SEVEN REASONS WHY NOT TO BE A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST!
Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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Responsive Reading Before the Sermon
From the book Salted Fire by Rev. Scott W. Alexander
In a world with so much hatred and violence,
    We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
In a world with so much brutality and fear,
    We need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.
In a world with so many persons abused and neglected,
    We need a religion that calls us to accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.
In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood,
    We need a religion that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
In a world with so much tyranny and oppression,
    We need a religion that affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.
In a world with so much inequality and strife,
    We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.
In a world with so much environmental degradation,
    We need a religion that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.
In a world with so much uncertainty and despair,
    We need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope, and our hands to serve.

The Sermon
I might as well just confess it at the outset (heck, half of you probably already suspect it anyway)...my sermon title this morning “Seven Reasons NOT to be a Unitarian Universalist” is nothing more than a cheap rhetorical trick to lay out in a proud and passionate way the seven essential beliefs of our faith. It is my unashamed intention this morning to spell out to you – by way of this negative (and dare I hope vaguely clever) rhetorical device – precisely why Unitarian Universalism is the perfect, sound and sensible religion for you...and the rest of humanity, for that matter.

You must have known this admission was eventually coming this morning. Surely you didn’t really come to church this morning expecting me of all people to give you seven reasons why not to make your spiritual home here. As a proud and passionate Unitarian Universalist minister, I have devoted nearly 45
years of my life to the health, growth, and extension of this religious movement...

**[PICTURE OF “SALTED WITH FIRE” BOOK JACKET IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

...including editing this best-selling liberal evangelistic book – first published in 1994 when I worked at UUA headquarters in Boston – *Salted with Fire*, on sharing our faith and growing our congregations. I believe deeply in our liberal religion – I grew up in this faith, built my entire professional career here, and look to this faith to guide my life, shape my character, humanize my relationships, and give my life its direction, meaning, purpose, and joy.

The truth is, I really can’t come up with even one reason why you should not make this faith, your faith!

Besides, why would I ever provide anyone with reasons or excuses not to be Unitarian Universalist when most in our culture manage quite nicely, thank you, to live without our free and progressive faith? You may not fully realize how statistically insignificant we Unitarian Universalists really are in North America ...but with only a little more than 150,000 adults and 61,000 children (which is a grand denominational total of 211,000 Unitarian Universalists) in the United States and Canada, our denomination represents considerably less than one-tenth-of-one-percent of the population. These small numbers are quite remarkable when you consider that more than a century-and-a-half ago Abraham Lincoln (after hearing a traveling Universalist evangelist preach that part of our positive, humanity-centered “good news”) was purported to have observed that given the reasonableness, compassion, optimism and logic of our liberal faith, and now I quote him “It is hard to imagine that there is a man [or woman] alive today who will not die a Universalist.”

While Universalism and its sister faith Unitarianism did grow rapidly for a period in the 18th Century (indeed at one time in the mid 1800s, Universalism was the sixth largest American denomination!), Lincoln’s prediction of our numerical and spiritual success in the cultural marketplace hasn’t quite come
to fruition. Despite a long history of having more cultural and political influence than our numbers might suggest (throughout our American history, Unitarians and Universalists as cultural, political and scientific leaders have had a greater impact on society and thought than our numbers would indicate), the fact is that when religious groups in the United States are listed, we are always anonymously lumped into “other” at the bottom of the table.

Indeed, one of my ministerial colleagues, the Rev. Bruce Marshall of Maryland, was once feeling a bit of excessive pride for all the influence and stature Unitarian Universalists seem have in American life... when he saw a news piece about how many Americans belong to certain off-beat groups. Did you know (and this is a real, honest-to-God statistic!) did you know that there are more Americans – more than 250,000 adults! – who believe they have been abducted by aliens into spaceships than there are Unitarian Universalists!

What...you haven’t been abducted yet?? Marshall wrote that he was stunned by that quarter million number – “that number is larger than the number of Unitarian Universalists in North America. There are, as of the last UUA Directory, just 210,000 Unitarian Universalists walking around...while there are some 250,000 Americans walking around sure they have been abducted by space aliens. This statistic gives me pause.” And then Bruce went on to give other American statistics, proving that there are more Filipinos living in California than there are UUs nationwide, more taxi drivers in the U.S. than UUs (and that was before Uber added hundreds of thousands of drivers to that list!), more people arrested for aggravated assault annually in the US, more members in the American Chemical Engineering Society, and so on. He concluded, “Whenever I start feeling self-important with all the influence I possess as a UU minister, I find that such statistics bring me properly down to earth.”

Given the sobering fact that we UUs are already pretty statistically insignificant as a religious group – and in my braver moments, I like to think of the UUA as a small, bright star in the constellation of world faiths – but given the fact that we are so statistically insignificant, this proud and passionate UU minister is the last person on earth from whom you are likely to get real reasons why you should not be a Unitarian Universalist. But I thought nonetheless that it might be a provocative exercise to take a look at what our movement does stand for by giving you seven reasons why some people (maybe even the majority) might not feel spiritually comfortable here.

And an important aside here, if I might. Obviously our liberal faith tradition – which (1) fiercely respects the individual, and (2) demands that each of us does a lot of hard spiritual and ethical work – is not right for all Americans...especially those who want to be told, once and for all, what to believe and why.

The mathematically gifted amongst you may have already noticed – by counting the number of UU “principles” printed every Sunday in the order of service – that Unitarian Universalism by odd coincidence has seven principles. It might just be this morning that my seven reasons for not being a UU may bear (in proper order nonetheless) an inverse relationship with our seven principles that define and animate our faith...just maybe!

So let’s get to the heart of my sermon today, shall we?...let me enumerate the seven reasons why you should not be a Unitarian Universalist...

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]
You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you have an essentially negative and pessimistic view of persons and their potential for dignity, decency and worth.

I wish I could say that I have made this up, but listen to this “Message from our National Chaplain” (written a few years back now, in what the author apparently thought was rather clever adolescent “lingo”) addressed to thousands of little Lutheran “Girl Pioneers” of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – the strict denomination my mother was obliged to be a part of as a child, due to her adoption by her uncle and her German Lutheran aunt...but that’s a whole other story!

Here is what the “National Chaplain” wanted to theologically communicate to these girls about their dignity and worth as persons (it would make any 18th Century Puritan proud!):

“Whereas I am a filthy, slime-bucket, worm-pit, low-life bum, and, Whereas I am surrounded in this life by other slime-bucket, worm-pit, low-life bums; and whereas one slime-bucket can’t deslime another; and, whereas one worm-pit can’t de-worm another; and whereas one low-life can’t raise another; and whereas a bum is a bum...Therefore be it resolved that this slime-bucket, worm-pit, low-life cast all his sliminess, worminess, and lowness in Christ our Savior...”

It goes on at some puritanical length, but you get the idea. A lot of American religious traditions (especially conservative Christian ones) begin theologically and spiritually with profound distrust of and disrespect for human persons and their potential. Our liberal religious tradition, on the other hand, from its earliest American beginnings as a hopeful alternative to Puritanical negativity, has always seen first (glowing at the soul and center to persons and society) a divine spark, a holy flame and, for the humanists among us, simply profound potential and power for common human decency and good.

None of this means, of course, that Unitarian Universalists are spiritually naive about or unprepared for human failure, depravity and evil – all wise and mature religions must confront and seek to change that – it’s just that we begin as our spiritual and theological starting place by seeing and affirming the worth and dignity of persons both as individuals and in community. So don’t become a Unitarian Universalist if you have an essentially negative view of persons and their potential for decency and good, for here we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS
The first principle of Unitarian Universalism is “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

REASON #1
1. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you have an essentially negative and pessimistic view of persons and their potential for dignity, decency and worth.

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REASON #2
2. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you think the injustices and indignities of our society and world are either intractable, or someone else’s responsibility.

A lot of people in our society today (if you look at their rather selfish, consumerist and self-centered behavior) seem to feel that the problems and pains of our social order – things like poverty and prejudice...hunger and homelessness...racial and social inequality...violence in our homes, schools and
streets...and the lack of opportunity and medical care for millions in our society...to name just a few of
the ways our society is failing its highest aspirations – a lot of people seem to feel that these problems
and pains are someone else’s responsibility to fix. Not so in this religious tradition. Unitarian
Universalists have always believed (again, since our earliest days as a liberal American religious tradition
of rebels and reformers) that it is our responsibility and moral duty as principled and caring people, to
do what we can to ensure greater justice, equity and compassion in human affairs and society. How
could we – how would it even be vaguely possible? – for us as a religious people who first and foremost
see this spark of goodness and worth and beauty radiating from the center of all persons – to then idly
and indifferently stand by and allow the unnecessary diminishment and degradation of persons by a
flawed social order? We cannot.

So if you just want to go your own merry little individualistic way in this world (imagining that you can be
safe and happy and well in your own little selfish world of possession, prerogative and privilege – taking
what you want from life and ignoring the needs and suffering of others), then don’t be a Unitarian
Universalist...because...

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

The second principle of Unitarian Universalism is to work to ensure “justice, equity, and compassion in
human affairs.”

For here we believe it is our duty to ensure justice, equity and compassion in human affairs, and must on
a nearly daily basis lend ourselves to the creation of just such a social order.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

REASON #3

3) You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you imagine yourself capable of having a full and
satisfying religious life all by yourself...in some sort of splendid spiritual isolation.

In this Unitarian Universalist congregation, we understand – deep to the core of our community – how
desperately and fundamentally human beings need one another if they are to (both separately and
together) achieve even an approximation of their full human potential for joy, purpose, and
responsibility to others. Here in this religious community we work continuously to create the kinds of
interactive and enrichment opportunities that will encourage each of us together to think, grow, care,
and cultivate meaningful connections with other life and persons. In this religion...

[THE FOLLOWING PICTURE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]
...we do not believe you can, in the end, find enduring peace, enlightenment or compassionate living by sitting alone in pure meditation or contemplation on some pristine mountaintop (did you notice this modern guru is contemplating life through his laptop!...amazing the pictures you can find on the internet!).

Ours is a community-based faith of interaction and interchange – and we know, deep in our spiritual bones, that we need congregations of communicating people who will care for – and connect – with one another. This is one of the reasons we have been so systematic here at UUFVB in recent years in developing our Covenant Group program...which enables small groups of members and friends of the congregation to “go spiritually and emotionally deeper” with one another. It is also why – under the leadership of Jenn Sutton and Kristen Jolly – we have revitalized our Adult Enrichment program, providing a variety of spiritual and ethical courses (again, interactive group experiences) to help us deepen our religious lives.

As a congregation, we need to encourage and care for one another if we are to be true to our goal of full and fine protection for and validation of all persons. So don’t be a Unitarian Universalist if you believe you are capable of having a full and satisfying religious life all by yourself in some sort of splendid spiritual isolation.

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The third principle of Unitarian Universalism is to ensure acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

REASON #4

4. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you want someone else – from some sure, dogmatic, and hierarchical place – to lay out a complete, cut-and-dried, true-for-all-times and places that requires you to blindly follow and obey.

Some (in fact most) American religious traditions – especially the conservative ones – require when you come to them adherence and allegiance to a fixed, pre-existing creed, dogma or belief system that has been handed down from all time. Here – while we do have seven clear and articulated principles...and have a long and coherent religious heritage from which to shape our ever-unfolding spiritual understandings (in our ever-unfolding world of challenge and change) – we Unitarian Universalists nonetheless never expect, or allow even, individuals to somehow blindly submit or submerge their own personal spiritual authority or understandings to that of some “higher” ecclesiastical authority. Here – within the clear, coherent, centuries-old framework that is Unitarian Universalism – we expect (in fact demand) that you always filter and fine-tune our tradition through the light and wisdom of your own best heart and most disciplined and diligent mind. This is a religion that requires you to employ your own discernment, judgment, and reflection, and personally shape Unitarian Universalism into a lifestyle faith that works for you.

There are a whole lot of people out there in America who don’t want to do this much spiritual and ethical work. There are a whole lot of people who honestly want to be spiritually lazy, and want someone else to lay out for them – once and for all, no questions asked, no doubts allowed, no ambiguity tolerated – precisely what to believe and how to act. Don’t be a Unitarian Universalist if this describes you...because here we will insist that you personally engage (alone and with others in this community) in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism is that we will engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Because here we believe in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” as did all early philosophers and proponents of democracy as a form of human governance, we of necessity are an American religious tradition firmly committed to democratic and egalitarian ideals. If the tortuous course of human history teaches us anything, it is that injustice, oppression and tyranny tend to perniciously arise in human organizations which do not respect and invite the full, free and equal participation of all. Over the entire course of our American history (and we UUs were there from the very beginnings of this great, experimental republic), Unitarian Universalists have always been staunch and sure supporters of democratic theory and practice.

As a movement, we have always spoken up in the public square when we have felt the Bill of Rights, the U.S. Constitution and its all-important amendments have been threatened with usurpation or subversion. That is why – more than a century-and-a-half ago – the Rev. Theodore Parker kept a loaded gun in his church desk to protect the freed slaves he was harboring...and why A. Powell Davies (the great 1950s Unitarian minister at All Souls church in Washington, DC) spoke up early and loud against the immoral excesses of Senator Joseph McCarthy...and why UU minister James Reeb died in the streets of Selma defending the civil rights of African Americans. And that is also why every major decision here in our congregation is reached only after a long, and thoughtful and open democratic process, where every member of the congregation is invited in to make their voice heard and their perspectives and needs respected.

Yes, every once in a while as your minister (indeed, every once in a while as an American citizen) I wish in moments of impatience or personal petulance when I want things my own way that there could be a little less of the laborious and time-consuming democratic process...but then I am reminded of the absolute necessity to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person by maintaining scrupulously fair and wide-open decision-making processes. So don’t be a Unitarian Universalist if you want to deny others the opportunity to have their say, speak their mind, vote their conscience, or have full and fair influence over the course of human affairs.

The fifth principle of Unitarian Universalism is that we believe in the rights of conscience, and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.

6. Don’t be a Unitarian Universalist if you are one of those Americans who believe that we can (as a people and nation) live responsibly and successfully upon this planet by isolating ourselves from the problems and pains of the rest of the world’s people.
Unitarianism and Universalism – each in their own ways, from the earliest days of their founding as American faith movements – have affirmed the absolute interconnectedness and inter-relatedness (and interdependency) of all the world’s precious people. We have always as a spiritual tradition been able to look beyond the surface differences of Mother Earth’s many peoples (who are so pleasingly diverse in color and kind, face and feature, culture and cuisine, poetry and perspective, tone and tongue), and see a universal worth and unquenchable dignity that demand protection and care.

How can we as American Unitarian Universalists honor our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and our corollary dream for justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and not look beyond the relative safety of our national boundaries to the possibility of world community in which every person (no matter how desperate or poor) will be afforded the dignity and worth to which they are entitled by the mere but holy fact of their humanness? If you’re one of those latter-day American “isolationists” who believes in “America First” and that our nation must now first and foremost “look out only for itself” and not be either the “policeman of the world” nor its “compassionate benefactor” sharing our astounding wealth – then don’t be a Unitarian Universalist… because...

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

*The sixth principle of Unitarian Universalism is that (together) we must constantly seek the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.*

...and promise to lend ourselves to doing what we can to enable such a noble world to slowly come to birth, lend ourselves even if that means we will be called upon as we shall be, time and again, to make very real sacrifices and live with less that others might simply live.

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

**REASON #7**

7. **Seventh, don’t be a Unitarian Universalist if you think humanity can continue to recklessly live on this fragile and endangered planet of ours, selfishly disregarding the tender balance and very real resource limitations of Mother Earth.**

As you all know, currently in irrational and ideological denial of the overwhelming evidence of all environmental science and against all logic and reason, our current U.S. President (Mr. Trump) and by extension his administration and the Republican Congress...and a significant percentage of the American population do not believe (or at least say they don’t believe) that climate change is either real or a pressing threat to the human future. This very week, our President refused to sign...with the other leaders of the free world...the Paris Climate Agreement which sets limits for every nation on the deadly emission of green house gases. This denial of our overwhelmingly clear and dire global and environmental situation could, of course, have absolutely deadly consequences for the future of the Human Family. We all know that if the human species is to survive on this planet over the long haul with a quality of global life worth having, as a species we simply must immediately and significantly change the way we live and consume as creatures of earth.

Unitarian Universalism – just as it has long understood, deep in its spiritual bones, the interconnection of all the earth’s persons and cultures, also understands the oneness of creation...and the sacred interconnectedness of all life forms and global environments. Since the early days of our 19th Century New England transcendentalist dreamers (who like Unitarians Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau wrote...
their poems to the “breathing oneness” of it all, we Unitarian Universalists have seen, celebrated and sanctified this holy, beautiful world as one interrelated piece...a “living whole cloth” that deserves both our praise and protection. As so many of the other guiding principles and perspectives of our Unitarian Universalist faith, this one will require that we act (and, yes, restrain ourselves responsibly) in certain self-denying yet, in the end, of course, self-protecting ways. So don’t be a Unitarian Universalist if you want to live the illusion that it is all right for you to live with environmental irresponsibility, foolishly denying the increasing distress and degradation of our planet...because...

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism is “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

...here we have respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and we fully understand our moral responsibility to participate with others of wise and good will in saving our world from ultimate imbalance and destruction.

[THE FOLLOWING SENTENCE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

SO THERE YOU HAVE MY “SEVEN REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT BE A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST”!

My dear Unitarian Universalist friends, there you have it...seven reasons (from this passionate, proud Unitarian Universalist) why you should not be a Unitarian Universalist. Obviously I have totally stacked the spiritual deck this morning against each of these false, fallacious and foolish reasons I have given you. I have stacked the deck against them because I believe, deep in my heart, that Unitarian Universalism – while surely not the only sound and sensible, worthy and wonderful religion in this world – is nonetheless a wise, compassionate and serious faith, seriously needed in these serious human times.

I want you to be faithful and engaged Unitarian Universalists because I passionately believe that together – by ourselves and in community – guided by our seven principles, and employing our finest minds and deepest hearts, we can play a holy part in helping to transform our society and our world in patterns of dignity and hope which fully reflect our potential as wise and noble and loving creatures.

Ours is a positive, humanity-affirming, life-loving faith tradition which has the power to show us the way to a life and a world worth having. There is no good reason – not one! – for you to not be a Unitarian Universalist. In fact there is every reason in the world for you to shape your life and craft your living by the light of this good and noble faith. Every reason in the world.

Amen.