Hello and welcome to all of those new and old to this church. My name is Ian Wilson, and I have been a member of this church since my religious flower began to bud. But what does that mean, religious? To some it is a term used as a shroud or as protection, and that is the point of my essay: what is my religion now. My religious background is Jewish, Protestant, Huguenot, and Universalist. Lf I tried to explain in writing what my dad is, I would probably get carpal tunnel syndrome.

When I was asked to talk about religion, I first wanted to explain what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist because I find that very few actually know what it is.

What Is Unitarian Universalism to Me?

I grew up here in a place where the word sanctuary still lives; our beliefs, no matter how odd they seem to the general public, can be respected just as all other religions. Whenever I am asked about what religion I am and my answer is “I am a Unitarian Universalist," the response is either “Huh?” or as my friend Sam says, “Unitarian? That’s not a religion; you have no beliefs.” It is hard to respond to someone when they say that to you. Unitarian Universalism to me used to be two hours on Sundays and all the Twizzlers I could eat, but as the years have passed I have realized it is of course much deeper. Unitarian Universalism is freedom, Unitarian Universalism is choice, and most importantly, Unitarian Universalism is me, and everyone in this room. Unitarian Universalists believe in seven Principles that are the seven basics of human life, and they have helped me become the person I am, a person with very few bias beliefs and a person who will go out of his way to help someone even ifl do not know them.

Unlike the older religions of the past many thousand years, we have not killed millions over a few miles of ground that is the cradle of the three main religions, or over the amount of prayers we do daily. All religions that are still feuding grew from the same beliefs. Our roots are also from the Jewish and Christian belief systems, but we do not fight because we have no holy lands. Our holy lands are here in our hearts, and in our minds.

We keep the ideal of a safe church when so many have become battlegrounds in the war against terror and in the anti Muslim beliefs that have been spreading like wildfire across the US. since 9/11. Our church members come from all backgrounds: Asian, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, gay, lesbian. Everyone is welcome to worship here. I think that as time goes on and culture changes, there is a loss of meaning in religion. Our religion never developed as a competition for who was better in the face of God.

My Religious Beliefs

As soon as I could really understand the difference, I was told that I could believe and worship in whatever way I wanted as long as I could explain what it was. I visited many churches and synagogues in search of that “right feel” that people can get from their chosen faiths. I thought to finally look into the one place I still had not been: myself. My religious views have had many important factors in their development. grandfather, who

has been my mental and physical mentor, taught me US. history from his days as the captain of a destroyer in World War II, while teaching me how to row a boat, chop wood, and properly cast for fish. He would talk to me about how this country grew to be what it is, or how it is influenced by different presidents. I know that I wanted a religion that would not tell me what I had to believe or try to persuade me to believe with fear instead of with hope. In my view, no one can really say which religion God favors or what makes one religion better or more true.

It was friendship that made me choose to be UU. It was the fact that there were all of these people from different backgrounds but with similar belief structures as me that helped me want to stay here. When I am here, there is a sort of unconditional bond with the people that makes you feel like you are with a family and not just with a group.

I have learned the values of the seven Principles, and that has helped me reverse the stereotype of most physically big kids. That is, that I am not a bully. It is really difficult at school to be this big. Kids are always challenging me to fight or to fight for them. It has taught me the power of words. Unitarian Universalism has taught me that when someone I don't know is treating me badly, it is probably just that they are angry about something having nothing to do with me. So I just let it roll off of my shoulders. I have been able to grow like this by having a good understanding of the seven Principles of the UU beliefs. The seven formal beliefs of UU are all printed on a bookmark, but here are the seven principles of my own beliefs:

- to respect those you know and those you don't - to always leave violence as a last resort

- that all people are equal and none are better than others

- that there is power in words - to strive for excellence - to never say no without thinking about it first

- to always give someone a chance and not to stereotype

Now I know that these are not as deep as the original seven, but these are the principles, or guidelines, that I live by.

My Religious Future

So here I am at my Coming of Age, the so-called climax of my religious experience, but where do I go from here? What is the path I will walk, and where will I be when I have a job, family, and as little hair as my dad? This church is my home away from home. I plan on going on to the youth group, where I can help make choices for this church that in turn has helped me make so many of mine. This church has done plenty of things for me that I cannot explain or understand, but there is one thing that I do know for sure. That is that there is a church of equals. I believe in a church of equals; this is a church of equals.

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