One of the most unusual things about Unitarian Universalism is the difficulty that we have in defining it for others. Someone asks us casually or seriously what UUism is and we are suddenly tongue tied or find ourselves saying things like: “You can believe anything you want.” Or worse, “We don’t believe anything.” Let’s admit it we’ve all said similar things when cornered. I cringe when I hear that because although the UU saying it is referring to freedom from dogma, it can sound like we have no values whatsoever to the person asking. And these kinds of platitudes don’t even begin to do justice to the depth and beauty of our faith.

The seven principles in our UUA by-laws were written in an attempt to explain what UU’s affirm and promote. Beware the trap of relying on these too specifically or we end up repeating something without really understanding its place in our faith or our lives. I think people sense this when we try and use these as an explanation of our beliefs. They want to know what we get from our religion, why it matters to us. To know this takes introspection rather than memorization.

Perhaps you’ve all heard of an elevator speech. This is the brief description of Unitarian Universalism that you can give someone in the time it takes to travel in an elevator together. The UUA has a relatively new pamphlet called “To the Point: 15 Unitarian Universalist Elevator Speeches.” They are all excellent. They are as simple as, “We are a church of many beliefs, worshipping as one community, and focused on making this a better world.” Some are more complex: “Our denomination is unique because every Unitarian Universalist has the right to develop a personal philosophy of life, without being told what to believe. We can learn from all philosophies and religions, and also from science and the arts. We explore important life issues in a caring community, united by shared values rather than by shared theological opinions. And no matter what we do believe about theology or philosophy, we try to live a good life and leave the world better than we found it.”

Some are poetic like this one: “Unitarian Universalists have different religious beliefs but share a common faith. We know that life is holy, that each person is worthy, and that when we join together to plant the seeds of love, the world blossoms.” And this one is my favorite: “Our faith is not interested in saving your soul—we’re here to help you unfold the awesome soul you already have.”

These speeches are pretty polished; clearly the authors worked on them, wrote them down and honed them until they said what they wanted to say. There is a terrific class called “Articulating Your UU Faith” that takes you through a process with others of doing just that. Some members who have taken the class said they found it scary. To start with you examine your spiritual upbringing and examine what you have come to believe about the big questions in life. You look at how you engage with UUism—what it means to you. And finally you practice sharing what you’ve come to with other people until you can fairly readily say something coherent and even true when asked.

There are many aspects to UUism and while you may appreciate them all, there is often one that is most compelling to you. It may be the rich historical origins of our religion and the many great thinkers and social activists that have contributed to it: names such as Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, Dorothy Dix, Walt Whitman and many others that any school child learns about because of their great contributions to American culture.
Social activism in the past and currently within our denomination may be what is most important to you. Or the search for spiritual development unimpeded by creedal expectations.

Expectations within our faith are communal and covenantal rather than creedal. We covenant with one another to be together and respect each other’s spiritual path. There are no mantras to learn or creed to recite. As Rev. Forrest Church wrote, “In our faith, God is not a given, God is a question. God is not defined for us, God is defined by us. Our views are shaped and changed by our experiences. As we grow, our faith grows. We struggle with what it means to be alive and yet have to die. We probe the depths of our own being for little hints of meaning. We create a faith by which we can live and struggle to live up to it. Throughout, each of us is fated to travel his or her own path. In the larger sense, we have chosen to journey together because we find that it is helpful. We find that it is good.”

Your interest in UUism may be about community. One person wrote: “UUism is a non-judgmental religious home that will accept and support you wherever you might be on life’s journey. ...It’s a safe place to stand out, stand up, and change your mind, particularly during life’s transitions... Our only doctrine is love.”

The thought of answering someone’s questions about UUism is daunting enough. But the more we practice it, the more we gain the courage to initiate a conversation with someone that might be looking for us, something that produces high anxiety indeed. We say that we don’t want to be thought of as evangelical like the ubiquitous TV and radio preachers. Just send in your money folks and you’ll be prayed for and saved. I really can’t imagine how anyone could interpret someone’s elevator speech about UUism as the dogmatic, “we have all the answers” kind of evangelism that we have all heard before. You are not entrapping someone if you are leading them to more freedom, to their own heart’s desire.

I think the real challenge is that having to explain to another or offer what we’ve found, encroaches on our complacency big time. We may have been members of the church for many years and gone through many phases of involvement after our initial excitement. Then we find ourselves settling in to a kind of routine, talking to the same people each week and doing more reminiscing than exploring. Talking to new people is challenging because they have questions that may not be easy for us to answer. We may feel some anxiety if we make the attempt but we will also feel more alive.

There are a lot of UU jokes. Most of them, it seems to me, make fun of the tendency to be irreverent, intellectual or passive. They portray our theology as empty and all UU’s as ignorant of church traditions. There is always a shadow side to any human endeavor. Our shadows tend to be elitism, intellectualism, and lack of ecumenism. Whenever we mock other religions, or think that we are smarter than most people or hide in our intellect we are caught in some of the traps that can keep us from a living faith.

Here are some of those jokes:

What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Unitarian Universalist? Someone who knocks on your door for no apparent reason.

Why can’t UUs sing very well? Because they’re always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next verse.

A Unitarian is just a Quaker with Attention Deficit Disorder.
You might be a UU if . . .
you have ever been in an argument over whether or not breast milk is vegan.
when you dress for a formal evening out you wear a little black dress, pearls—and Birkenstocks (and your wife thinks you look great!)
you are unsure about the gender of God.
the money you sent to the Sierra Club last year was more than you spent on your mother at Christmas.
you think the Holy Trinity is “reduce, reuse and recycle.”
you study the “ten suggestions” instead of the “Ten Commandments.”
the only time “Jesus” is mentioned at church is when someone trips or stubs a toe.
your child says to you before eating dinner at a friend’s house “I’ll remember to say my ‘pleases’ and ‘thank you’s but I’m not going to say that dinner ‘pledge of allegiance’.”
You think a Holy day of Obligation is your turn to do coffee.
You get mail from committees you didn’t know you were on.
You know at least two people who are upset that trees had to die for your church to be built.

Here’s a real story that happened in a UU Sunday school. The Kindergarten class was discussing “prayer”, and the children seemed aware that the way you end a prayer was with “amen.” Does anyone know what “amen” means, the teacher asked. There was a long silence. Then one little boy piped up, with appropriate, computer-age gestures, and said, “Well, I think it means, like, “send”

A little Unitarian Universalist girl was sitting on the curb in front of her house with a sad look on her face. An older lady happened upon her and asked her why she looked so sad. The girl replied, “My kitty cat died.”

The older woman, trying to be helpful, said to the little girl, “I know you’re sad, but right now your kitty cat is with Jesus.”

The girl crinkled her nose for a second and replied, “What would Jesus want with a dead cat?”

What does the KKK do to get rid of UU’s in their town? Burn a question mark on their lawns.

A Priest, a Rabbi and a UU minister were talking about their experiences with a church fire. The Priest said, “It was touch and go, but at least I saved our ancient Bible from the flames.” The Rabbi said, “We were blessed that way too and our cantor saved our Torah just in time.” The UU minister nodded sympathetically and said, “Yes, we too were so happy that Eva saved the coffee pot!”

Ok, that’s enough.

I’ve extolled the virtues of the elevator speech and so the least I can do is tell you one of mine:

10th floor - We are a community of people who value the freedom to explore more than the need to have easy answers.
9th floor – We gather for worship without being told what to believe. We wonder about God more than we believe in a God.

8th floor - Unitarianism comes from the belief in one God not a trinity. God is one. Universalism believes that God is loving and that all souls are saved. God is love.

7th floor – Unitarian Universalism has evolved and expanded to include many people that use many names to describe their faith: atheist, humanist, theist, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, agnostic, Pagan just to name a few.

6th floor - We believe in the holiness of all creation which is why we accept people of all races, ethnic groups, sexual orientations and gender identifications. There are no strangers.

5th floor – Everyone has worth and dignity and has within them all the gifts, strength and salvation that they need.

4th floor – We are responsible to protect and cherish the earth and all of its inhabitants.

3rd floor – We accept the reality of death and still find life worthwhile and joyful.

2nd floor - We would love to have you join us on Sunday. Please come. You can read about us at 2UOmaha.org.

1st floor - Thank you for asking! I hope to see you at Second Unitarian Church someday.

Go forth and share the good news of Unitarian Universalism with others! You already know at least one person who would love this church and this faith. Don’t regret not having offered it to them.

May it be so.