Fate, I've decided, has a sense of humor. The first time I attended a Unitarian Universalist church, it felt very familiar. It espoused a philosophy I had tried to live for much of my life. But I wondered, so where's the part that is religion? After a few years of active participation in that church I decided to go to seminary to find out.

When I came out of a UU theology class, I was more than disappointed. I hadn't found a clear answer. We read a lot, thought a lot, discussed and wrote our own treatises…but we did not come to a firm agreement as to just how to define Unitarian Universalist theology. I was ordained and went into search for a congregation—I was hired not by a UU church, but by a UU fellowship. For those of you who don't know, congregations with the term Fellowship in their name are the ones most likely to have a membership with the widest range of theological belief systems. At some point I laughed out loud, believing this was fate expressing its sense of humor.

Unitarian Universalism fits squarely in what's sometimes called the liberal religious tradition. It means we've adopted a non-orthodox or non-traditionalist view of Christianity. It does not mean, and should not be confused with what's called a liberal political view. It's not a political position, as far too many believe, it's a theological perspective. In other words, people who have a moderate or conservative political orientation can also have a liberal religious perspective.

Let me say a few words about our history and how we came to this place of tremendous theological diversity within our faith communities. Unitarianism is an understanding of the "oneness of the Godhead", rather than the trinity of God. The concept of the Son of God as subordinate to God the Father, is an old notion, held by the Christian scholar and theologian Origen, in 225.

This concept was similarly held by Arius and became heretical with the adoption of the Nicene Creed in 325. The first denominational Unitarian church came into being in Transylvania in 1568. Unitarian churches also grew up in Poland, England and America.

The word Heretic in Greek means "choice". And Unitarians have long held tight to their right to choose. Many have chosen to belong to a Unitarian church whether or not they individually hold a Unitarian theology.

Universalism arose in direct opposition to the Calvinist view of man as totally depraved and enslaved in sin. It also counters the belief in unconditional election, where God, through grace alone has chosen those to be saved, irrespective of individual faith or merit. Universalists assert that a good God, a gracious God, would not condemn the majority of his people to eternal damnation. Rather they believe God would ultimately grant salvation to all.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism found their way across the big pond as belief systems. Earlier we heard that John Murray, founder of American Universalism, landed at Good Luck Point, NJ. He later went to Gloucester, MA, where in 1779, he found the first Universalist church in America.

American Unitarianism grows out of the early Puritan Congregational churches primarily in Massachusetts, where tension arose between the Trinitarians and Unitarians within its congregations. Since these churches were part of the Parish governmental system, the General Court of Massachusetts asked independent Congregational churches to establish church discipline. The definitive manual on congregational organization, government and ministry was the result, in 1648, called the Cambridge Platform .

The document established the right of each parish to call its own minister, to control it own property and funds, and determine criteria for membership. Congregations were free to associate with each other without permission of higher authority. Central to this agreement was the notion of Covenant, a voluntary agreement of people to meet in public worship and to engage in mutual help and cooperation. Covenantal relationship continues to be the central governing construct of our congregations.

Unitarianism became closely aligned with the Harvard Divinity School and the well-educated elites of Boston after 1805. That's when Henry Ware was appointed to a prestigious professorship, formalizing the acceptance of a Liberal Christian theology. Those who held an orthodox theology pulled away to form their own seminary in Andover.

The two separate faith groups, the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. We're a faith community that believes in the inherent goodness of human kind, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning and a willingness to support one another in our individual spiritual growth. Our members locate themselves across a very wide theological spectrum, including none at all.

Our Unitarian Universalist worldview, our self- definition, would seem to be a very sellable message. But as a denomination, we are not growing. The truth of which, has long-term negative consequences for our health, our message, for our very existence. As a Senior Executive I once worked with said: "Change is a given, so the only question for us is: do we merely react or do we try to create the change we'd prefer?" There was a correct answer!

I'm convinced our time to shine is now! We are at perhaps the most opportune time in history for us to stand up and be seen, to let our message be heard. You see, we offer exactly what the world is most in need of, acceptance of one another. We have a genuine belief in the worth of every person, a willingness to support each other, a belief in our inherent interconnectedness.

Religious communities, in general, are at their least attractiveness to the American public. The fundamentalists are increasingly seen as divisive. The Catholic Church has lost so much of its moral authority. Virtually all the mainline religions are dwindling, meaning they are not meeting people's needs. There is a spiritual wasteland out there, sorely in need of being filled. And *we* are perfectly poised to fill that need…if only…we are willing to do the necessary work.

I've heard it argued that we need to focus on and seek to attract the "nones" (not NUNS), those who do not affiliate with any religion. I'm not convinced that's the answer, at least not exclusively. I see our future better served by seeking to retain the "moderately religious", who show up at our doorsteps, seeking a religious education for their children and a sense of community for themselves. And who, too often, leave thereafter. They leave either because they do not perceive we are providing the spiritual/or religious feeding they desire OR they have not been able to grasp just what it is we do offer, beyond a claim to being friendly and welcoming.

We need to better figure out how to feed people's soul's, their spirits, their religious longing. We need to somehow touch that inner spark that Emerson spoke of, not just help to feed their intellectual ruminations.

We need to provide religious education that helps to tether our young people to a religious tradition, not only teach them how to be good citizens. And perhaps most importantly, we need to provide an accepting and *truly* welcoming sense of community.

If we choose to create the change we'd prefer, we have work to do. I suspect the foundational work is to take a hard, objective look at who we have tended to be and how we tend to behave. Our future lies in creating a more comfortable, recognizable faith community for those who have no understanding of our long-term debate about the acceptance or rejection of a god. No experience with our tendency to value rational thought above a faith, in that which is divine, that resides in each of us.

Our future lies in risk taking, demonstrating a willingness to grow and change, as individuals and a community, in order to meet the needs of others, rather than primarily satisfy our own wants and needs. Our future lies in us looking outward more, to connect, rather than looking inward to be satisfied and comfortable.

Does a spiritual home, a spiritual community, net out to be nothing more than a place that exists to feed me? For too many of us, that's the impression we give. Well, here's a newsflash: no such community exists, at least not for long. Any healthy community must place demands on its members. No family exists solely or even primarily for the individual. There are expectations, even of young ones, to adhere to established norms and expectations, in order to reap the rewards of belonging.

One must give in order to receive. In fact, it is written that it is *better* to give than to receive. But I wonder sometimes, if the majority of us really believe that statement?

Commitment is what makes community work.

The theologian, Dietrich Bonheoffer, says, the idealization of community is a "human wish dream", " a hindrance to genuine community [and it] must be banished if genuine community is to survive." "Those who love their dreams of community more than the community itself become destroyers of [that community], even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial."

Lets get about this work, the work of being changed by our faith community. As we work our way through out own issues inside of congregations, we pressure test our principles, our beliefs, our values. Then, we try again in love. We can then take our learning, experience, the skills we've developed into our everyday world and be builders of a better way.

As Unitarian Universalists, our grounding in covenant is a tremendously important and valuable concept. In fact, I believe it's our *core* message. Covenant. It truly has the ability to change the world. Our future lies in our ability to get our message heard AND to more fully live into our commitment to covenantal relationship; covenant with the divine or however we define sacred, covenant with each other and our Association and our covenant with justice, which is messaged so nicely on the sign outside, "Standing on the Side of Love." Let us do exactly that: stand on the side of love.

And may we ever seek the future we prefer.