

Reverend Stephen Kendrick
Brave New Religion
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How many of you have written your six-word biography yet? I wrote mine and you'll see this illustrated if you go up to my office later, "Life is complex. Love trumps excellence." That's me.

Pour Johnson spent his life making wrong decisions. It didn't matter whether he was going to the bank, he always go into the wrong line. It didn't matter what he did, it was wrong in every aspect of his life: the lane of traffic, the day he picked for the picnic always got rained out. And so it went day after day, year after year. Because he had such terrible luck in making decisions, he obviously didn't like to fly. But he had to fly, and he only had one option. There was only one plane that was going to the meeting he had to attend. So he thought, "Well in this case I can't make a bad decision." He was a good catholic, so he broke into fervent prayer as the plane took off. To his favorite saint, St. Francis, he said, "You know I've never made the right choice. Why this should be I don't know, but I have bore this cross and I have not complained. On this occasion this is the only plane I could take. I had to take it, and therefore let this be a safe journey." But it was not. Turbulence began to develop, and suddenly to everyone's horror the plane started down. He prayed, "St. Francis save me," and a hand came down, swooped him up and held him a mile above the earth. St. Francis said, "My son, I can save you if you have in truth called upon me." "Yes I've called upon you," he cried, "I called upon you St. Francis!" "Ah," said the heavenly voice, "St. Francis Xavier or St. Francis of Assisi? Which?"

Now why did I tell that goofy joke? Well, one I like it. Two, we now live in a time of choice. For centuries upon centuries human beings have been born into religious communities just as they have been born into tribes and nations and families. That is what they've accepted. It's been very rare in human history that there have been hinge moments where people felt an inner freedom to shift and to change. But we are living in one of those moments. Maybe you've noticed a Pew Foundation pole that's been released in great fanfare and coverage in the media. It was astonishing. These were results that not even the people taking the pole had anticipated. It tells us that we Americans are living in a time of unprecedented religious change. Some would say, if you're of fundamentalism or if you decide that it's right somehow whatever place you're born you stay, you would interpret it as chaos. But it's real and true. Twenty eight percent of all Americans have now left their church, or religion, or temple, or faith, or synagogue of origin, twenty eight percent. Amazing statistic. Equally amazing, sixteen percent of Americans say that they are not adults of any religion group, making unaffiliated now the fourth largest "religious" group in America: larger than all Protestant sects. The three largest religious groups break down at Protestant Evangelicals at twenty six percent, Roman Catholics at about twenty four percent, and Liberal Protestants at eighteen percent. I'm curious and don't know the answer as to where they put Unitarian Universalists.

We do know one thing, we are moving into an era. Right now America is barely Protestant, it's about fifty one percent. But we know for a fact that because of immigration and population trends, that we will soon be a Protestant minority country. Interestingly the Roman Catholic Church lost more people than anyone, but they also gained because of immigrants. So

they ended up being pretty much even. Not so good news for American Protestantism. The main rule that we took, knowing that nearly a third of all the people in America feel no sense that they need to feel in stay in the religion of their childhood, and that such a large percent, sixteen percent, say that they can go through life without religion being an important element of their daily life. What we know from this amazing pole is that we are moving in a brave new world of faith and spirituality. The change is almost unprecedented.

One of my favorite stories about modern day religion is a young man named Bill Hybels, an Evangelical, graduated from seminary and decided, "You know, I think that I'll go to the suburbs of Chicago and ask people who are unchurched why they're unchurched." So he went door to door to door. It didn't matter what religion they were. If he found out they were no longer attending or participating in any aspect of religious life he asked them why. The answers he received were very interesting. The things that people didn't like and the reasons that people claimed they no longer went to church or synagogue were: 1) the hymns, 2) the offering, 3) having to dress up (I see you're very relaxed today and I compliment you on that), 4) sermons (I don't know how that got in there). So Bill Hybels said, "You know it isn't important about the form. What's important is that we somehow create something that actually answers modern peoples' needs and try to answer what they say they want." So he created Willow Creek, which is the largest church in America. They have five services every Sunday, a huge parking lot, theater style seating, they don't accept an offering and say at the beginning of the service that they won't accept money, have Broadway style music with a rock band, and say come comfortable. Instead of classic sermons they have plays! They have a whole creative team that puts this creative package together every week. They call it a searchers service. They say, "You all are searchers." Now interestingly a lot of people don't want to stay searchers forever. So they either drop away or they start going Wednesday night to a place where they have to sing the old hymns and tithe.

Another amazing statistic that came out two years ago: the two factors in American congregations that are growing as opposed to American congregations are churches that have organs tend not to grow and churches that have rock bands are growing. The other factor, ministers without seminary education have growing congregations. If you got trained, sorry. So we're living in a time of absolutely unprecedented change where expectations are absolutely being turned on their head and turned upside down. So the UUA, our mother ship, decided that maybe we should try and do some experimenting. A friend of mine tried and decided he was going to use the music of REM, the rock group, to sort of be the glue that held his new mega church together. It didn't work, possibly because their most famous song is titled, "Losing My Religion." We wanted to have Paul play it, but he claimed in a staff meeting a few weeks ago that he didn't know whom James Taylor was, so we didn't know.

This sermon isn't about losing your religion. It's about a very strange process that is going on that I think affects Unitarian Universalists. I suspect it affects many people who are in the pews or listening on the radio this morning. That is that you're not losing your religion at all, but there is some trading going on. There is some shifting going on. There's a rediscovery of what it actually means to be religious. I can not tell you how many times I sit and I'm working with a couple to perhaps do a wedding or to do a child dedication service or sometimes sadly a funeral, and people say to me over and over again, "I'm not religious. I don't like organized

religion.” Now the classic joke for Unitarian Universalists is, “That’s okay. We’re a disorganized religion.” But that’s not good enough. The reality is, the real reply, because we are living in such unprecedented times, the real reply we have to make is not a joke, but to simply say, “This is a time where organized religion does indeed suffer. But it is also a time, a blessed time, for the spirit.” People have an incredible hunger. Not to receive liturgies, and creeds, and perceived gods, but something real and vital. It’s what Emerson tried to do a long time ago in the great transcendental movement. He said, “You know, if it isn’t fresh, if it isn’t real, if it isn’t new then it’s actually not faith. It’s something else.” In early America they had something called the great awakening and then seven years later before the revolution, the second great awakening. I would posit that what we’re being told in these statistics is that we’re in the middle of a third great awakening. The question for us this morning, and I submit each and every time we gather, is a simple question, “Are we going to be awake for this great awakening? Are we going to be flexible, and free, and full of the spirit?” Can we respond when twenty eight percent of all Americans say that they no longer feel any need to be in their childhood faith that they grew up with: this is also an opportunity, an invitation, a challenge, it is a blessing.

So many of you today, are here because you are attempting a soul experiment. You are flexing your spirit muscles if you will. You are exercising your own discernment. What speaks to you? What helps you? What nurtures you? What lifts you up? What challenges you? What comforts you? Rosemary, in the prayer, talked about to love and to serve. They are really the same: to love and to serve. The purposed of First Church since 1630, nothing has changed and our essential purpose and mission and self-understanding were to help people live good and strong lives. We’re to encourage people, to lift up their moral, to serve the cause of justice, to take love and to live it in our own lives. To our families, yes: to our neighbors, yes: to our communities, yes: and to this beautiful and suffering world. That’s what religion is, to find the energy, to grow, and to change, and to shift, and to move and to find happiness: to find happiness in love and service. Nothing in this essential mission and self-understanding has shifted one iota. But in a time of change, we must be free to be flexible, to be open, to try new things, to experiment. The old ways are good, but there may be new ways to, to add to the things that are comforting. I often think, now that I’m twenty-eight years into this, “What will the life of congregations be like when my children are my age?” I think it will be considerably different and I need not fear that. None of us, as Unitarian Universalists, need in any sense to be afraid of this shift. It is in fact the greatest opportunity that Unitarian Universalism has been given. The open question is, “How do we respond?” Can we open our doors? Can we understand the mission of hospitality? Can we understand that it’s important to sing the old hymns and to be free with music but there is so much more that we can and should do, and that people want us to do. The true sense of a church, as I’ve tried to express, is not always our own comfort as a beloved community. We do need to take care of each other. I spent a wonderful afternoon yesterday with a woman in her nineties. I love that, that’s what a church is about, to make that kind of visit. But it’s also about the next person who walks in the door. Can we speak to them? Can we open our arms to them? Is our theology open and free enough so that young people, who are rightly suspicious of organized religion, can find something true and vital here? Are we going to be open enough to create new venues of spirit? Can we do more with our evenings here so that we become a place where people in Boston immediately think of First Church as a place to come when they have questions and when they wish to understand themselves and their time better? Can we reach out to them? Can we form circles of caring and compassion? It is so

important to be able to speak to people's happiness and their core sense of what they were meant to do in this life. Life is so short. It is a breath. It is a fleeting moment, and therefore every opportunity we gather is absolutely crucial. Lives get changed here. More importantly, there is so much more we can do, and want to do, and that these times compel us to want to do. In this time of shift and change, in a world that sometimes seems poised between a title wave of secularism, where people say that there is no meaning, and rampant fundamentalism where people say I have the only meaning, there is a this narrow wedge where we stand to say, "You are free to determine your own religious path. But you are free also to choice who you will walk with. Who do you want to work with to do this love and this service?"

It is a time of great change and shift. The Church of Christ lost twenty percent of its members in the past twenty years: the Episcopal Church, twenty eight percent: Methodist, eighteen percent: Disciples of Christ, down forty three percent. Mainline church after mainline church is going down. The question before us as people of the free faith is, "Are we free enough to escape that trap?" I believe that we are. I know that we are. I think that we are living in such a creative time. To some people it might be disquieting and dismaying, but to those of the free faith it is in fact the opening that we have desired. We have so much good that we can do. There is so much happiness and mercy that we can offer if we are flexible and open and willing to greet this brave new world of faith. Unitarian Universalism may be a small religion, but may be large players in this emerging religious reality. To embrace the wisdom and insight of the past and to do so in open and free and creative ways we can help to answer people's spiritual needs, their perplexities, and most of all speak to their sense of hope. In an age of decreasing denominationalism and increasing individualism we may be creative in modeling what a beloved community looks and feels like. In an era of losing my religion, we can become in the midst of shift, a place where we can find out spirituality, find our soul, find our true life to be awake for this great awakening. The purpose of our faith is for this liberty, for this change, for this to raise moral, and to inspire love, more than love, friendship, connection: all the ways in which modern consumer society seduces us to retreat from one another we say no. We say it's important to be bound to one another. That is how we find freedom. When we care for each other and when we care for people we don't yet even know. That is how to love and serve. That is a brave new world, and I for one welcome in. Amen.