

## *Assembly Required*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*

*November 2, 2008*



*“The really rough part was  
building my own theology from scratch.”*

*HYMN 389, Gathered Here*

### *GREETINGS*

**David.** I'm David Reed and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right; now is the time to put your cell phone in Worship Mode, childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, and after the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area behind you. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly

write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

**In your bulletin are three important items that you should know about.** Next Sunday, the **Privet Patrol and Pizza Party** returns. If you have a pickup truck we need your help. On Wednesday the 5<sup>th</sup>, we will sponsor a **special Wednesday Night In** for partisans of all stripes. We'll have an open mike so you can celebrate if your guy won, sneer if your guy lost or spew if you're glad it's all over. Jeff Briere will proved posole and we hope you can come and have a little fun in the middle of the week. And you can **meet and speak with Charlie Clements**, our speaker on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, after the service and enjoy a light lunch. You have to sign up and the roster is by the kitchen door.

**A complete listing of announcements** is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

*PRELUDE: Over My Head*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*Today I Feel Silly*

Today I feel silly. Mom says it's the heat.  
I put rouge on the cat and gloves on my feet.  
I ate noodles for breakfast and pancakes at night.  
I dressed like a star and was quite a sight.

Today I feel grumpy and mean.  
I picked up my room. It still isn't clean.  
I forgot to feed Franny and water the fern.  
And the cocoa I'm making is starting to burn.

Today I am angry; you'd better stay clear.  
My face is all pinched and red ear-to-ear.  
My friends had a play date. They left me out.  
My feelings are hurt. I want to shout.

Today I am joyful; my mood is first-rate.  
My friend's sleeping over. He said he can't wait.  
My freckles are popping, the sun is too bright.  
I ran in the relay with all of my might.

Today I'm confused; my life's getting hairy.  
Joan says she's my girlfriend, but I kinda like Mary.  
My mom told my father he might be a dad.  
I might get a sister—I'm not sure I'm glad.

Today I am quiet; my mom understands.  
She gave me some ice cream and then we held hands.  
We went to the movies and then had a bite.  
I cried just a little and then felt all right.

Today I'm excited; there's so much to do.  
I'm going to sell cookies and lemonade too.  
I'm starting a club to clean up the park.  
And I have a big crush on my teacher, Miss Clark.

Today I am cranky and nothing seems right.  
I have diarrhea and I broke my new kite.  
Mom dyed her hair—orange! My dad shaved his beard.  
My tooth came in crooked. My family is weird.

Today I am lonely; I feel so small.

My auntie's away; I wish that she'd call.  
My mom's working late and my dad has the flu.  
Although I've got everything, I've got nothing to do.

Today I am happy; I'm walking on air.  
I learned how to cook and I'm growing some hair.  
I did my first solo in hip-hop and jazz.  
This day's been so great, I'm full of pizzazz.

Today I'm discouraged and frustrated—see?  
I went roller-blading and fell on my knee.  
I have really straight hair and I want curly—Q  
Should I cut it or grow it? What should I do?

Today I am sad; my mood's heavy and gray.  
There's a frown on my face and it's been there all day.  
My best friend and I had a really big fight.  
He said that I tattled and I know that he's right.

Today my mood's great; it's the absolute best.  
I rode a two-wheeler and I passed my math test.  
I played soccer at recess and we won the game.  
I sang in the show and my parents both came.

I rather feel silly, excited or glad,  
Than cranky or grumpy discouraged or sad.  
But moods are just something that happen each day.  
Whatever I'm feeling inside is OK!

#### *CHILDREN'S RECESSINAL*

We hold you in our love as you go, as you go  
May your heart be at peace as you go  
To nurture the spark of your precious life  
We hold you in our love as you go.

*OFFERTORY: Székely Áldás*

The Presidential election this year seems to have stirred up a lot of enthusiasm and energy among the younger folks. I understand that many young people have registered for the first time and have voted or will vote on Tuesday. The last time young people were so stirred up about an election was in 1964, when Johnson beat Barry Goldwater. But their energy was directed against the establishment in those days.

The last time that young people got excited about the presidential election and were positive about the system was 1960, when Kennedy beat Nixon. To remind you of those days, I have a couple stories about Kennedy.

As Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1960, Kennedy was surprised to receive the endorsement of the New York Times, which usually supported the Republicans. Once elected, the new President remarked: In part, at least, I am one person who can truthfully say, I got my job through the New York Times.

Kennedy enjoyed telling this story about his father and himself. He said that during an election campaign his father sent him the following telegram: Don't buy a single vote more than necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide.

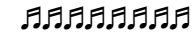
When Kennedy got the news that he had won the presidency against Richard Nixon in the closest election ever, he turned to his wife and her friend Toni Bradlee, both of whom were pregnant, and said, All right, girls, you can take the pillows out. We won!

Addressing a group of donors who had paid a great deal to meet the Democratic presidential nominee, Kennedy said, I am deeply touched. Not as deeply touched as you have been by coming to this dinner; nevertheless, it is a sentimental occasion.

Now as far as our offertory is concerned, you won't be touched any more deeply than you desire. And if you touch yourself too hard that's good. Don't worry about it. We'll collect the morning offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way.

As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and be thankful for them. Steve, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

*ORISON*

*Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

We have news of Carmen Linn. Harold is through the worst, having almost lost her to pancreatitis and kidney failure. It was very touch and go for a while. She is home now, doing better, awake and

generally alert, but cannot be out of bed.

Harold must stay with her 24/7 and, thanks to neighbors, gets a break now and then to go to the pharmacy or grocery store. He is very grateful for the support from the congregation through this ordeal and sends his thanks. He mentioned several times the strength he drew from the church and how it helped him through the darker moments.

If you would like to contact Harold and Carmen, let me know and I'll hook you up.

Today I pray for the vast swath of Americans who will be challenged by the economy in the coming months and years. At the upper incomes, people may not be hurt so badly in the moment; they will likely experience contraction in their retirement savings. But for those in the great middle class and those without income, it will be tough. The New York Times reported on Thursday that the longest American shopping spree on record is over.

The Commerce Department reported that morning that consumers sharply cut their spending this summer, causing the United States economy to shrink. By almost all accounts, the economy is now in recession.

The last quarter in which consumers reduced their spending came in 1991. Since then, neither the recession of 2001 nor the slow income growth of the past seven years has kept households from increasing their consumption. They often relied on debt—home-equity loans, mortgage refinancings and credit-card loans—to continue spending.

But the housing bust, the resulting credit crunch and the deteriorating job market have forced many people to cut back. In the third quarter of this year, personal consumption fell farther than at any time since 1980, when the economy was in a deep recession.

Such news points to a serious problems facing the United States

economy: consumer spending is falling, and no engine of growth seems likely to replace it in the near future.

My retirement is based on income from stocks and bonds, much like yours, perhaps. And it has lost significant value. If I could have sold it all at the beginning of this year, I would have made about 30% more money than if I sold it last Friday. Whether they have a personal IRA account or a retirement plan directed by an employer, I believe retirees and those soon to retire, are in for some difficult times.

Those in the prime working years of their lives may lose their jobs as the economy contracts and employers protect themselves by cutting their work force. Those just starting out may find fewer jobs or they may be offered jobs with inadequate compensation. And anyone wanting a loan for a car or a house or a small business will face tougher scrutiny from their banks and credit unions.

For some, an economy like this offers opportunities. I believe the rental market will be lucrative as people abandon their dream of home ownership. State parks may experience more visitors as people drop plans for a Caribbean cruise. People may find cheap wine and beer just as refreshing as imports and craft brews.

But for many sectors of our economy, the headwind of a recession will beat them down. I don't mean to be pessimistic. If you read the business news, you'll find plenty of glimmering hopeful lights amid the doom and gloom. It will be tough, but we will survive with the strength we find in our communities—our faith communities, our civic communities and in the communities we form within our families. The relationships we form with other people will ever be our sustenance during times untoward.

And so this morning I pray for us, all of us—even those making more than \$250,000 a year—all of us, that we find those connections which keep us grounded in our lives, those connections to the

interdependent web of all creation. When we grab and hold on tight, that interdependent web may shake and bounce and may rip here and there. But we'll still be hangin' on after the storm.

Thou, who art everywhere,  
Many are your names.  
May thy presence be with us,  
May thy wisdom guide us,  
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.  
May we have what sustains our body and soul;  
Lead us to forgive the mistakes of others  
As we hope our own mistakes will be forgiven.  
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,  
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.  
May we live purposefully and joyfully  
in every moment,  
in every encounter,  
now, and in the time to come.

In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those who feel oppressed by life and especially, let us pray for those who suffer the fallout of war.

*Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.*

*RESPONSE*

When our heart is in a holy place  
When our heart is in a holy place  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace  
When our heart is in a holy place

*SERMON: Assembly Required*

We Unitarian Universalists are a curious lot. As you might expect,

I get a lot of queries about Unitarian Universalism and our church. I want to recount for you a conversation I have every semester with a college student. Actually, what I will tell you is a composite of several conversations I've had over the five years I've been here.

There is a conservative Christian college nearby. You knew that, right? Actually, there's more than one. And every semester a student routinely contact me for their World Religions class. Every semester I get an e-mail message or a phone call from a student who has been assigned to interview someone who professes a religion other than her own. And I say her own as a matter of English composition. The students are both male and female.

Now if you've been raised Baptist like 98% of the students are, it's easy to interview and understand a Methodist or a Presbyterian. A Catholic is a little strange, but no matter. That's not their assignment. They must interview a non-Christian. And that really throws some of these kids for a loop. Some of the possibilities given to the students are: A Buddhist. A Muslim. A Hindu. A Unitarian Universalist.

The sharper kids grab up all the easy ones, leaving the Unitarian Universalist to the student who slept in that morning. So the sleepy head comes to me and asks all the questions suggested by her professor.

*How are you saved? What is God's plan for us? Where do we learn morals? What happens after you die? What's the purpose of life? Who created the universe?*

You know, all the simple questions about life, death and why we are here on earth. Same questions every semester. Same questions every semester.

And truth be told, I don't mind talking with students. I enjoy it. The first three times. After that it became a little tedious to answer the

same questions time and time again. I have toyed with the idea of writing my answers and handing them out when I am called, but instead, I created a file with all my answers. I got wise and now correspond via e-mail. The student submits her questions, I pull up the file and paste in my answers and shoot it off to her.

And it's not only the college students. About once a year someone from McCallie calls me with questions that are not exactly worded the same, but still are directed to the same thing.

*What is sin? What about my soul? How can we avoid hell? Does evil exist?*

I suppose it's a good exercise for these kids to be exposed to another culture; I question the academic method to accomplish that. If I had to expose students to another culture and another religion, I'd send them on a year-long exchange to a non-European, non-American country and sponsor someone from that country to come here.

The single most puzzling and inscrutable concept for students to understand about Unitarian Universalism is that it's a non-creedal religious society. A non-creedal religious society. Let me unpack that, as my theology professor used to say.

A society. The first thing you hafta understand, I say to my interviewing student, is that Unitarian Universalism is not monolithic; it is different in every expression. There are societies, fellowships, churches and congregations. There's one in Missouri calls itself a chapel. That's not too difficult for her to understand, because most of them, being Baptists and having no bishops, are familiar with the idea of churches governing themselves.

A religious society. This is an easy concept for her to grasp.

A non-creedal religious society. We're getting sticky now, and she is beginning to squirm, because Unitarian Universalism marries the

idea of freedom of belief to the practice of living in a covenanted religious society. We are a society of people with diverse and sometimes divergent opinions about religious matters, yet we live together in relative harmony.

For my student, every other religious society she has encountered is held together with a creedal statement of beliefs. It may be the Canterbury Profession, the Winchester Confession, the Apostle's Creed or the Baptist Confession of Faith or any of dozens of other creeds, confessions, doctrines, or manifestos. And now she is confronted with a religious society that has no creed.

"How can that be? How does that work?" she invariably asks, once she has managed to hold the two supposedly contradictory ideas in balance.

I tell her that no two Unitarian Universalist churches are alike, some are more liberal than others, I say. Some don't even meet every Sunday. In my own church, I say, there are several atheists, a few agnostics, some Christians, a coupla pagans some Jews, some Buddhists and whole bunch of people milling around the center that could be called some degree of humanist.

Everyone is responsible for her own theology, I say. Everyone has to build it herself. Think of Unitarian Universalism as a table, I say. It will support just about anything, no matter how heavy or awkward. You can use it for storage, for dinner or for an art project. The only thing is, it's not handed to you all tied up with a bow like a Christmas present. You have to build it. There is some assembly required, as the title of my sermon attests.

"How can you minister to them? How can you get anything done?" she cries. The image of herding cats comes to mind.

If there's one thing we believe in common, I say, it's that we're all on this spiritual journey together and we believe that the journey is more

pleasant in the company of others. We learn from them and they from us and together, we find our way in a confusing world. Also, I say, part of my job is to provide resources and materials for the congregation to build its own theology.

In order for this new idea to be fully appreciated, I usually provide a little history for my student. The reason that Unitarian Universalists are the way they are is because of Martin Luther, I say. Her eyes open wide. “Martin Luther?”

Yep, I say, that’s the guy who first popularized the private interpretation of the Bible. In essence, he said that the people ought to read the Bible and make up their own minds about religious matters. Bishops and priests are not necessary to interpret scripture nor to have a relationship with God. Martin Luther’s two big ideas. As it happened, the printing press was just getting fired up and pretty soon, Europeans had a reason to learn to read.

Those ideas crossed the Atlantic with the English settlers and in the new country of America, the settlers could organize a church that suited their own ideas. And if a settler grew bored with her local church, she could start another. And another. And so forth. Thus we have today, many churches and sects and fellowship and congregations and religious societies, all with differing religious ideas.

Unitarians and Universalists were no exception to this trend. In 1819, William Ellery Channing preached his most famous sermon, Unitarian Christianity, in which he advocated for the use of reason in religious matters, that God is a unity, not a trinity, that Jesus is human and not divine, that God loves everyone equally, and that Jesus did not die for our salvation, but lived to inspire our salvation. These points certainly set Unitarians apart from the majority of Christians in 1819.

Compare that with the words of William Channing Gannet from

1887. Speaking before the Western Conference of Unitarians in Chicago, he enumerated beliefs that he observed were commonly held among Unitarians.

- We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion; (*not God*)
- We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief; (*like Channing*)
- We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new; (*the Upanishads, the Koran, Shakespeare*)
- We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love; (*Mohammed, the Buddha, Hillel, Hildegard of Bingen*)
- We believe in the growing nobility of Man; We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful and beneficent;
- We believe that good and evil carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil thing success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that all things work together for the victory of the Good;
- We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all;
- We worship One-in-All; that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits—that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God—that Love with which ours souls commune.

The words of William Channing Gannett, from 1887. You can see the change in beliefs, right? In 1819, a unitarian Christo-centric and

biblical theology in 1819 to a theology in 1887, admitting truth and sacred scriptures from other cultures with Jesus as one of many prophets, and all focused on improving this world.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, so many things Influenced Unitarian Universalist theology: The temperance movement, abolitionism, prison reform, the *Humanist Manifesto*, the civil rights movement, women's liberation, the emergence of gay men and women into mainstream society, environmental stewardship and sustainability efforts and peacemaking. Given that history, I say, isn't it to be expected that within one church, people might have differing philosophies, beliefs and theologies? With that, she usually sees the light.

To drive home the point, I say, Here's another way of looking at it: One mountain, many roads to the top. Unitarian Universalists believe that the journey is more important than the destination. Or even having a map.

“How do you know where you're going?” she replies.

This is the part of the conversation that gets to the nature of belief. No one knows exactly, 100%, for sure where they are going, I say. You can't know, it's not human nature to *know* anything beyond this life. You can *believe*. You can prepare for what you *think* is your destination. But you cannot know with certainty. So, I say, we Unitarian Universalists have to build our own theology that informs our actions in this world so that we are able to transit to the next world having lived a good life and having made the world a better place.

And here the conversation usually comes to an impasse. The Unitarian Universalist idea of religion is so different and more profound than she ever imagined that her training and background fails her for the conversation. I think—I hope—that her critical thinking skills are provoked by our conversation, because it seems to

me that her faculty of reason takes a nap when she goes to church.

So today, in this church, some assembly is required. You must build your own theology. There is a downside to this approach. There is a temptation to be against everything else. When asked, “What do you believe?” some Unitarian Universalists will say, “Well, I don't believe in the doohickey.” or “I don't believe in whatshisname.”

I have done this myself. But we're really not stating our beliefs by negating other beliefs. Express your beliefs positively. And of course to do that, you'll have to figure out what they are.

There is an upside to this approach. Nearly the entire spectrum of philosophy, theology and common sense is open to you. You can pick and choose from existing beliefs or make up your own. Would you like a little Buddhist salad with that Christian entree? Fine. How about a pagan dessert? No problem.

You cannot, however, believe anything you want. Well, actually you *can* believe what you want. But if what you want to believe is exclusive, hurtful, racist or mean-spirited, you'd best start your own church, because you won't be happy in this one.

When I was in seminary, one of the hurdles I had to jump over was a career assessment seminar. It was two days long and 30 miles from my school. The seminar consisted of a very long personality inventory for which I had to mark my answers in little tiny circles with a No. 2 pencil, several psychological tests, and an IQ test.

The point was to assess me as a person and compare my strengths and “growing edges” against what is required of a minister to determine if I were suited to the task. I passed, but not before I shocked the seminar leader.

He was about my age, I guess, been a Presbyterian minister all his life and had been running these seminars for about ten years. He was

kinda interested to have three seminar participants from Meadville Lombard, all Unitarian Universalist seminarians.

While we were getting acquainted, he said, “You’re a Unitarian Universalist, eh? That must be easy. You can believe anything you want.”

“On the contrary,” I said. “It’s difficult. I have to work hard at my beliefs every day and sometimes twice or three times in a day. I don’t have a book with all the answers in it. I have to study and sweat to find the truth. The truth is not handed to me; I must go out and find it. And sometimes, I have to change my beliefs in order to square them with my experience.”

He had that same uncomprehending look on his face that I see in the students who ask me about Unitarian Universalist religious beliefs. I thought later that in actuality, *he* had it easy. He had a creed. He had doctrine and dogma. He had direction—maybe even coercion—from his superiors. He had a good retirement plan. His bishops and popes and patriarchs gave him all the answers and told him to search for the test.

I had the test and was searching for the answers. Now I think maybe neither one of us has it easy.

So this religious life ain’t easy, but don’t despair. I have some guidelines for you, or rather the Unitarian Universalist Association has some guidelines for you. They are the seven Unitarian Universalist principles and you can find them in your hymnal on page ten, three pages before the first hymn or, on the back of your bulletin. They are there every Sunday.

Some people call these the Seven Suggestions, as they are not a creed, although they are occasionally treated as such. They are principles adopted at a *General Assembly of congregations*. They were adopted by congregations.

They were not, nor were they intended to be, adopted by or for people. So you can take them or leave them. I suggest they can be a starting point in forming your own spiritual beliefs. And to get you started, come back next week when I will discuss these principles and why I think they are too many, too academic and in an attempt to be too inclusive, too wordy.

Next Sunday, in front of this microphone, I will perform a feat of magic never before attempted in any Unitarian Universalist church anywhere. I will fold seven principles into three and there will be no remainder. Not even a fraction.

*HYMN 34, Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire*

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.

*POSTLUDE: Go Out with Joy*