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Arlington Street Church  
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## Standing on the Side of Love

Fill in the blank: My religion is ... what? The Dalai Lama answered with one word: "My religion is kindness." Try it. One word, or a small phrase: My religion is justice-seeking. My religion is peacemaking. My religion is love, on earth as it is in heaven. Service. My religion is living the questions. My religion is the beloved community.

When someone says, "What's Unitarian Universalism?," what do you say? "How much time do you have?!" Find that one word, your one small phrase. Then say it. Say it with your life.

Our lives are the text of our religion; our religion is not what we say, but what we do. Each and every one of us is an ambassador for Unitarian Universalism. When asked, "Where do you stand?," we answer with our very lives: We stand on the side of love ... love and service, justice and peace. Or, "We don't stand; we move!"

We move; we are part of a religious movement. With our lives, we proclaim that is not enough to stand; we are called to action, to activism, as representatives of a free faith tradition, a movement, building the road to a better world as we walk on it.

I used to think that everyone was a Unitarian Universalist; they just didn't know it! I was wrong. Unitarian Universalism is a demanding faith. No one will tell us what to believe, or how to behave. There is no doctrine; no creed. We have guidelines – principles that remind us of our covenant to honor the worth and dignity of all beings, and of our deep, abiding interconnectedness with everything on earth. Beyond that, we make it all up as we go along.

I remember being in training for pastoral counseling, and feeling a kind of wonder and envy of my colleagues who had little books with all the answers of their faith tradition codified, chapter and verse. They brought them into the counseling sessions with them, and had an answer for every question. I had no answers but my own.

My work was and is to respond, “I don't know your answers to your questions, but I will keep you company, as you seek the answer.” I cherish those beautiful lines from the fourth of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*: “ ... I feel that no human being anywhere can answer for you those questions and feelings that deep within them have a life of their own.... Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the *questions themselves*, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign

tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”<sup>1</sup> Let us go, then, together.

One of the great exercises in which Unitarian Universalist junior high Coming of Age groups engage is the creation of a *credo* statement: *I believe*. Each student writes their own *credo*. And those statements aren't static; they grow with our young people, and are refined and augmented by life ... real life. Forty years later, mine continues to change. I hope your *credo* continues to deepen and grow. Our own Rev. Dr. James Luther Adams asserted, “Revelation is not sealed.”

Despite all of this emphasis on being true to our own, unique experience, though, there is much – very much – that binds us as a movement, and as the faith tradition we lift up today. We are, first and foremost, a covenantal faith: we make promises to ourselves and to one another, and here, as in many Unitarian Universalist houses of worship, we recite the heart of those promises every Sunday morning. Love is the spirit of this congregation.... Each of us may come up with our own *credo*, but we choose to live it out within the context of the faith community, this beloved community.

I've told you the story, before, of attending my very first Unitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, correspondence with Franz Xaver Kappus, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1903, translated by M.D. Herter Norton

Universalist General Assembly in Ithaca, New York, in 1977. I was nineteen years old, tagging along with my beloved minister and mentor, Rev. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley.

Up for consideration at the General Assembly was the Anita Bryant resolution. In case any of you was lucky enough to miss her, Anita Bryant was the woman in the nationally-broadcast orange juice ads who made it her business to hate on queer people.<sup>2</sup> The bright orange tee shirts worn by the Unitarian Universalist campaign organizers said, "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges." At the time, to my knowledge, I had never met a queer person. Hmm.

There was a lot of buzz about the resolution, and I dutifully went to every informational plenary session, so I could learn more about the issue behind the vote. In one session, an older gentleman in a suit and tie was especially articulate, and helpful in framing the issue. I went up to speak with him afterwards, and noticed the pink triangle in his lapel. I asked him about it. No time for a history lesson. "I'm gay," he said. Before we parted, he introduced himself as Arlington Street's Bob Wheatley – the first person who ever came out to me. Four years later, I was working as his intern at Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters.

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2 Two of her choice quotes from when she was serving as spokeswoman for the Save Our Children campaign: "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children," and "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nail biters."

By the time of the Anita Bryant vote, Dana McLean Greeley had retired as the first president of the newly-merged Unitarian Universalist Association, and was highly respected as a champion of peace and human rights and basic fairness. Having grasped that queer rights was the civil rights issue on the horizon, I went with Dana to the plenary session, and took a ringside seat to history in the making.

Three moments are seared into my memory:

Dana, standing on the plenary floor, surrounded by a group of men in suits and ties. He stood a full head higher than they, and his voice was huge. They were asking for his support. His face was serious, and he had his arms out, drawing them into a circle.

The vote was taken. The moderator called for those in favor. The “aye” swelled and rang from the delegates that filled the hall. Then the call for “nay.” The hall grew very still. The crowd held its collective breath. The earth shifted slightly on its axis. The vote to resist Anita Bryant's hateful campaign and stand on the side of love was unanimous. The room exploded into cheers and applause.

And then, from all throughout the room, Dana Greeley was swarmed by the people whose lives had just been changed forever by a religious movement that voted with its feet to take their part. Everyone tried to get close enough to touch him, to thank him. The men wept openly. And something in me broke

open in pride, in gratitude, in love. I didn't know yet that it was a vote that would change my life.

What I learned from this experience was all I needed to know about Unitarian Universalism to give it my heart, forever. I want to be part of a faith tradition that honors all beings, that loves and serves and seeks justice and peace for everyone. We create the beloved community by taking one another's part; by standing and moving together toward purposes higher and deeper and wider than our individual lives. Unitarian Universalism stands on the side of love.

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In *The Color Purple*, author Alice Walker gives Shug these great words: “Tell the truth, have you ever found God in a church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.” Tweaking the language just a little, we carry the holy with us, within us, sometimes only in the form of a longing, or a prayer; and then we come to Arlington Street and share it – an experience of the holy – and in the sharing, something magical happens.

I have experienced that magic with you in worship, and over a cup of tea, and in hospital rooms and sitting in the Public Garden and marching in the streets. What is it? It's a sense of recognition: I see you, and you see me, and we are both a little less lonely for that. When it comes right down to it, that may be the heart and soul of spiritual community: *we are a little less lonely*. I think of that anointed line from poet Adrienne Rich, “There must be those among

whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors.”

Adrienne Rich continues, “I think you thought there was no such place for you, and perhaps there was none then ... but we will have to make it, we who want an end to suffering....”<sup>3</sup> “There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors.” We need one another. Seek, and ye shall find.

My spiritual companions, how will each of us answer the question, What's your religion? And ... what's Unitarian Universalism?! May we answer with our lives: Our religion is living the questions. Our religion is love and service, justice and peacemaking. And may we be for one another those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors.

Let us stand together *and* move together:  
 stand on the side of love,  
 share our experience of the holy,  
 honor all beings,  
 and seek to create the beloved community.

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<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich: “Sources: XXII” in *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems*

