

## “Credo”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist  
Cohasset, MA  
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*Credo*. Latin for “I believe.” But wait! I thought we were non-creedal. It’s almost the first phrase out of our mouths when we’re asked to describe what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. “Well, we’re non-creedal,” comes the response. Yet we encourage our youth to work hard, think hard, and feel hard to form their *credo* statements, and we take great pride when they stand at the pulpits of our congregations and speak them aloud. We also speak aloud our shared principles and purposes, in adult and children’s versions no less, with as much devotion as many of us once summoned for the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed or even the well-learned answers of a Catechism.

Then there are those embarrassing moments when a friend or acquaintance discovers that we’re Unitarian Universalist and poses that bound-to-be- conversation-stopper: “Oh, you’re the ones who don’t believe anything!” How many times have we responded with a lame smile and words that confuse more than correct this common assumption about who we are? In fact, it’s an assumption quite consistent with our explanation that we’re “non-creedal.”

We seem to contradict ourselves about being non-creedal while espousing credo statements and holding up again and again our shared principles. We seem to trip over our own left feet when confronted with the popular notion that we really don’t believe anything at all. How to untangle ourselves?

I don’t think we are non-creedal. I think we’re quite creedal. It’s just that we’re not mono-creedal. Remember that large tent that stretches to encompass us in all our motley glory? Some of us deem ourselves theist Unitarian Universalists. Some of us identify as Christian Unitarian Universalists. Some of us consider ourselves Buddhist UUs; some agnostic, some atheist, some pagan, some animist. And later this morning we’ll hear from Allie and Tatyana about their beliefs, which will likely transcend category.

I wonder if the glue that keeps us together is not itself cause for great faith. The emphasis that each of us lends to our filter of the spirit is distinct, but the door through which we enter this Meeting House and the door through which we enter this faith is singular. It is singularly wide open that each of us might step inside. It remains wide open that each of us might “Touch the earth” and “reach the sky,” that we might connect with that which grounds us and wonder at that which transcends us. We are creatures of curiosity, reason, imagination, spirit, humor, and fallibility. None of us sees the whole picture. Yet each of us has gifts of perception and sensibility that comprise that grand gift that is our willingness to come together and make meaning of what we find. Ours is a many-splendored belief.

The credo statements we are about to hear will be deliciously different from one another. We nurture this. We nurture questions that our children ask from the earliest age. We teach to the question, not to the hard and fast answer. Yet we also teach our children stories and parables that hold up the most caring behavior we can muster. We teach our children to care. We teach our children to wonder. We teach our children that we worship what we care about and wonder at.

Sometimes we call it God; sometimes the Spirit of Life or the Source of All Being; sometimes the Great Unknowable. Sometimes we call it Life with a capital “L.”

In the church of my growing up years I was taught hard and fast beliefs, and this wasn't a bad thing. It was simply the given of my childhood. It happened to be a Presbyterian church, so you sometimes hear me say “Let's not throw out the baby Jesus with the bathwater.” Our faith is not about we have to give up if we were raised otherwise, but about how we can integrate those elements of our earlier religious experiences that make sense to us in the broader scope of things. And while I do remember the “what” of my early Sunday school years, I remember far more intensely the “how.” I remember a warm and wonderful woman named Izzy Eastlund. She was a close friend of my parents and became a close friend of mine well into my adulthood until her death just a few years ago. Izzy taught Sunday school. She could have taught us anything and we would have paid attention, because we knew that she loved us. She took us seriously. She was patient with our antics and responsive to our questions. She made us feel good about ourselves, hopeful about growing up, and confident that we could make a positive difference right there in our Sunday school rooms and later on as we trekked out into the world.

When I recall those times, the words Alice Walker chose to describe her own Sunday school days rise up like the flame in our chalice:

“Who made you? Was always  
 The question  
 The answer was always  
 “God.”  
 Well, there we stood  
 Three feet high  
 Heads bowed  
 Leaning into  
 Bosoms.  
  
 Now  
 I can no longer recall  
 The Catechism  
 Or brood on the Genesis  
 Of life  
 No.  
  
 I ponder the exchange Itself  
 And salvage mostly  
 The leaning.

We who are Unitarian Universalists don't have all the answers. We don't even have all the questions. But as we honor today the Mothers who gave birth to us, the Mothers who raised us, and the Mothers who taught and nurtured us, I believe that we can all say that what we savor most about our early and present experiences of learning is “the leaning,” the sure knowledge that there has been someone there for us to lean on, someone who was trustworthy, someone whom we entrusted with the precious material of what we cared about. From this fertile soil of trust, come the credo statements that we will soon hear. Such trust is made possible largely by the caring and committed women and men, mothers and fathers all, who have taught our children, who have served as exemplars for our children, who have led and attended committee

meetings, who have planned and produced and created that garden in which the many-splendored beliefs of our children have taken root.

I believe with Sophia Lyon Fahs that it does matter what we believe. We don't believe any old thing. We believe and try hard to behave in ways that affirm each of us, that honor the connectedness of us all, and that revere this amazing circumstance we call life. I believe that there is love that moves through the teaching and learning of this church. I believe that as our children go forth from this parish there will come a day when they might forget the "what" of their credo statements, and that their credos will likely flex and stretch over the years, but that what they will remember, what we all remember, is the "the exchange itself" as we salvage with life-long gratitude "the leaning."

I celebrate you, Allie and Tatyana. I celebrate you, our mothers and grandmothers. I celebrate you, our teachers, our committee members, our one-room schoolhouse creators, and I celebrate you, Jacqui, our amazing Director of Religious Education.

Maybe the next time someone says to me, "Oh, you're the ones who don't believe anything," I'll begin with some stories of you – how you care, how you cultivate a garden with all kinds of flowers, how you honor the questions and *live* the answers, how by your love our children learn and grow. Amen.

#### **Sources:**

Sophia Lyon Fahs, "It Matters What We Believe," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 657.

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Alice Walker, "Sunday School, Circa 1950," in *Revolutionary Petunias*, A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, 1970.