a scientist who studied parasites. At that time most of his global colleagues were in the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. So, my friend’s father corresponded constantly with people that were supposed to be his enemies. He got permission to travel to Russia, not only to exchange scientific results, but also to befriend, and go hunting and fishing across the strongest barriers in the world. They all knew that the pursuit of truth and friendship were universal and better than all that might divide them, and my friend carried those values into being Unitarian.

Finally, to be reasonable, progressive, generative and leaders, unitarians have been very individualistic. We want to be free from conventions, comforts and traditions that “bind the mind to narrow thought and lifeless creed.” The problem is that it is hard to be an individualist all by yourself. I always liked that scene in the movie “The Life of Brian” when a crowd of people has gathered around Brian, thinking that he is the messiah. He says to them, “You need to think for yourselves,” and they repeat “We need to think for ourselves.” He says, “You are all individuals. You’re all different.” They repeat “We are all different.” Except for one lone man beside a wall who objects, “I’m not.” It is hard to be an individualist all by one’s self, so we seek also what is Universal,

the universal community admitting our identity is both very particular and yet always going out beyond racism and sexism and ageism and political polarization.

I sometimes use Marcus Garvey's phrase "One Love" to invoke the spirit of Universalism, as in the Reggae song, "One Love, one Heart, let's get together and feel alright." I think of the Universalist Clara Barton who cared for men across the political spectrum of her time and created an American form of the international Red Cross, an emblem of universal care and concern. Unitarian Universalists are those who seek that community, by being creative, and scientific and reasonable and ethical.

Cedars is a particular community, a unique and inspiring community. To identify as a member of Cedars is to identify with a uniquely loving network of wonderful people. But do not forget that this particular congregation bears a greater heritage, a shared identity which has no ultimate boundaries. We seek to embody a universal love, tempered by reason and science; we seek to form the beloved and inclusive community of all, tempered by individual integrity. We are Unitarian Universalists.