

**“Getting Religion”**  
**Kathy Burek, Member, MSUS**  
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Sermon: My topic this morning was chosen by our Service Leader, Marie Phillips. Marie won the privilege of choosing a sermon topic at our last year’s Service Auction. When Marie and I talked about her interest in the topic, she asked several questions: How do people acquire, change or hold religious beliefs? Can we let go of fears from childhood? What is the role of family experience? What are the social or psychological impacts on belief? While these questions prompted my exploration of this topic, what I read got me thinking about two rather striking facts about Unitarian Universalists. The first is that almost 90% of us were raised in a non-UU faith; birthright UUs account for 12.5% of us, according to a study done by the UUA. The second fact, and one that has concerned me since I first heard it, is that 90% of our children do not affiliate with a UU congregation as adults. Not surprisingly, there is a connection between what I discovered about how religious beliefs and affiliation are formed, why we’re here, and why we aren’t keeping our children.

First, a word about a word—namely, the word “belief”. As Rev. Dana has informed us, we have changed the meaning of the word “belief” over time. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the word has come to mean: A feeling that something exists or is true, especially one without proof; a firmly held opinion, trust or confidence in; religious faith. When Sophia Lyons Fahs tells us it matters what we believe, she’s using the word in this modern sense. Marie’s questions also reflect the contemporary use of belief. Rev. Dana speaks to us the older meaning of the word. The Latin word for “I believe” is *credo*, which comes from the same root as cardio, meaning heart. Prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “believe” meant, “to set your heart on”, “give your heart to”, or “commit yourself to”. Our English word “belief” comes from German *belieben*, “to hold dear”. The relationship between the German and the English is clear in our word

“beloved”. I will be using “belief” in its modern sense for most of this talk, and I’ll let you know when I shift to the older meaning.

One other bit of clarification: the survey data I will be discussing mostly deals with the topic of religious affiliation, that is, the denomination of which do people consider themselves to be members. Membership in a denomination is not necessarily equal to belief; there are many people who attend churches while rejecting parts of the official doctrine. For example, according to a 2004 Gallup Poll, 78% of American Catholics support allowing Catholics to use birth control, 63% think priests should be able to marry, and 55% think women should be ordained as priests. Gallup also reported that more Catholics than non-Catholics believe that homosexual behavior, divorce, and stem-cell and human-embryo research are morally acceptable. Catholic affiliation does not equal Catholic belief, and the same is true of other denominations as well.

I’ll start our conversation about belief with an overview of survey data on religion in contemporary US society. Next, I’ll talk briefly about the findings of neuropsychologists about how the brain forms and changes beliefs. I’ll share some insights from a classic work by James Fowler on the stages of faith development. My final section will apply my findings to contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has conducted numerous polls and studies on trends in contemporary American religion. Their most recent study, released this past February, grabbed headlines for its findings about significant increases in the numbers of Americans who change their religious affiliation, and the increase in the number of unaffiliated Americans (from 8% to 16.1%). The study found that 28% of Americans had left their childhood affiliation—not counting movements within Protestant sects. If you include changes within Protestantism, 44% of Americans are not affiliated with the denomination of their childhoods. This is a higher figure than has been seen previously, and it suggests that denominational loyalty is declining.

The focus on the increase in switchers and the unaffiliated, however, masks an important fact: 76% of Americans did *not* switch among Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, etc. Most people, it seems, stay close to their religious roots. That suggests that our families play a critical role in our faith formation. This conclusion is reinforced by a cross-national study conducted by the Center for Spiritual Development in Children and Adolescents, which found that 76% of youth said their parents facilitated their spiritual development. (Parental influences ranked #4 after being in nature, listening to music, and helping other people or serving the community).

Still, Americans do seem to be more willing to switch affiliations than ever before. The most common reasons cited for moving from religious to unaffiliated included, “Just drifted away”; “Spiritual needs not being met” or “Finding a religion I liked more”. Some Catholics who moved into the Unaffiliated category, however, did so because of disagreements with the church’s teachings about homosexuality and abortion (56%), birth control (48%), or the role of women in the church (39%). In contrast, Protestants who are now unaffiliated cited these factors at much lower rates, presumably because many Protestant churches have liberal views on these matters. The clergy sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church was cited by 23% of those former Catholics who are now unaffiliated.

While Unitarian Universalist may be small membership (less than one percent of the population), we appear to have had a significant impact on the religious landscape: 70% of Americans agree that many religions can lead to eternal life, a Universalist view and 68% agree that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their religion, a Unitarian

view. Another study conducted by the University of Chicago finds that religious liberalism is growing, contrary to the impression generated by the media. between 1972 to 2002 the number of Americans who consider themselves religiously liberal increased much more dramatically (18% to 39%) over the course of those 30 years, while the number of fundamentalists increased only marginally (27% to 30%); The number who consider themselves religious moderates, however, decreased from 52% to 36%. Polarization in religion, it seems, is increasing.

What of today's young adults? The Pew researchers found that, "compared with their elders, young people are much less likely to affiliate with any religious tradition or to identify themselves as part of a Christian denomination. Fully one-in-four adults under age 30 (25%) are unaffiliated, describing their religion as "atheist," "agnostic" or "nothing in particular." Despite the lower rates of affiliation, the Pew researchers found that the stated beliefs and religious practices of young adults (about the existence of God, for example) did not vary so dramatically from their parents' generation. When young adults were asked about their childhood religious practices, the influence of family becomes even clearer. The Unaffiliated are less likely to have attended worship services regularly, and are less likely to report having had a "strong" religious faith as a child or adolescent. Those who attended church regularly and described themselves as having had a strong faith are less likely to leave their childhood religion. This finding reinforces the role of family in shaping a child's faith.

Rev. Terry Sweetser, the UUA's Vice President for Development, found a similar pattern among UUs who were raised UU. Sweetser surveyed 250 "birthright" UU ministers, DREs and

lay members. Two-thirds of this group liked Sunday School, for the connections they made there, and 94% were involved in a youth group. 91% reported that these were significant experiences. (On the other hand, 46% reported that what they liked least about Sunday School is that it was “boring”). Since parents take children to church until they’re well into high school and have drivers’ licenses, we see that even among UUs, parents are important.

To gain a different perspective on belief formation, I’ll turn now to the work of Dr. Andrew Newberg of the Mark Robert Waldman of University of Pennsylvania Center for Spirituality and the Mind. Dr. Newberg, in his book, *Why We Believe What We Believe*, summarizes the literature on the brain and belief, and reports on his own research, which uses SPECT scans (single photon emission computed tomography) to study the brains of Buddhist monks and Catholic nuns during meditation.

Newberg states that beliefs are formed through 4 processes:

1. Perception (information received through senses)
2. Cognition (processing of information, including abstract reasoning and memory)
3. Emotions (provide intensity and value)
4. Social consensus (what others around us believe)

All of our beliefs begin with what we perceive with our senses, however, how we interpret those perceptions is influence by our belief systems. We tend to reject information that does not conform to our prior experience and knowledge; we often over-rate the validity and accuracy of our beliefs.

Newberg states that we often shape our beliefs so that we are accepted by those close to us, especially as children—buttressing the Pew finding about the role of family. Negative experiences trigger a stronger reaction than positive ones, so you have to work to maintain a sense of optimism and well-being. To answer Marie’s question about getting over childhood fears, the strength of negative beliefs is why it’s harder to get over fears. However, we can determine our response and changes in beliefs, and in so doing, we change our neural circuitry. Repetition increases belief: those beliefs you tell yourself

over and over become engrained, and become harder to change. Strong emotions also reinforce beliefs; any belief that we associate with a strong feeling has a greater impact than one without such an emotional association. Newberg says, “Depending on how you choose to meditate, think or pray, you can foster compassion or hate (or anything else); be careful what you obsess on, it will become your truth; any idea that is repeatedly recalled and contemplated becomes strongly embedded in memory, taking on greater and greater nuances of reality and emotional import.”

Our emotions impact our beliefs and attitudes: Anger results in brain changes that cause us to think in narrow ways, to be more selfish; being calm leads us to be more generous. Newberg also finds that education doesn't seem to impact belief in god, but college and post-graduate educated people are less likely to believe in miracles, hell or the devil. Finally, he has found that the brains of skeptics and believers seem to function differently; the chemical dopamine plays an important role in spiritual experience. People who are given dopamine are more likely to have a spiritual experience. Our brains, it appears, have much to do with how we believe what we believe. Some of us seem more predisposed to certain kinds of experiences than others. That said, our beliefs and our brains can be changed if we want to change them. Religion, it appears, is “all in our head”, but nonetheless real.

A somewhat different approach to the formation of beliefs comes from James Fowler, who developed a theory of faith development based on the work of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg. Three different UU ministers, including Rev. Dana, told me Fowler was the book to read on the topic of how faith and beliefs are formed, so you know this one is important. According to Fowler, faith is a dynamic triad among the self, others and a shared center of value and power (god or something else that serves the same purpose). Once again, we see the importance of family, and later, the larger society that we saw in the Pew research and neuropsychological research. Fowler posits an initial stage of undifferentiated faith in infancy, which he characterizes as a pre-faith stage. This is followed by six stages of faith which begin at around age 3, when a child develops command of language. Fowler's view

is that as children develop, their cognitive and emotional capabilities increase and this new capacity impacts the structure of a child's beliefs. As children grow, their faith orientation changes in complexity and nuance. The transition between one faith stage and the next are triggered by the child's growing mental and emotional complexity, by exposure to people and ideas outside the home, and by life events they encounter, such as the death of a relative. Fowler then extends the stage concept into adulthood. In adulthood, transitions from one faith stage to another are triggered by the failure of the current faith stage to deal with the adult's life situation and increasing maturity. Regressions, Fowler claims, are possible, and some adults will settle in at Stage 3, 4, or 5. (Stage 6 is a rarely-attained stage Fowler contends characterizes the Martin Luther King's and Gandhi's of this world). Fowler cautions that the stage an adult settles into is not necessarily a reflection on the adult's worth. Here's a very brief summary of the stages:

In Stage One, between ages 4-6, children are imaginative, can't always distinguish between reality and fantasy, respond to more concrete stories, and tend to be either/or thinkers.

In Stage Two (ages 7-12) children can separate fantasy and reality, are literal thinkers, are beginning to learn the rules of the faith tradition, are oriented to an ethic of reciprocity, and begin to understand that others might believe differently than they do

Stage Three is the stage of adolescence, when youth begin to develop a more complex and coherent orientation to the world. They notice internal contradictions in the faith tradition, and are bothered by any discrepancy between what is preached and what is practiced. Fowler describes this as a conformist stage, where the youth is much attuned to the beliefs and expectations of significant others. This is also a stage where, Fowler says, many people stop. Others move on, often as a result of some form of "leaving home", as in going to college or into military service, or establishing a home of their own.

Stage Four often occurs in early adulthood. The Pew Foundation studies show this is the age (mid-20's) where, if people are going to switch religious affiliations, they are most likely to do so. This stage, according to Fowler, is characterized by taking responsibility for one's own beliefs, rather than accepting what was handed down uncritically. Stage four also involves critical reflection on the beliefs; that is, the young adult can step outside his or her own belief system. This may be another stopping point for many adults.

At Stage Five, the individual reworks his or her past and integrates childhood beliefs and experience into his or her current worldview. This is the stage where childhood fears and issues can be overcome, in response to one of Marie's questions. This stage is also one where the individual is able to recognize the myths of class, race and religion, and must grapple with the paradox of divisions within and a sense of our common humanity. At this stage, the individual is ready, Fowler says, "to spend and be spent" for others' identity and meaning. This is another stopping point, since few are called to Stage Six.

Although Fowler contends this is a structural theory, and one can be in any stage in any faith tradition, it seems to me that Unitarian Universalists are most likely to be at Stage 4 or Stage 5. The 9 out of 10 of us who were not raised UU had to take responsibility for our own beliefs and critically examine them in order to reject our childhood faith in favor of this new one. At first, we may have emphatically rejected our childhood faith; we may have had strong negative reactions to religious language and concepts. The longer we are UUs, the more likely we are to confront the impact of our childhood religions on our current belief structures, and to re-integrate these older experiences into a new understanding of spirituality. Myths of race, class and religion are of great concern to many people in this very white, culturally middle-class faith tradition.

To summarize my answers to Marie's questions:

- Our belief structures are the result of changes in our brain, and we can impact beliefs if we choose; repetition and emotion are two forces that impact the intensity of belief
- Families play a critical role in a child's faith formation; if parents are active in a church, and the child has good relationships with parents, the child may well stay in the faith tradition of origin
- Life experience also has an impact; leaving home and meeting new people with new ideas can challenge the childhood faith; education is important; religious liberals tend to be more educated than fundamentalists; if we acquire a greater level of education than our parents, we leave our childhood religious affiliation
- We can overcome any religiously-based fears we learned as children by not obsessing on them, and by re-integrating and understanding those fears in the context of our new faith tradition

Let me turn now to how the findings I've been presenting might explain why it is that 90% of our young people choose not to stay with Unitarian Universalism. If you're one of those who wonder why it's important to help our children and youth be stronger in the UU faith, think back to the Fahs reading. Even if our children retain their UU outlooks while not attending a UU church, do we want our grandchildren being raised in a faith tradition we ourselves rejected as deficient?

To begin, many religious liberals are refugees from faith traditions where questioning and making up one's own mind were not tolerated. As a result, many UU parents feel they should not "impose" their beliefs on their children, but leave them free to discover their own truth. However, Fowler's work suggests that children are not ready for this type of mental exercise until adolescence. For younger children, there is a need to be clear what the parents believe and don't believe. Bill Doherty, professor of Family Science at the University of Minnesota, and a Member of Unity-Unitarian in

St. Paul, shared this story in the *UU World*: “It was 1980. I had been a Unitarian Universalist for about two years when my seven-year-old son Eric said to me, “Dad, what happens to us after we die? Is there a heaven?” “Well, some people believe that after we die we go to heaven where we live forever,” I replied, “and other people believe that when we die, our life is over and we live on through the memories of people who have known and loved us.” “What do you believe?” said Eric. “Well, some people believe that after we die we go to heaven, and other people believe. . . .” “But what do *you* believe?” “OK,” I said. “I believe that when we die we live on through other people but not in a heaven.” Eric took this in and responded with words I will never forget: “I’ll believe what you believe for now, and when I grow up I’ll make up my own mind.” ... I [had] responded to him as if he were a 20-year-old taking a course on world religions. I had a better sense of what *not* to do as a UU parent—don’t impose my beliefs—than of what to do, namely, give him religious guidance.” Too often, our approach to religious education tends to give Stage 1 or 2 children, a stage 4 or 5 answer. They don’t know what to make of what we’re telling them.

Further, if we found our old faith tradition lacking, and find this one superior, shouldn’t we want our children to choose this one? Even if traditional religion has moderated, and adopted some of our values regarding tolerance and critical thinking, they are still operating within a traditional theological construct, and one set of scriptures is given a preferred status. Perhaps the choice is not between imposing our beliefs and being neutral, but of being willing to promote our beliefs to our children and youth. We can still let them know we’ll love them no matter what they choose, but it can’t hurt to let them know why we think UUism is the better choice.

Another difficulty we face in bringing up our children lies in the “come-outer” status of most of us. We don’t know enough about UUism to teach it. Many of us join UU congregations to find religious education for our young children. Often, we start teaching RE classes in our second or third year of

membership. More often than not, we know little more about the subject matter than what is in the curriculum package. We're unprepared to answer questions, because we don't know ourselves.

Newberg's research demonstrates the importance of repetition on belief. In Christian churches, the minister speaks about Jesus every week. Children and youth study Jesus and the Bible every week. Here at MSUS, when my children were in RE, we taught UUism every three years, interspersed with World Religions and a social action curriculum. Depending on where in the curriculum cycle the RE Program was when the parent joined, over five years, the child may only get one opportunity for exposure to UUism. Here's a telling example: a few years ago, I was watching WCCO News. Don Shelby, the anchor, mentioned to Amelia Santeiello that he had been raised Universalist. She asked him what that was about. He said he wasn't sure, but they went to other people's churches a lot. Maybe if we as parents and adults who work with children and youth had a better grounding as UUs, we would be better teachers. Maybe if we focused our religious education program on UUism more, our children would have a stronger UU identity, a deficiency in the RE Program my adult children have commented on.

The Pew study also found that regular church attendance with parents led to stronger commitments to a faith tradition. As UUs, we don't make a big deal about attending church or RE classes regularly. Some of us are single parents for whom getting children to church on Sundays is a major undertaking. Some of us share custody with an ex-souse. Many of us are very busy, overachieving parents who have their children in any number of enrichment activities and if they need to skip church, or we need to skip church, well, that's ok. If we want to have our children remain UUs, however, we maybe need to start putting church higher on the list for ourselves and our children. In other words, we need to "believe" in Unitarian Universalism in the old sense of the word—giving our hearts to it, committing to it.

Peter Morales, it seems to me, has put his finger on the real issue: as long as we emphasize what we think, and not what we love, we will emphasize our differences over our commonalities, and we will be unable to make the commitment that we are capable of making. Our adult services and our children's RE program will be heady and less likely to "stick". In contrast, when we focus on what we love, and not what we think, will give ourselves, our children and our youth a stronger sense of what this faith tradition is capable of. It will also transform us in the process. May it be so.

Singing: Hymn # 300

Closing Words: To repeat the words of Peter Morales: When we focus on what we love, we "get religion". May we all "get religion" in our lives.