

“Why Are You U, U, or UU?”

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Once upon a time, a man was walking along a dusty road
when he came to a bridge and saw there another man, wailing in despair.

The man passing by asked, “What’s wrong?”

To which the other man replied, “Nobody loves me.”

The first man then said,
“But God loves you. Do you believe in God?”

The distraught man answered, “Yes.”

And then the first man asked, “Are you a Christian or a Jew?”

“A Christian.”

“Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?”

“Protestant.”

“Me, too! What franchise?”

“Baptist.”

“Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?”

“Northern Baptist.”

“Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?”

“Northern Conservative Baptist.”

“Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region,
or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?”

“Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.”

“Me, too!”

“Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879,
or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?”

“Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912,”
the man replied.

“Well, you’re a raging heretic,
and I’ll have nothing more to do with you.”
And with that, he was off.

Sometimes, labels truly matter.
And sometimes they matter a whole lot more to some than to others.

This morning, I hope to help us think through the labels
we take on for ourselves in this particular community.

While there are countless labels to describe our individual identities
in circulation at VanU, I’ll be focussing today
on the labels that begin with the letter U.

Namely, Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist.

At the outset I want to make clear
that my goal isn't to convert anyone to my perspective,
but to hopefully shed some helpful light on a topic
that is often a source of confusion.

On one level, given that our official name is the Vancouver Unitarians,
it would probably be much simpler if we all just called ourselves Unitarians.

But things aren't quite so simple.
Some of us claim other labels.

Personally, I am a Unitarian Universalist,
and, along with essentially all my North American colleagues,
I was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

That said, given the ten syllables involved in the label,
I often appreciate being able to just tell someone
I'm meeting for the first time that I'm a Unitarian.

Of course, that alone can be complicated enough to explain!

All of this is made even more confusing given that our history—
the history of this congregation
and the history of the Canadian Unitarian Council—
has been deeply intertwined with that of our siblings across the border,
who are members of the Unitarian Universalist Association
and are often called UUs.

In the years after this congregation was founded in 1909,
we had meaningful ties to both the British Unitarians
and the American Unitarian Association.

Early on, they both helped supply this congregation with ministers and critical financial support.

Without the help we received from both, without their investment in sustaining a Unitarian presence in Vancouver, VanU would very likely not exist today.

Throughout the 20th century, we, along with congregations across Canada, were part of the American Unitarian Association and, later, the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the UUA.

In 1961, when the American Unitarian Association finally merged with the Universalist Church of America, we were very much in the mix and participated in the decision to consolidate the two historical traditions into one.

That same year, 1961, the Canadian Unitarian Council, or the CUC, was also established as a distinct region within the newly-created UUA.

For over 40 years, VanU was a member congregation of the UUA, until the UUA and the CUC parted ways in 2002.

While our denominational name was officially Unitarian Universalist, Canadians opted, at the time of the merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists, to call ourselves only Unitarian, given the relatively small numbers of Universalists in Canada at that point.

As well, Canadians had a strong brand identity to maintain. For decades following the end of World War II, the Unitarian Service Committee, founded by Lotta Hitchmanova, the most famous Canadian Unitarian of all time, had made “Unitarian” a household name across the country.

With her frequent appeals on CBC radio and television for support for the USC's work to support refugees, she would sign off: "This is Lotta Hitchmanova. Please give generously to the Unitarian Service Committee..." She would then state the mailing address in Ottawa. Does anyone remember it? (56 Sparks Street)

This congregation and many others across North America retained their historical moniker, be in Universalist or Unitarian, while others adopted the new name that combined the two terms.

The congregation where I did my internship, historically a Universalist church founded in the early-19th century, opted to call themselves Universalist Unitarians.

Perhaps, at this juncture, it might help to have a more detailed description of what all these U-words mean.

Forest Church, speaking as a Unitarian Universalist minister in the American context, offers the following explanation:

One thing worth noting about our denominational name. Some churches adopt a denominational moniker according to polity (Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian); others by sacramental practice (Baptist; Seventh Day Adventist); still others by nationality (Greek or Russian Orthodox) or by founder (Lutheran or Mennonite).

Our denomination (both of them before they were joined) was named for two specific theological doctrines, Unitarianism (a belief in one God), and Universalism (a belief in salvation for all).

We didn't name ourselves,
but were named by our opponents, in each case Calvinists
(Trinitarians who believed in eternal damnation)
who held that as Unitarians and Universalists
we had demonstrated ourselves to be heretics.

Here is what I find interesting.
As far as I know we are the only denomination
named according to doctrine.
Yet, ironically, we are the most non-doctrinal of denominations.

If you take both words at their theological face value,
not every Unitarian Universalist is a Unitarian
and not every Unitarian Universalist is a Universalist.
And nor are we required to be.

Ours is the freest of all faiths,
each one of us answering not to the authority of power
or the writ of revelation, but rather
to the oracle of conscience and a wisdom drawn from experience.

So what we are, ironically enough,
is a non-doctrinal faith named after two doctrines.
As a devotee of paradox, [he says,] I have no trouble with this at all.

So, it's fair to wonder just how
all this talk of denominational labels and identities came to be.

While the Unitarians and Universalists, in both the US and Canada,
merged in 1961, they had been seriously courting one another
for more than a century.

Even in the mid-19th century, there was significant theological overlap.

In their concept of God, the Unitarians and many Universalists rejected the notion of the Trinity.

They both tended to regard Jesus as an exemplary teacher, but one who was fully human, not divine.

They both argued against the doctrine of Original Sin and the Calvinist view that humans were born into “total depravity,” believing, instead, that people are not enslaved to sin.

They both tended towards liberal interpretations of the Bible that set them apart from their Christian contemporaries.

And they both put their faith into action, recognising a need to serve the greater good by working for social justice.

Where they most distinctly diverged, theologically, was around the question of salvation.

Universalists believed that God was truly loving and would ultimately be reconciled to every human being.

Amongst themselves, they had a range of views about how this would happen, with some believing there would be a sort of purgatory in which people paid for their sins, while others, like Hosea Ballou, were Ultra-Universalists who altogether rejected the idea of hell as a place of punishment for sin.

The Ultra-Universalists felt the claim that God would torment humans for all eternity defamed God, who they believed was radically loving and forgiving.

Over time, the Universalists' belief in "universal salvation"—the idea that all would be saved—caused them to see the world around them quite differently.

Without a belief in hell in some afterlife to come, they came to see hell in the here and now, in human suffering, in oppression, in the violation of human dignity.

And they began to recognize, in their own Christian framework, that if all were to be saved, that maybe God loved everyone, no matter the religion they practised.

Over time, this meant a shift in focus from universal salvation to a hope in an emerging universal religion.

By the time of the merger in the 1960's, these two historical traditions had a great deal in common, including large numbers of people shifting away from a belief in God and many beginning to see themselves in a decidedly post-Christian light.

Given these similarities, it wasn't uncommon for people from one tradition to be accused by their detractors as being from the other. To those on the outside, the two denominations looked a lot alike.

That it took over a century of courtship to bring them to the altar, then, is often noted to have been less about pronounced theological differences than it was about their systems of governance and, most significantly, the disparity between their social classes.

The Unitarians of New England in the 19th century were the urban elite, with wealth, access to higher education, and vast political power.

As Harriet Beecher Stowe put it in 1826:

“All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarian.
All the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians.
All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches.
The judges on the bench were [all] Unitarians.”

In contrast, the Universalists of the time tended to be poorer and less educated.
They lived in more rural regions, where they were visited
by itinerant preachers travelling on horseback to share the good news.

These differences in social class were often felt
in the disdain Unitarians often had for Universalists,
often looking down their noses at them.
There are reports that this was as true in Canada as it was in New England.

Thomas Starr King, who in the mid-19th century,
identified as both a Universalist and a Unitarian, famously quipped
that the Universalists thought God was too good to damn them,
while the Unitarians thought themselves too good to be damned.

Ironically, after the merger, it was the money the Universalists
brought to the marriage that ultimately saved the UUA,
as it recovered from the years of reckless spending
by the Unitarians in the 1960's.

Occasionally, someone will question whether
this marriage should have ever taken place.
Seeking some ephemeral pure Unitarianism or pure Universalism,
they long for a distant, idyllic time that never quite existed.
As a student of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist history,
this argument makes absolutely no sense to me.

Unitarian Universalism and its antecedent traditions
have always been changing, always evolving, always living.

For more than two centuries on this continent, the theological traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism have been in dialogue.

They have challenged and and they have changed one another.

To the point that the proverbial cake can't be unbaked.

At the point of the merger, there was a fear among the Universalists that they would, actually, be not merely merged, but “sub-merged,” completely subsumed into Unitarianism as the smaller, junior partner. Many ministers and scholars today contend that Universalism ultimately won.

That Unitarian Universalism,
with its focus on the inherent worth and dignity of every person,
with its radical call to genuinely accept one another,
with its understanding of our place in the great web of life,
has carried forward more of the gifts from the Universalist side of the family.t

Indeed, many of the things that we, as Unitarians here in Canada, most love about our tradition are deeply rooted in Universalism.

I believe we should be honest about that,
no matter the particular labels we choose for ourselves.

Our history is one of a faith ever moving through time,
seeking to meet the present moment, even if imperfectly.

There are, and always have been,
as many Unitarianisms, and Universalisms, and Unitarian
Universalisms as there are people who claim and have claimed
the label down through time.

Whatever the label we choose for ourselves,
may we live into the depth of it,
that we might bring forth its full promise,
for ourselves and for our world. Amen.