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The Future of Unitarian Universalism:

Exploring the role of the individual, the community, and spirituality in UU congregations

I am a third generation Unitarian Universalist. Church was the one thing my family did together every week of my childhood; and for the most part I enjoyed it. I liked learning about how other people worshiped as members of diverse religious groups from around the world. I liked the friends I made in the church, and the strong supportive community in which I was nestled. The Church offered me leadership opportunities including being a youth conference organizer, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, a teaching team leader, and the honored speaker in front of hundreds of people on more than one occasion. As a youth in the Church I had always felt loved, important and capable.

But as I reached young-adulthood, at the age of 19, my relationship with the Church community began to change. Although, I still loved the Church, I was also angry with it. I wasn't a little girl anymore, and as I had grown so had my spiritual needs, yet I didn't know how to negotiate the world of "Big Church" (the name we used to call adult worship in Sunday-school) which was so drastically different than my experiences in youth worship. In fact the difference was so great, that I chose to leave the Church for the next five years.

As an adult I have chosen to work in the social services among drug addicts, gang members and prostitutes. I need a faith that can help me face each day with renewed strength and confidence, a place where each member can both benefit and contribute their gifts and resources. I long for an authentic religious community with shared spiritual

practices, which offers its members resources for growth in wisdom, serenity, courage, and hope.

In my youth I turned to drugs and co-dependent relationships for solace. Today I am looking for something different, a rich and healthy spiritual life which would be both comforting and challenging, yet I have not been able to meet these needs in my familial UU community. Due to this absence, I have often felt deprived and betrayed by my faith. Of course I love its purposes and principles and the community of fellow seekers; but I have also felt extremely abandoned and alone by the lack of fellowship in times of darkness and by the UU insistence on individual spiritual practice separate from the larger community

So why do I care? Why not just leave, throw in the towel, or convert to something else? Well, believe me, I've tried! But it never works because *UU is who I am*. Over the past year, I have discovered that Unitarian-Universalism is central to my identity, my politics, my community, and my world view. Looking back, I am also grateful for my Unitarian Universalist upbringing. UU has taught me to be a visionary, to explore, to examine and question my faith and the world around me; and to be an active member in the creation of both.

UUs are self motivated; our discipline lies in the active seeking of truth and not getting stuck in one particular "frame" or point of view. Although we may get complacent (I know I certainly have been) our faith teaches us to challenge ourselves, our world views, and to "Question Authority." I am proud of my UU heritage; we have a strong history of pushing the envelope through social activism, and social justice work in the US and throughout the world. UU is the soil from which I grew: I will always be a part of it, just as UUism will always be a part of me. Therefore I have committed myself

to find out what is lacking in UU and what we can do as a religious institution and as part of a spiritual community to enrich Unitarian Universalism for the future.

I believe Unitarian Universalism must adopt innovations in increased dialogue among Church members, increase the pastoral care of our new and long time members with a special focus on UU youth, and increase the spiritual dimensions of community worship. In this paper we will explore these assertions as well as the finer points of Unitarian Universalist history, beliefs and practices through the writings and experiences of some of its most distinguished clergy and members as well as through the eyes of its most vocal critics.

As UU's we must explore the role of the individual in the religious community as well as the community's role in the lives of its members, increase dialogue, support our members, and be intentionally open to communal spiritual expression in order to better meet the needs of our present and potential membership as well as to thrive as a religious institution in a rapidly changing world.

#### “Deeds Not Creeds:” Unitarian Universalist History

With its historical roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions, Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion -- that is, a religion that keeps an open mind to the religious questions people have struggled with in all times and places. We believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion, and that in the end religious authority lies not in a book or person or institution, but in ourselves. We are a "non-creedal" religion: we do not ask anyone to subscribe to a creed. (1995, Unitarian Universalist Association)