

# “What Are Your Deepest Spiritual Values?”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, October 1, 2005

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

What is most important to you? Is it a person or something that has to do with your relationship with others, or is it intensely personal, something that involves you alone? Is what matters most to you an experience or way of living, or is it something that you can see or touch or hear or taste or smell, something objective? Is it a quality of your life, or a principle or set of principles to which you are deeply committed? How is it spiritual?

How important is it? Is it something that everybody has just in being alive, or is it something rare, costly, perhaps unique to you, something no one else has? What would you give up to keep it?

Once Picasso was relaxing on a beach in the south of France when a small boy ran up to him with a blank sheet of paper in his hand. The child had been sent over by his parents, who were hoping to get a quick sketch over Picasso's signature. After looking at the child for a moment, Picasso turned him around and drew a few lines on the boy's back instead of on the sheet of paper. He signed his name with a flourish and sent the child back. Then he turned to his companion and said "I wonder if they'll ever wash him again."

How do you measure the value of whatever it is that matters most to you? Picasso was quite aware of how people valued his art. Friends lunching in his home once commented that they saw none of his own paintings on the walls. "Why is that," one asked. "Don't you like them?" "On the contrary," he replied. "I like them very much. It's just that I can't afford them."

Can you afford whatever it is that matters most to you? Can you afford not to have it? Think again about what you value most highly. What is it that is so important to you in living that you would not be *you* without it?

I want you to take a few moments to jot down on the blank cards that were in the orders of service three things that matter most to you in your life, your deepest spiritual commitments. Use a maximum of three words for each, please. If you can think of only one, that's okay. If you can think of a thousand, limit yourself to three that must be among your top choices. I'll ask you to pass them in in a moment and at the end of the sermon I'll read them aloud without your names.

Over 100 years ago the Unitarian minister and feminist writer Antoinette Brown Blackwell said in The Sexes Through Nature that "any positive thinker is compelled to see everything in the light of his own convictions." Unitarian Universalists know that to be at the heart of our religion. We say each woman and each man has the right and the responsibility to determine her or his own convictions. Our first Principle acknowledges "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." The irony is that in spite of so much personal freedom and openness, UU's are more like one another in personal values than are the members of any other organized religion, at least in North America. How do I know that?

Three decades ago an American sociologist of religion, Milton Rokeach, studied the religious values held by a broad cross-section of the population, people from most religions as well as unchurched Americans, whom he called nonreligious people. He collected data on many faiths but somehow missed us so a few years later another sociologist, Robert L'Hommidieu Miller, took another shot at it. He used the same instrument that Milton Rokeach had developed, and he surveyed his fellow liberal Unitarian Universalists.

**Here's the Rokeach Values Survey list that they used.**

**Terminal Values (Ends or Goals)**

**My Rank**   **UU's Rank**

|       |       |                                  |
|-------|-------|----------------------------------|
| _____ | _____ | <b>A Comfortable Life</b>        |
| _____ | _____ | <b>An Exciting Life</b>          |
| _____ | _____ | <b>A Sense of Accomplishment</b> |
| _____ | _____ | <b>A World at Peace</b>          |
| _____ | _____ | <b>A World of Beauty</b>         |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Equality</b>                  |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Family Security</b>           |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Freedom</b>                   |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Happiness</b>                 |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Inner Harmony</b>             |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Mature Love</b>               |
| _____ | _____ | <b>National Security</b>         |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Pleasure</b>                  |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Salvation</b>                 |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Self-Respect</b>              |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Social Recognition</b>        |
| _____ | _____ | <b>True Friendship</b>           |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Wisdom</b>                    |

**Instrumental Values (Means)**

**My Rank**   **UU's Rank**

|       |       |                        |
|-------|-------|------------------------|
| _____ | _____ | <b>Ambitious</b>       |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Broadminded</b>     |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Capable</b>         |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Cheerful</b>        |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Clean</b>           |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Courageous</b>      |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Forgiving</b>       |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Helpful</b>         |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Honest</b>          |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Imaginative</b>     |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Independent</b>     |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Intellectual</b>    |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Logical</b>         |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Loving</b>          |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Obedient</b>        |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Polite</b>          |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Responsible</b>     |
| _____ | _____ | <b>Self-Controlled</b> |

This morning we're going to take that same survey that was used to study UUs all over the continent. Rokeach started with over 500 terms and boiled them down to the 36 divided in two columns above. There are 18 terms in each list. In sociological jargon these are called "Terminal" and "Instrumental" values. We usually call them "Ends" or "Goals," and "Means." Terminal Values are the goals you hope to achieve in life, and Instrumental Values reflect the means or the ways you expect to act to reach them. Write "Goals" above the left column and "Means" above the right column on your sheet.

They're in alphabetical order. In a moment I'll ask you to add your own priorities by putting a number under "My Rank" before each item. Here's the easiest way to do it. First work only on the Terminal Values or Goals list. Put a check by the 6 you think are most important and a zero by the 6 you consider least important on that list, ignoring any of middle importance. Those will be easier to prioritize later. Then go back and put a "1" before the checked value that you think most important among your top six., "2" before the second most important and on down. Then put an "18" next to the choice with a zero that seems least important, "17" next to the zero-marked one that is next to last in importance for you, and so on till they are done. Later on you can tackle the six of middle importance, marking the highest of those "7," next highest "8" and so on down to "12.". But only do the top and bottom 6 now.

When you've finished the list of Terminal Values or Goals, go on to the second list, Instrumental Values or Means, and mark it the same way, checks for the top six, zeros for the bottom six. Then give one of your top six Means your number "1" choice, the second of importance your number "2," etc. Then mark your lowest choices. Again you can do your middle choices later just as you will on the list of Terminal Values or Goals.

When you are all done you'll have a number from "1" to "18" under "My Rank" for both Terminal

Goals and Instrumental Means. You may need to finish this at home to have time for all 18 choices in each list. We'll run too long this morning if we wait for everyone to do all of the choices in each column. In a moment I'll tell you the average scores of the 2,000 randomly selected Unitarian Universalists who took the survey originally. No fair looking on your neighbor's sheet.

The right answers are on the next sheet we're passing out. Of course there is no such thing as the "right" answers on this survey but you'll see how other UU's ranked them and you can compare their averaged priorities with your own survey to see how you compare with other UU's.

**Here's the list that tells the priorities for religious values given by UU's in the original survey.**

**Terminal Values (Ends or Goals)**

1. Self-Respect
2. Wisdom
3. A World at Peace
4. Freedom
5. A Sense of Accomplishment
6. Inner Harmony
7. True Friendship
8. Equality\
9. Mature Love
10. A World of Beauty
11. Family Security
12. Happiness
13. An Exciting Life
14. Pleasure
15. Social Recognition
16. A Comfortable Life
17. National Security
18. Salvation

**Instrumental Values (Means)**

- Honest
- Loving
- Broadminded
- Responsible
- Independent
- Capable
- Courageous
- Helpful
- Intellectual
- Forgiving
- Imaginative
- Cheerful
- Logical
- Self-Controlled
- Ambitious
- Polite
- Clean
- Obedient

The most remarkable thing is not the exact order of answers but the fact that it showed that UU's are more like one another than are the people of any other religion in North America. Don't worry, your list won't be just like the average UU response list. The lists weren't identical for those who took the survey originally either. But your responses will probably be similar to theirs in many ways. How?

First, almost all UU's put "Salvation" in 18<sup>th</sup> place among Terminal Values or "Goals". Many UUs refused to include it. It was negative for them, the only one they refused to include. They were positive to all the other Goals. Next to last was "National Security." This survey was originally conducted during the Vietnam War. It wasn't that UU's didn't want "National Security," but other things mattered more to them.

Among Goals consistently ranked high by UU's were "Self-Respect," "Wisdom," "A World at Peace," "Freedom," "A Sense of Accomplishment," and "Inner Harmony." Consistently at the bottom along with "Salvation" for UU's were "National Security," "A Comfortable Life," "Social Recognition," "Pleasure," and "An Exciting Life."

More important than the exact ranking was the discovery that UU's were *different* from every other group in giving higher importance to certain Goals, even when they weren't among our top

choices. When UU's put them lower on their own lists, they were still higher than they were in the average scores of people who belonged to other religions as well as unchurched people.

We gave significantly higher importance to "Self-Respect," "Wisdom," "Inner Harmony," "Mature Love," "A World of Beauty," and "An Exciting Life" than did any other religious people. "An Exciting Life" was often a low value for UU's, but it was higher than it was for all other religious people.

The original study asked more questions—about age, education, wealth or home location of people being surveyed. Unlike all other religious groups our scores showed no difference whether UU's were young or old, highly or modestly educated, affluent or poor—and it didn't matter where they lived.

This wasn't true of other religions. Rich Catholics were found to have different values from poor Catholics, young Methodists were different from old Methodists, highly educated Jews valued things differently from Jews with little education and there was a big difference between Northern and Southern Baptists. All these variables had an impact on the people of the other religions but they made no difference to UU's. We come to our religion by choice, not heredity or geography or wealth or education or age. We choose the values of our religion the same way other Unitarian Universalists do.

Isn't it interesting that UUs are more like one another in our goals than are the members of every other religious group in America even though our members openly profess widely varying theological views?

With the Means that we say we live by, the findings were similar. The Means we choose to achieve our goals as UU's are different from those of every other group, religious or unchurched, and they also are not affected by the variables of age, education, wealth or geography.

We said we more highly value being "Loving," "Broadminded," "Independent," "Intellectual," "Imaginative" and "Logical" than other Americans said. While those are not all among our very top values, the relatively greater importance we give them than do other people again shows how much we are like one another and different from other religious people.

The top Instrumental Value or Means for UU's, as for some other religious groups, is being "Honest." We also highly rate being "Loving," "Broadminded," "Responsible," "Independent" and "Capable." At the bottom of our UU ranking was "Obedient," "Clean," "Polite," "Ambitious" and "Self-Controlled," leading some cynics to suggest that UU's are lazy, rude, dirty and unruly folk. We know that's not true, of course. I think. Along with those items we ranked being logical and forgiving lower than other values. A low ranking doesn't mean that we don't value these Means, but rather that *other things matter more to us*. All of the Means are important to us.

The upshot of the study is that the sociologist studying UU's said in a scholarly article (in the *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 17: No. 3, Spring, 1976) that "***being a Unitarian Universalist is characterized by holding a constellation of values which differentiates such persons from other kinds of religious communities and at the same time, develops an internal sense of commonality and a homogenous community.***"

He went on "***this distinctive quality of being religious...reflects a religion of personal realization, individual self-fulfillment, and self-actualization...[focused] on competence rather than***

*on morals.”*

So there you have it. When you go about your religious life, you do it differently from folks in other churches and temples as well as the people who shun religion entirely. That’s one of the reasons Unitarian Universalists find it difficult to explain our religion to others. We start from such a different orientation that other people have difficulty understanding us and putting us in their customary categories, their religious pigeonholes.

In one of her poems Phyllis McGinley said

We might as well give up the fiction  
That we can argue any view.  
For what in me is pure Conviction  
Is simple Prejudice in you.

That, of course is one of the things we need to watch out for. While we UUs are more like one another in our values than are other religious folk we can fall into the trap of assuming that because we share so much in common we are better, wiser or more responsible than they are. The Rokeach Survey didn’t show that at all. After all we could all be wrong together.

What do you really value highest? Author Judith Viorst once said “Along with the police emergency number, a good recipe for quiche, and a hairdresser who’ll always work you in, the meaning of life is also a nice thing to know.” Somehow the knowledge of that is got left out of our Principles and Purposes as well as the set of unique values that we share as UUs. Be gentle about it. No one else has it either.

Rev. Dick Weston-Jones

When the 3 X 5 cards filled out by Hillsborough UU’s were reported, there were many similarities in the things that they said were their deepest spiritual commitments, the things that mattered most to them. On 62% of the 50 cards that were returned, “family” or members of the family, spouse, partners and friends were listed, and 22% listed “love” or relationships with others. There were many other similarities as well as unique answers among the cards, but no other answers came close to the commitments to family and love or compassion.

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