

Faith is so closely linked to our identities, that sharing it is an act of vulnerability

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I spent most of my childhood denying my faith. Or more accurately, it was a lie of omission. It wasn't easy being the only Unificationist family in town. I felt a deep connection with my parents' faith and with God, but like there was no safe place for me to express it outside of my own home. I wanted desperately to belong, like most adolescents do, and so I tried my best to keep hidden the parts of myself that might make me an "other."

This seems to be a common experience. Many Unificationists I've talked to have expressed similar stories. When your traditions and perspective are so new and different, it can be easy to focus on the dilemma around being understood, instead of recognizing the blessing that perspective has to offer.

When I think of evangelism or outreach, an involuntary panic is my first reaction. It's not easy to break those habits that are now entrenched from my childhood, but that's exactly why I do it. A big part of my life has become about opening myself up and being vulnerable in a way that is extremely uncomfortable, but also exponentially rewarding. I want to live my life authentically, and to teach my children to be proud of who they are, even if it doesn't fit in with the norm. I know that in order to do that, I need to be

honest with myself and be willing to show up in the world with courage and conviction.

How do I do that? I'm still figuring it out. But I've learned a few things so far:

It's Not Supposed to Be Easy

Faith is so closely linked to our identities, that sharing it is a huge act of vulnerability. It is no less than letting our greatest hopes and desires hang out in the wind unprotected. We long for connection and belonging, and fear rejection. This is why our brain starts to panic. Intimate connections can feel dangerous because of the risk involved. There will always be the chance for ridicule or rejection, but intimacy is also the prerequisite for any authentic, healthy relationship. If we close off the possibility of rejection, we are also closing off the possibility of love, acceptance, and grace. You can't block off one without the other. Here's the thing about the human spirit though: it's resilient. I was fortunate in my youth to experience my worst fear come true. Someone I loved and trusted rejected me after I was honest about my faith. Why do I say I was fortunate? Because I survived. I'm still breathing. Not only that, but it allowed me the gift of knowing who I really could trust my heart and my whole self with. That would not have been possible if I had continued to let my fear of rejection overpower the need for authentic love and connection.

You Don't Have to Know Everything

You don't need to be a religious scholar to engage someone in a conversation about spirituality. It's good to study, to know yourself and your own beliefs, but it's also okay to say, "I don't know." I am immediately suspicious of anyone who says they have it all figured out. Maybe that's just my east coast cynicism, but I know that my own spiritual journey has been more like a river than a rock—windy, fluid, and adaptable. We are constantly growing and changing. Part of that is being open to continually redefining faith, what it means to us, and how we express it in our lives. It's a journey. I am walking the path, and I know that my experience or perspective might look different ten years or even a year from now. The good news is, we don't have to have it all figured out in order to be an expression of God for someone. Often, the act of saying, "I don't know" is a place of connection and honesty that resonates deeper than any self-assured testimony. Showing others our own faults, doubts and struggles is actually an invitation for others to do the same, and to feel like they will be accepted and safe no matter what. Isn't that what God's love is all about anyway?

Love People

It's that simple. Remember Matthew 22:36-40: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments! Wow. Jesus just broke it down. Most people do not have an emotional bond with scripture or theology. They don't look at words on a page and decide to change their entire belief system. What people connect to most is the expression of faith in other people. Who you are and how you love is your greatest witness. All of the other things are secondary.