



# Behaving, Believing, Belonging

Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson  
Arborg Unitarian Church  
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It is astonishing how certain human bonds are able to transcend time and place. Earlier this year, my brother Chuck made contact—on the Internet, no less—with a long lost relative in Iceland. Kristinn Karlsson (Kiddi) is a retired fisherman and factory owner in Eskifjörður, on the east coast of Iceland. Kiddi's grandfather and my great-grandfather were brothers. As genealogists reckon relationships, Kiddi is our second cousin, once removed; in the simpler reckoning of the American South, he might be called a "kissing cousin." What matters, of course, is that however it is measured, we are kin! We belong to "something" that crosses generations. We belong to one another.

Now it's an old saw that you can choose your friends but you can't choose your relatives. When one is dealing with distant relations, this observation doesn't really matter much—unless they come to visit. Well, Kiddi did come to visit during the summer, accompanied by his wife, Bára, and their youngest daughter, Gunna. They stayed with my brother and his family. Now, I would be less than fully forthright if I failed to admit that I found myself a little anxious about the prospect of distant relations coming to town. What if we had nothing in common? What if we couldn't easily communicate with one another? What if our expectations of behavior were incompatible? What if differing beliefs proved to be barriers? What if they were Mormons!! What *if ... what if ... what if ...* !

There was no need for anxiety. Almost immediately, we connected through the swift, sure bonds of kinship. In the days and weeks that followed, our affection grew ... at the dinner table, around the campfire, along the beach. I shall not soon forget this glorious time. We were blessed by their visit. And we were moved to tears when it came time for them to return home.

What is it about kinship that transcends the normal boundaries of human relationships? What is it about family that allows us to connect after generations and thousands of miles of separation? How is it that, being as distantly related as we are, somehow we felt an almost instant bonding with one another—a connection, a sense of belonging to one another and, more importantly, belonging to something that transcends time and place?

Families can be remarkable in this regard. At the same time, it is lamentable that many people are unable to experience their families in this way. In many families, love is conditional rather than unconditional. In such circumstances, what passes for love may rely on belief or behavior, rather than a sense of belonging to one another. Sometimes families cannot bridge even the smallest distances of time and geography. But more often than not, it has been my experience that families do rise above their differences and that, despite their imperfections, we can rely on our families as we can rely on few other human institutions. Even after a distance of many generations, we can embrace those we call kin, holding them in our arms and often sharing a remarkably common set of beliefs and behaviors, while feeling clearly that we belong to one another.

This can happen for more than just families. It happens, too, in the political realm and in social matters. Ideally, it happens in religious circles. In his book *Sacred Fragments*, Rabbi Neil Gillman notes that the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan, taught that “there are three possible ways of identifying with a religious community: by behaving, by believing, or by belonging. Kaplan himself insisted that the *primary* form of *Jewish* identification is belonging—that intuitive sense of kinship that binds a Jew to every other Jew in history and in the contemporary world. Whatever Jews believe, and however they behave as Jews, serves to shape and concretize that underlying sense of being bound to a people with a shared history and destiny.”<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, Unitarian Universalism is akin to this, though with a difference. If we accept Mordecai Kaplan’s analysis that people in religious communities tend to identify with those communities by behaving, believing, or belonging, we will find ample evidence to support this view.

There are the behaving religions. The puritan traditions, from which we are religiously descended, and the pietists of all religious communities tend to place tremendous emphasis on the way we behave. Of course, the easy route to excommunication in pietistic and puritan groups involves inappropriate behavior. Now the behavioral emphasis is not all negative. In the nineteenth century, the “Issue in the West” presented two competing claims for the basis of membership in Unitarian churches. On the one hand were those who affirmed that membership demanded a common devotion to the Christian faith, as interpreted by Unitarians, of course. They felt that Unitarians needed to worship God as their object of devotion and acknowledge Jesus as their spiritual leader. On the other side of the issue were those who argued for what was called the “Ethical basis.” For these Unitarians, what really mattered in religion was how we treated one another, how we cared for our neighbors—if you will,

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<sup>1</sup>Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xvii.

how we behaved towards one another. In time, those who advocated the Ethical basis came to advance an even more broadly-based interpretation of their position. But, at first, they were arguing that behavior was the primary characteristic that bound people together in religious community. It mattered less to them what people believed than how they acted.

There are also the believing religions. Creedal Christianity comes immediately to mind. The defining characteristic of such religions, which are by far the most numerous, involves assent to a particular creed or statement of faith. If the classical philosophers had been given to creeds, they might have said, "I believe, therefore I belong." To be honest, creeds are not always obvious at first glance. Even some varieties of humanism and certain secular philosophies come dangerously close, at times, to creedalism. It is creedal religion that Unitarians and Universalists have most clearly rebelled against in the course of history. Nevertheless, even while rejecting creedal approaches to religion, Unitarian Universalists have affirmed that, in the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs, "it matters what we believe." But while recognizing the importance of belief, Unitarian Universalists have been reluctant to exclude people from their religious communities on the basis of belief alone.

That brings us to the "belonging" traditions. Judaism and Shinto stand out as two important examples of religious traditions that emphasize the importance of shared identity, spiritual kinship, and belonging to one another ... beyond what we may believe or how we may behave. Belonging to one another is what is most important in such traditions. There is at least a kernel of this sense among the Mennonites and in ethnic churches in general, where the creeds often bow before the altar of ethnic cohesiveness. Unitarian Universalism, it seems to me, is among those traditions which emphasize belonging as the central factor in creating religious community. Here in the Manitoba Interlake, the pioneer Unitarian pastor Magnus Skaptason's clear message was that love was the foundation upon which to build the church. Loving relationships were more important, in his estimation, than behaviors or beliefs. (Of course, this itself was a belief, of sorts, which generated a particular relational behavior.) So, our churches here in the Interlake, from the very beginning, emphasized belonging—the sense of kinship and companionship—over all other characteristics of religious community.

In recent times, it can perhaps be said that Unitarian Universalism has overemphasized belonging—sometimes to the *exclusion* of behaving and believing. I sometimes wonder if we Unitarian Universalists have come to emphasize belonging so strongly because collectively, at least, we wish to avoid accountability for the things we believe, not to mention the things we do. Yet there is something holy—well, at least wholesome—in the quality of belonging that we seek to nurture.

But we seem to lack much of the richness or depth of "belonging" possessed by our

friends in the Jewish community or other ancient traditions. Ours is, after all, largely an association of converts. Nonetheless, we do have a glimmer of this sense of belonging—an intuitive sense that we belong not only to one another, but to the whole of humanity. The human family is, indeed, one great family.

Now I would argue that all three aspects—behaving, believing and belonging—are essential to any religious group which aspires to integrity! At different times and in differing circumstances, a religious movement might emphasize one aspect or another; but an ongoing emphasis of one to the exclusion of the other two is idolatrous. If behaving, believing and belonging are not held together in some sort of creative tension—a tension that seeks to adjust the balance from time to time—then we risk falling into the same sorts of idolatry that have led many a religious movement to the rubbish pile of human history.

It may be that Earl Morse Wilbur’s classic threefold slogan of Unitarianism—freedom, reason and tolerance—reflects our ways of behaving, believing and belonging. Our behavior is characterized by freedom. Our beliefs are built upon reason. Our way of belonging is characterized by tolerance.

It does matter how we behave. It does matter what we believe. But it matters, more importantly to us, that we maintain a sense of belonging to one another and to the larger tradition, the cloud of witnesses who have testified to the enduring ideals and vision of liberal religion.

There may be something incredibly naïve about the notion that we can have meaningful human relationships without any mandated behavior or commonly-held belief. Perhaps if it were more easily accomplished, divorce lawyers would find themselves out of work. Yet we try as a religious community to live into this noble ideal. We do not say that behavior and belief are unimportant, but we do say—through word and deed—that our distinguishing characteristic is that we are a people who belong to one another. We covenant together, making a voluntary commitment with our spiritual neighbours to be together, viewing one another as kindred spirits and interacting lovingly and compassionately with one another.

It is interesting and inspiring to see how that sense of belonging can transcend the differences of time and place. To meet a Unitarian Universalist from another community (whether a rural crossroads or a large metropolitan center) or with a different theological perspective (be it Christian or humanist, theist or eclectic) is to immediately recognize a kindred spirit. It is almost like coming across a cousin—say a second cousin, once removed—who turns out to share many of the same values and behaviors, idiosyncrasies and passions that we have ourselves. As in many families, so too in religion. When we encounter a kindred spirit—a person to whom we belong and who, in turn, belongs to us—we are reminded of the holiest of all religious truths: all

the women and men and children of the world are sisters and brothers in the things that matter most. We are one great human family and those religious traditions that find their distinctive emphasis in recognizing that we belong to one another are, in fact, those religious communities that are best positioned in a broken world to bring healing to the Earth and a sense of kinship to all who dwell here.



**First Reading: From the *Samyutta Nikaya*\***

Then the venerable Ananda approached the Lord [Buddha], prostrated himself and sat down to one side. Sitting there the venerable Ananda said to the Lord:

“Half of this holy life, Lord, is good and noble friends, companionship with the good, association with the good.”

“Do not say that, Ananda. Do not say that Ananda. It is the whole of this holy life, this friendship, companionship and association with the good.”

**Second Reading: From *The Future of the American Jew*\*\***

by Modecai Kaplan

A religion is the organized quest of a people for salvation, for helping those who live by the civilization of that people to achieve their destiny as human beings. In the course of that quest, the people discovers religious truth and abiding values. These truths and values, like all others, are universal. They are not the monopoly of the group that discovers them. They may be discovered by other groups as well. Religions are distinct from one another not so much ideationally as existentially. Each religion represents a particular area of collective life marked by the *sancta* of the group. These are a definite product of the group's unique historic experience. Such *sancta* are its saints and heroes, its sacred literature, its holy places, its common symbols, its customs and folkways, and all objects and associations which have been hallowed, because of their relation to that people's quest for salvation. ... What is important is that the *sancta* of each people or church help to humanize all who belong to it, by implementing those universal values which it should share with all other peoples and churches.

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\*From the *Samyutta Nikaya*, trans. John Ireland, quoted in *Teachings of the Buddha*, ed. Jack Kornfield with Gil Fronsdal (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 16.

\*\*Modecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), quoted in *Judaism*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 39-40.