

Why “Unitarian Universalism” is Dying

David Loehr

A century ago, the Viennese writer Karl Kraus saw, felt and heard the Hapsburg empire ending while most around him thought it was flourishing. He wrote about it in a few lines that could describe every prophet and would-be prophet in history:

*I hear noises which others do not hear.
And those noises disturb for me the music of the spheres —
Which others don't hear either.*¹

It's always risky and arrogant to think of ourselves as prophets. Our vision may turn out to be both puny and wrong rather than prophetic. So some humility and caution are wise.

But I think I hear noises of the death of Unitarian Universalism which others don't seem to hear. And those noises disturb for me a music of the spheres that I don't think others hear either. So I will proceed with what you may decide was, after all, too little humility, in trying to describe to you both the noises I hear, and also the music.

•••••

The movement which many call “Unitarian Universalism” has been dying for 43 years, continues to die, and the fact of its slow but steady death is the elephant in the room that few in the UUA want to face, let alone talk about.

Between 1970 and 2000, the UUA lost over 12,000 adult members in real numbers. But during those thirty years, while the UUA's adult membership declined by more than 7%, the population of the U.S. increased by over 37%. In other words, when compared with the population of the U.S., the adult membership of the UUA has declined by more than 44% since 1970. Our numbers are now about what they were at merger in 1961, while the rest of the country has grown by nearly half. If we had simply kept up with the population growth, we would have more than 225,000 adult members now. There is no way to pretend that these facts paint a picture of growth.²

I want to try and sketch a history of how and why this “movement” died, and what hope there may be for liberal religion, if not for UUism.

I'll start in the 19th century. The most important fact to understand about American Unitarianism is that it began as a style rather than a theological position. The supernatural world had ended, for the better-educated people, with the late 18th century Enlightenment.

The 19th century saw the birth of a whole host of natural sciences, which changed our picture of ourselves and our world. The earth was clearly far more than 6,000 years old, and The Flood had just as clearly not been the only “catastrophe” in the earth's history. In 1800, most educated people thought the world was 6,000 years old. Even Thomas Jefferson believed, in 1785, that no species could ever become extinct. This was the worldview that changed almost completely during the 19th century. American and British theologians had to decide whether to hold the received faith sacred, or accept the emerging picture from the sciences that was demolishing their faith.

The voices that wanted to keep the same safe feel on Sunday mornings urged denial, and there were many of them in Unitarian churches. But they lost. The voices that won were voices that trusted the future more than the past, and expected religion to reframe its message to offer profound insights

into life as we were actually living it. This was just a hair's-breadth away from leaving religion for politics and social movements, and the transition from religion to political action happened immediately and seamlessly.

One clue to what "UUism" is and why it is dying is in the fact that the parts we remember about 19th century Unitarians are their social actions on behalf of the political ideal of individual liberties — Theodore Parker's amazing energies devoted to the abolition of slavery, prison reform and women's rights, for instance. It is significant that we look primarily to the individual rights stances, the social actions that have echoes in current political liberalism.

Theologically, however, the 19th century Unitarians were followers, not leaders. Had they never lived, no important religious ideas would have been lost. Everything they said worth keeping had been said earlier and better by more powerful religious thinkers.

The nominal theism of the Unitarians did not have, even in the 19th century, the warmth of more deeply held faiths — as evidenced by Emerson's famous labeling of Unitarianism as "corpse-cold." It was corpse-cold because it was losing connection with its religious center and becoming a political and social phenomenon of over-educated people who were becoming marginal in terms of political and financial power — as we are today.

(Ann Douglas' book *The Feminization of American Culture* brings this 19th century marginalization into helpful focus. She describes how, during the Industrial Revolution, America's cultural liberals lost political, economic, and social power in the changing society. In reaction, they retreated to the schools, the arts, and the "cultural" publications — the intellectual fringe — which areas were controlled primarily by women (in roles as teachers, writers, mothers). The woman who wrote under the name of George Eliot, for example, translated two revolutionary and incendiary religious works: Strauss' *The Life of Jesus* (1835) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), books still assigned in good divinity schools (and still in her translations).

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, Unitarians moved steadily away from a religious center and into a political center grounded in the basic assumptions of secular cultural liberalism. Unitarian thinkers had moved out of theology into psychology, sociology, anthropology and politics. (There was nothing innovative here; Feuerbach had called for theology to be replaced by anthropology in 1841.)

Universalism died as its pleasant answer — "All dead people go to heaven" — no longer fit the questions people were asking. By the end of the 19th century, liberals tended not to worry about where dead people went, and generally avoided that whole grammatical structure (the use of any transitive verb with dead people).

It's true that a brand new meaning for the word "universalism" emerged after about 1893 (the year of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, when Western thinkers got to hear first-rate Eastern thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Dharmapala and others. This new notion — which we still use — was a form of "all spiritual paths address similar needs."

But this universalism had no connection with American Christian Universalism. So while there is a concept of "universalism" that is both alive and useful today, it has nothing to do with the 18th and 19th century American Christian religion which taught that all dead people go to heaven — whatever that could mean in a modern worldview. Neither heaven nor a concern for the whereabouts of dead people had any necessary role to play in the new and unrelated kind of universalism. The confusion comes because there are those two words, spelled and pronounced exactly alike, whose meanings have no relation. (A similar thing happened to the word "God" between the 18th and 21st centuries.)

By mid-20th century, both Unitarian Christianity and Christian Universalism had mostly exhausted their spirits. In 1961, America's scattered little groups of Unitarians and Universalists didn't

want to (and didn't) worship together. Where they did come together, and saw one another often, was in the important secular activity of political action during the middle part of the 20th century.

When the two moribund denominations merged in 1961 some of the most important aspects of that merger were either not seen, or were ignored:

1. Neither Unitarianism nor Universalism was by then a vibrant or even viable religion.
2. What was significant about them was not theological, but political. Both had merged, to differing degrees, with the general assumptions of America's cultural liberals: the well-educated people who voted for liberal social policies and could be counted on to support most individual-rights causes.
3. But neither group had any common set of religious beliefs, either as Unitarians or as Universalists, beyond a general lack of interest in supernaturalism. There was no ontology, no distinctive understanding of the human condition, its problems, or the solution; in a phrase, there was no religious "salvation story."

By "salvation story," I don't mean anything supernatural. I mean a tradition's understanding of the human condition, its malaise, and its prescription for satisfying the deep yearning that has always marked serious religions, and its sense of how and why living out of this story makes our lives more fulfilling and useful to the larger world.

There were good reasons why no one noticed that religious beliefs were no longer the center of this new merger. One of those reasons was that by 1961, American religious liberals in general were losing their voice and their attachment to the traditional theological assumptions of Christianity. The word "liberal" meant cultural rather than religious liberals, and cultural liberals were bored with the supernatural baggage of Christianity, as they had been for over 200 years. (I'm thinking specifically of the year 1799 when Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote his still-classic book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Those "despisers" were the educated people of his day who had no use for supernaturalism. Both Parker and Emerson read this book, but neither of them took their religious thinking anywhere near as far or as deep.)

But another reason religion wasn't missed was that, in the 1950s and 1960s, the spirit of liberal religion couldn't compare in relevance, excitement or moral clarity with the spirit of liberal politics. For good reasons, the "salvation story" of America's religious liberals became the salvation story of political liberalism. It was a very distinctive story, with a dark side still seldom acknowledged.

The best example of this story was probably the civil rights movement of the 1950s. After Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat on the bus, many white liberals followed outraged black leaders into the civil rights movement. While the movement was mostly organized and led by black people, it's fair to say that it would not have succeeded without the support of liberal whites. They rightfully felt virtuous for their good efforts, and a new salvation story took shape. The role of liberals would be to speak up for victim groups, to accept the gratitude of their chosen victim groups, and to feel virtuous for their efforts.

So what liberals did have — and in the 60s and 70s it seemed exciting and sufficient — was a political ideology. The 60s and 70s were heady times for political liberalism in America. Individual rights movements were in full bloom, and liberal Methodists, Unitarians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians, atheists, feminists, gay rights activists and civil rights activists thrilled to the feeling that we were remaking America in the image of our shared liberal ideology.

Both the language and the spirit of Unitarianism were political, not theological. Or, to put it the other way round, we had turned our political ideology into a religion. "God" became "Our Political Liberal, Who Art Us, Writ Large."

So it's not a coincidence that in the late 1970s, Unitarians were heard to complain that "Our kids don't know what to tell their classmates they believe." Looking back, this was a disingenuous statement. The problem was not that kids didn't know what they believed. The problem was that

Unitarian ministers and adults didn't know what they believed that mattered at all in the larger scheme of things, because their beliefs had become indistinguishable from generic cultural liberalism.

It was time to ask hard religious questions, like "What's worth believing?" "Are there profound truths about life that make demands on people of character whether we like it or not?" "What beliefs can be used to fashion admirable people?" and so on. In a sentence, the question was "Are there deep and abiding truths capable of sustaining honest spiritual quests without supernatural underpinnings?"

Such questions would not have had easy answers. You can't vote on them. You have to discover them within the fabric of the human condition and the demands of contemporary living. To be fair, nobody else was asking these questions either, at least not in the churches. (Paul Tillich had translated the liberal and existential tradition of Western religion, especially Schleiermacher, Schelling and Kierkegaard, into the fairly ordinary language of depth psychology in the 1950s to his death in 1965, and some of our ministers learned, understood, and preached this message — I heard it from John Wolf in 1963.)

The lack of anything worth believing was a religious crisis, which should have called for religious solutions. The mid-20th century was a time for religious liberals to claim the tradition of liberal religion — a tradition that can be traced in broad strokes back 2500 years — and educate themselves to be its new voice. It was a time to seek the legitimate heir to the form of liberal religion their parents and grandparents had inherited.

But none of this happened. Maybe the general narcissism of the times can be blamed in part, or maybe the fact that our beliefs were political rather than religious, and political beliefs are routinely taken with polls.

So instead of asking religious questions about what was worth believing, what was necessary to believe, what beliefs might best be used to fashion people of good character, and so on — instead of this, the Unitarians simply took an extended poll. They asked a handful of churches — including the first church I served — to hold discussion groups, to discover what the people who attended there (and liked discussion groups) happened to believe. What such a poll had to, and did, reveal were the generic cultural beliefs these people brought into church with them: the profile of social and political liberals.

This process produced the "seven principles" — known in some circles as the Seven Banalities or the Seven Dwarfs — which soon became the de facto creed of a brand-new religion called "Unitarian Universalism," a religion that had never before existed anywhere, and to which no one of any note in history had ever belonged.

William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker were Unitarian Christians: a very different religion (though Emerson, like Thoreau, got most rhapsodic over the *Bhagavad Gita* of Hinduism). John Murray and Thomas Starr King were Christian Universalists, another very different religion.

All seven principles come from the secular culture and secular values of America's cultural liberals, whether they had a religion or not. That's why so many visitors can recognize the principles as the sort of things they believed anyway. I suspect it's also why they often leave when they realize many of the UU churches offer little beyond the ability to socialize with people who share those cultural values and vote for liberal social and political policies.

This exalted self-description of "our kind of people" first snuck into religious education curricula for our children. Then it spread to the larger movement in an adult education curriculum endorsed by John Wolf and Forrester Church, entitled "What Unitarian Universalists Believe: an Introduction to the Seven Principles." These were good ministers, but they did a very bad thing. In the midst of a religious vacuum, they exalted the social and political profile of the seekers rather than the depth or ontological power of the religious center that was being sought — which means that center was no longer being sought, and the seekers were now learning to be pleased with themselves. I wrote them in the late

1980s when this ill-conceived catechism came out, asking how and why they would endorse such a betrayal of the very spirit of liberal religion. Forrester wrote back that the Principles didn't do much for him either, but "people need a simple place to start." I disagree completely. (I also disagree completely with Bill Sinkford's statement last year that the vitality of a religious movement can be measured by the number of people who attend General Assembly.)

Later, Forrester and John Buehrens published their large-scale catechism, the book *A Chosen Faith*, identifying the primarily political proclivities of "our people" as a religion. I think it's a shame they haven't been properly recognized for this new religion they coined. Martin Luther and John Calvin both had religions named after them. I've long thought this new religion should have been named "Forrester-Church-and-John-Buehrens-ism." It's a lot more honest, and it's even one syllable shorter than "Unitarian Universalism."

The act of creating "a simple place to start" was the act of creating a religion for our masses, and I have been vehemently against it from the start. I'll admit I think Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor (in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*) makes a powerful defense of religions for the masses, religions that give people a simple place to start rather than a profound or challenging one. But I don't believe it can be defended against the background of the long and honorable history of the world's liberal religions.

And it is quite different from the real religions of history.

Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and others point to the insights of their tradition as carrying ontological truths or fertile mythic structures for imagining an expanded life, or at least a deep and seasoned wisdom that might appeal to many of all times and places.

And world religions all think it's hard — that there are hard demands, and that few make it:

- Islam teaches the path as the razor edge of a sword stretched across an abyss.
- Jesus talked about the narrow way that few entered.
- Hinduism also speaks of the path as razor-edged, and has so many stories about how many lives you'd have to live, in order to get it right.
- Buddhists teach how hard it is just to wake up, to outgrow the comforting illusions of "our kind of people."
- And for Jews, the notion of being God's "chosen people" meant God demanded more of them than others, not that they were special.

All the enduring religions of the world have been clear that the treasures of honest religion must be earned, and make the highest demands on us. That's how those traditions raise our sights to see and hear what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature."

The new religion of "Unitarian Universalism," however, did not have a tradition or a distinctive understanding of the human condition. Instead, it exalted a self-portrait of its people as what was to pass for its sacred center — a fact revealed in that slogan, "Unitarian Universalism: the religion that puts its faith in you." It looked like narcissism, or a conclave of mutual narcissisms, each writing the others blank moral checks.

But more deeply, politics replaced religion as the shared center of Unitarians and Universalists in the mid-20th century, and remains their shared center today. If this is seldom mentioned, it may be because it's just too obvious. I don't know what percentage of adult members of UU churches are registered Democrats or Green Party, but nationally it must be ten to thirty times the number of registered Republicans.

I mentioned the salvation story of liberal politics earlier, but I want to spend more time with it.

When we adopt myths to live by, their center is some sort of salvation story, which is the point of living in the myth's terms. I want to describe the salvation story of American political liberalism and official "UUism" as I have observed it for the past twenty-five or thirty years. See if it doesn't sound familiar.

The salvation story of leftist American politics has five parts:

1. Liberals select a few token groups among the many possible: blacks, women, gays and lesbians, etc. (In Marxist terms, these are our token proletariat groups.)
2. They define these groups as “victims” (rather than, say, survivors or warriors).
3. In return, they give special attention to these token “victims” within their small circles of influence.
4. The “victims” are presumed to feel grateful for this ...
5. ... and the liberals feel virtuous.

This remains the salvation story of political liberalism — and ideologically-driven “anti-oppression” schemes, which remain willfully unaware of the self-serving oppression of their own schemes.

This salvation story worked pretty well in the 1950s. But the individual rights movements of the 60s and 70s began to seek identities as survivors and warriors rather than victims, and they neither wanted nor allowed white liberals to define them as victims or speak for them.

This began with the emergence of powerful and articulate spokesmen in the civil rights and Black power movements. It continued with the women’s movement, which began and remained in the voices of a handful of charismatic and articulate women. Religious liberals were welcome to follow, but they could no longer lead, and could get slapped upside the head for defining these warriors as victims. (For those familiar with Greek mythology, the patron goddess of the American women’s movement was Artemis. I can’t imagine anyone defining Artemis as a victim and living to tell the tale!)

Without a group of people to define as victims and speak for, the salvation story of political liberalism is bankrupt. This wasn’t just a problem of “UUs,” but of the whole gaggle of cultural liberals. This is also a problem with the Democratic party, and probably one of the reasons Bush won a second term.

Perhaps a word about what’s wrong with defining human beings as “victims” in order to feel it necessary to speak for them, and to feel virtuous for having done so. Defining someone as a “victim” demeans them by taking away their dignity, their resolve and their power.

Someone who has survived an ordeal is a survivor. And describing them as a survivor leaves their integrity intact, and leaves power with them. Someone who has survived with verve and determination is more than a survivor; they’re a kind of warrior. And that word even feels strong, passionate, and capable. How we define someone shows where we want to locate the power and dignity: with them, or with us.

Rachel Naomi Remen tells a powerful story on this point, taken from her own life. In her 60s now, she has suffered from Crohn’s Disease since her teen years, and has been through over a dozen surgeries for it. As you’d expect, it can be a severely depressing disease. She tells of the time when, in her 50s, she was feeling beaten down by the disease — like a victim — and sought advice from one of the world’s leading experts in Crohn’s Disease.

It took her an hour to tell her story. He listened closely and with great sympathy for her. After she finished he was filled with pity for her, and asked if she was still able to practice at least a little (Remen is also a physician). Shocked, she reminded him that her schedule was as busy as his. Then she reflected:

But his remark had reawakened a deep sense of doubt. Many years ago, other doctors had told me that I would be dead long before now. On the strength of their authority I had decided not to marry or become a parent.... The power of the expert is very great and the way in which an expert sees you may easily become the way in which you see yourself.³

In the weeks that followed, she worried more about her physical problems. Finally, one of her physician friends asked her why she seemed to be having such a hard time. Remen writes:

Almost in tears, I told him what had happened. "May I hear the story too?" he asked, and so I told it again. Like Dr. Z., my friend listened thoughtfully, without interrupting, but he heard something very different. When I had finished he looked at me for a long time. "God, Rachel, I had no idea. You are a warrior!" he said, and healed me.⁴

The "healing" came through leaving her dignity, integrity and power intact, rather than transforming them into pity (which takes your power and gives it to the person who has presumed to pity you). Defining someone as a victim is one of the most brutal and demeaning things we can do to them. This was, remember, the reason liberals lost permission to speak for the Black Power and Women's movements: they wisely chose to define themselves as survivors and warriors. That left liberals without a necessary role to play. It also shows, perhaps painfully, that the reason we define our token groups as victims is so that we can give ourselves a necessary role to play. The salvation story of political liberals requires victims. That's why it's such a dehumanizing myth.

Good social critics — both conservative and liberal ones — have written about the narcissism of the biases reflected in the Seven Principles/Banalities/Dwarfs. But you will seldom hear them from UU pulpits, and never read them in the movement's guardian of orthodoxy, the UU World. Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, Jonathan Rauch, Jim Sleeper, Christina Hoff Sommers, Camille Paglia and Todd Gitlin come quickly to mind as among the many authors who wrote widely-read critiques of the racism, sexism and narcissism of the liberal culture. That's too many books to discuss here, but consider just these lines from Barbara Ehrenreich's 1990 book *Fear of Falling*:

A problem with today's middle class is that it can't identify with the poor or the rich, it's not taken seriously, its words and actions seem self-serving, the movement became only "a weird pile of liberal shit." This is a serious loss of identity and purpose for the middle class, which has already lost pretenses to being rich (the Yuppie craze) or identified with the poor (too white, more power, education, and possibilities). They don't have real power in capitalism, and don't have influence or moral worth, either.⁵

She was describing the American middle class, but specifically the parts of it that constitute cultural liberalism. And Ehrenreich isn't a right-wing nut; she's one of the articulate voices of American cultural liberalism, and we ignore voices like hers at our peril. Denial isn't a river in Egypt; the river runs through us.

A Digression: Dissecting the first "principle":

Using logic to show the incoherence of the Seven Banalities feels kind of rude, like throwing melons at a little dancing bear. But it's worth a few paragraphs to take just the first one apart. It's important to understand how and why the Banalities are not only simplistic but also incoherent. So let's take a critical look at this idea that we value "the inherent worth and dignity" of everybody.

"Inherent" would mean it's there from the moment of conception rather than being added later — after sixth grade, or when the college loans are repaid. But if we actually believed that all zygotes had inherent worth and dignity, wouldn't this principle mean we must oppose abortion, as it destroys

individuals of inherent worth and dignity? Yet we're clear that abortion isn't murder because a fetus isn't a child and doesn't yet have inherent worth and dignity that merit saving.

But think about this. That means this alleged worth and dignity are not inherent, but — perhaps to coin a word — adherent: not there from conception but somehow added later. Well, when? And how? This principle dissolves as soon as it is examined, which may be why there has been no serious effort to do this kind of critical examination. It's just chanted like the mark of membership in a kind of club.

But leaving the logical problems of inherent or adherent worth aside, let's consider that notion that our definition of the human condition seems content with asserting an inherent worth and dignity. Only that? Only goodness? Just a big happy face? What about inherent evil? What about our inherent gullibility, foolishness, or selfishness? What about our tendency toward self-absorption and the rest of the shadow sides that complete the make-up of the human condition: what of them? If all these potentialities are present, then we need the ability to make necessary distinctions between the inherent (or adherent) parts of us that are silly, self-absorbed, etc. And you don't do that by uncritically affirming the inherent worth and dignity of people, as though that's all that's in there.

If strict Calvinists err by overemphasizing original sin, it is surely more dangerous to ignore it, and to cover the human condition with a childish happy face.

How does this differ, if at all, from “the vision of the anointed” that black columnist Thomas Sowell lambasted for being self-absorbed, indifferent to facts, and a brutal travesty of both reason and justice (in his book *The Vision of the Anointed*)? And while we're at it, why aren't we discussing thinkers like Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele when we talk about who black people are and how they should be treated? Are Sowell and Steele the wrong kind of black people? If so, why so?

The wagons of the UUA and most UU churches have been circled around the unquestioned assertions of loud political leftists for so long we've not noticed that we are no longer really critical, we no longer really question, and no longer have a center that is much bigger than the vision of the anointed.

So. Why is Unitarian Universalism dying? There have been several fairly clear steps:

1. In the 19th century, Unitarian leaders left the tradition of Christianity. These few Unitarians showed the courage of a pioneer spirit in leaving behind the tradition of Western Christianity. But in leaving it, they also left behind a tradition, an ontology and a rich understanding of the human condition, its malaise and its cure. We have not found its legitimate heir; I don't think we ever looked for it.

2. In place of a religious center, Unitarians moved to a political center based in an unbalanced concern for individual rights (unbalanced, because there was not the equal concern for individual responsibilities owed to society, nation and history). The sacred scripture, or at least the reference document, became not the Bible, but the Bill of Rights. This isn't bad, but it is a political center, not a religious one.

At no place in this process did anything more profound or transcendent than a political or social vision ever enter. The Seven Banal Principles — in order to be accurate — would all need to end with the phrase “... within the currently accepted boundaries of liberal political ideology.”

3. Without a religious center, and with a political and social center that had simply merged with generic liberal social and political ideologies, the movement had become redundant by thirty or forty years ago. That's why the cry went up in the late 70s saying, “Our children don't know what to tell their friends they believe.” Our beliefs had become indistinguishable from the general liberal ideology one could absorb through popular culture. We didn't know how to tell ourselves or anyone else who we were in any profound way, or why we mattered any longer. We had lost moral authority, lost meaning and purpose within American society. We were and are best known to most people only as the butt of

Garrison Keillor's jokes — my favorite is the one about the Unitarian missionaries who once tried to convert Minnesota's Ojibway Indians through interpretive dance.

4. But identifying with leftist social ideologies couldn't fill the identity vacuum we felt in the late 70s, because we needed something distinctive and there wasn't anything distinctive. And that, I believe, is behind the move that exalted not God, not a religious tradition or a commanding transcendence, but simply us. It's also why we spend so much time talking about a few dead people from 150 years ago who — we think — belonged to our club.

Looking Around, Looking Ahead

There are many religions present and practiced within the churches that pay dues to the UUA. There are people for whom God-talk is still alive, for whom that idiom of expression still calls forth images of and commandments toward a full, noble, and morally demanding life. There are people who narrow their God-talk down to just the Christian dialects, for whom the idea, the example, and the teachings of Jesus mark their sacred center.

There are Buddhists, for whom God-talk isn't an evocative idiom, and who connect with hints of a centered life through the example and teachings of the Buddha, with the many layers of commentary that have been added.

In the church I serve, we have a few Hindus. Austin has the largest Hindu temple in the United States, and many Indians have been drawn to our city by the once-plentiful high-tech jobs. Our Hindus tell me their religion isn't about belief at all, but is instead about living within the rich web of stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

We also have some Taoists, including our current Board president, who reads passages from his *Tao te Ching* every morning to help center his day.

And we have people who, like me, describe ourselves as religious liberals but not UUs.

Each of these religions is ancient, deep and profound, and has helped countless millions of people develop into adults of responsible character living full and useful lives. And one of the great freedoms of our churches is still the ability to choose or help make your own religion.

No one would want to set Unitarian Universalism alongside such a list of real and noble religions. As a religion, it is trivial. But it was never meant to be a religion. It was the self-referential name we used to speak of the cultural liberals who wound up in our churches, to try and give them a special name, an identity their children could tell their friends about. For the record, I don't know of any of our children who tell their friends about the Seven Banalities; they think they're silly.

So I think it is not premature to draft an autopsy for "UUism." When you've been dying for 43 years, you're in your last laps, and it's long past the time when Denial can fool anyone for long.

Some Rays of Hope

Still, even if UUism is dying, there are some rays of hope.

After hearing UUs harp on the 19th century trinity of Channing, Emerson and Parker for years, I began thinking about it from the other end recently. Think about this with me. We look back 150 years and still find only about three dead men we think are worth recalling today.

But that's another way of saying that, when we look back even to the 19th century heyday of Unitarianism, over 99% of the ministers aren't worth remembering.

In other words, in spite of all our happy-face talk, we know that the Way really is very narrow, and those who have had the courage and persistence to walk it are very, very few.

Furthermore, the act of making a point of remembering those three men means that at some level we also know there was something about them that was significantly different from the vast majority of Unitarians of their day, who we don't care to remember. And if that is so, then it would serve us to learn what their noble and courageous traits were, that we might imitate those traits in our own lives.

For one thing, they were all on the fringe of Unitarianism. Emerson was pretty much thrown out after delivering the Harvard Divinity School address for which we remember him. Parker was not invited to speak from the pulpits of Boston-area Unitarian churches because his stances against slavery and other controversial issues were an embarrassment to them. A group of Boston Unitarian ministers even told him he should resign from the ministry because he wasn't suited to it as they were.

And while we justly celebrate Channing's withdrawal from Congregationalism by deflating two-thirds of the Trinity, we don't as often tell the story of how he resigned from his own church when its members — in a preview of today's Seven Dwarf Principles — created statements of belief to speak for their members.

Against the background of these three courageous men, it's easy to see that the UUA and the vast majority of those who have led it are not in the tradition of Channing, Emerson and Parker at all. They are, instead, in the tradition of the vast majority of Unitarians of all times, whose names and deeds nobody wants to remember once they're no longer around calling attention to themselves. This weird little religion coined in the 1980s and called Unitarian Universalism is — ironically! — the worst religion in the UUA. It is neither useful to us nor worthy of God — or the legitimate heir to what was once called God.

To plant seeds for a noble religious future, our people need a profound place to start, not a simple one. We need to be reminded that, as all the great world religions have said, the way is indeed narrow and few indeed are those who find the path and have the courage to take it.

I do not believe Unitarian Universalism can be saved. It's too political, too self-absorbed, and too paltry. But I do know that many people are hungry for truths that can set them free, rather than political posturings that merely draw attention to them. I have always had more faith in people than in their leaders, even as I have become one of those leaders.

That's why I came into this profession: because I do hear some of the music of the spheres, and I know that most people who come to our churches come hoping to hear it, too.

Within this dying movement, there is still the freedom to choose honest and profound religious paths that are, as an ancient theologian once put it, "useful to us, and worthy of God" (Origen, c. 185-254). There is the freedom to adopt a moral code so demanding that — like the West Point Honor Code — it insists that we always choose the harder right. There is the possibility of realizing, as the ancient Greeks and Romans did, that our best shot at creating noble humans comes through molding them in the image of our very highest ideals.

And as these few examples suggest, the quality of wisdom that can lead us to the peace that passes understanding can be found in many places. But we must be willing to look for it, and to work with it. That is the shape of the doorway that leads to the Narrow Path, and to the possibility of a reunion — not, God forbid, with a few thousand UU party animals at GA, but with the noblest, most religiously musical and spiritually mature people who have ever lived.

It would be a reunion with a life lived, as the Romans put it, "under the gaze of eternity": a life lived as though all of history's noblest souls — as well as the better angels of our nature — were watching us.

It is a reunion worth working toward with our hearts, our minds and our souls. It is a reunion worth working toward, my fellow travelers, with everything we have left.

¹ Karl Draus, *No Compromise: Selected Writings of Karl Draus*, ed. Fredrick Ungar (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1977), 222.

² From "Combined Membership & RE Enrollment as % of Population," available on-line at <http://www.uua.org/aboutuua/statistics.html>, accessed May 15, 2005.

³ Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997) 235.

⁴ *Ibid*, 236.

⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 251.