

How a Mormon Made Me A Unitarian Universalist

Before I get started I just wanted to say that, no, this is not the story of how two Mormon missionaries came to my door in an attempt to convert me to Mormonism that went terribly wrong and ended up with me becoming a Unitarian Universalist.

No, no, this is the story of a man I knew who changed the course of my life forever precisely *because* he was a Mormon.

Let me set the scene. The year: 2006, I was twenty-one, and a senior at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. My extremely extroverted personality had led me to the job of Resident Advisor in my Residence Hall, a hall that was designed specifically for students who had a interest in music. It was called “Just About Music” or JAM, and it would be an understatement to say that I loved it there. I lived there for three out of my four years at Cornell. Some of the people I met in JAM (or Jammies, as we called ourselves), are still my dearest friends to this day. While I was in college, JAM was simply the most important community I had.

You see, JAM had been where I finally found the courage to truly be myself. It was there that I first come out as gay in my freshman year. And it was with other Jammies that I helped restart the defunct Atheist and Agnostic Club, which, by this point, I was the president of. I felt I had found in JAM a group of people that were just like me, a group of people that accepted me for who I am, and with whom I felt totally comfortable.

And so, it took me a little by surprise when I was going over the roster of students on my floor that year. Among a group of 36 students, many of them new freshman, was Evan. I didn’t know a whole lot about Evan, but here’s what I did know: He was a junior, but he was a year old than I was because he’d just returned from two years in Finland as a Mormon missionary. I also knew that he was part of the Reserve Officers Training Corps.

Perhaps this goes without saying, but I was a little afraid of Evan.

I was afraid of what would happen if he found out about these facets of my identity. How would a Mormon react to an atheist? How would a Mormon react to someone who was gay?

The truth is I hadn’t even ever met somebody who was Mormon before, at least not that I’m aware of. All I had to go on was what I had heard about Mormon’s in the media. Now, remember this was ten years ago, and its amazing how much progress we’ve made on LGBTQ issues since then. Back then there was precisely one state where same-sex marriage was legal - this one. All I knew, as a young queer person, was to be afraid of religious people.

And so I decided that I’d avoid Evan as much as I could. Of course, I’d have to interact with him, he was my resident after all, but otherwise I’d avoid him. And I certainly wouldn’t mention that I was a gay atheist around him. I’d just refrain from mentioning those things about myself. Everything would be fine.

There was only one problem with this plan. I hadn't counted on Evan being so darn nice.

The floor of this residence hall was set up so that everyone who lived there had to pass by my room on their way to theirs. I always had my door open, inviting students to stop by and say hello as they passed. But you know who stopped by the most? Evan, much to my chagrin. He'd come in and sit down, and we'd talk about all sorts of things. Music -he was a lover of Jazz -schoolwork, his trip to Finland. And whenever I organized an event for the floor, he'd be the first to show. Always happy to play a board game, listen to some music, or watch a movie.

And slowly, it began to dawn on me that maybe, just possibly, Evan and I were becoming friends.

But I still kept my guard up. It was until Thanksgiving - where Evan and I remained among a small group of students who hadn't gone home for the holiday – it wasn't until Thanksgiving, three months into the semester, that Evan found out I was gay thanks to an offhand comment of another resident.

And I braced myself for what was to come. I figured one of two things would happen: He would either challenge me, or he'd stop talking to me. But to my surprise neither of those things happened.

Evan kept stopping by my room every day to talk. Except now we had this new subject to talk about. He'd ask me questions, not from a judgmental place, but really from a place of trying to understand. I couldn't believe it. Where was the fire and brimstone I'd been expecting?

Through the rest of the year Evan and I grew closer. It wasn't like he didn't struggle with my sexual orientation – he did. He definitely expressed difficulty with reconciling it with his Mormon faith. But he was honest and open with me about his struggle. And it was just that, a struggle, not a condemnation. That's an important distinction. To struggle with something is to admit that what you had previously thought might be wrong. Somehow, Evan found a way to open his heart to me despite these convictions. Something that I think took real courage and humility.

And so, it was a cold February night when I found myself, this time sitting in *his* room, talking with him about life. He'd been going through a difficult few weeks. And I will never forget this moment because he paused in the conversation and he looked up to a portrait he had hanging on the wall above his bed. It was a depiction of Jesus and he simply said "you know, if it wasn't for Christ, I don't think I could get through it."

And in that moment Evan showed me something I had never even considered before. He showed me the ways in which religion can help people. If this Mormon faith, the one that I thought was so terrible, had somehow had enough of an impact to help Evan, this now dear friend of mine, then surely it couldn't be all bad, could it?

Now I was the one who was struggling.

Maybe I ought to give religion a try?

Something had begun swirling in my mind. You see, I was growing tired of the Atheist and Agnostic Club. We were starting to feel like an anti-religion echo chamber. There was something *missing* in that group, and I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. We'd get together to talk about ideas, but never to try to be better people. Never to comfort each other when we were in pain, or to challenge each other. Because it wasn't a religion, it was club.

And so, I went back to my room and searched Google. I'm not sure what words exactly I used, but I know for sure that I ended up on the 'Unitarian Universalism' Wikipedia page. And I remember sitting there, at my desktop computer, in shock. "There's a *religion* like this??" I remember reading through the principles, and thinking "hey, I pretty much believe all of this already." I couldn't believe it. Before that, I had heard about "Unitarians" in passing, but really, I knew nothing about it. Reading this article was like somebody had dropped a religion out of thin air that was exactly what I was looking for. A place where I didn't have to suddenly start believing in a higher power and denounce my atheism. A place where I could find that community. A place where my whole self would be accepted.

If Unitarian Universalist adherents have conversion experiences, than this was certainly mine. Upon reading the holy gospel, the wonderful "good news," of Unitarian Universalism on a Wikipedia page on the internet in my dorm room, I right then and there professed my faith. There was nothing supernatural about it, just a remarkable coming together of events that lead me to this Wikipedia page. And so, that Sunday I got up far too early for a college student and walked half an hour in the Upstate New York winter (which is worse than Boston winter, by the way) to go to my very first service at a Unitarian Universalist Church. And my life has never been the same.

In Unitarian Universalism, I have found a faith that has nurtured me and challenged me, inspired me and disappointed me. A faith that has allowed me to grown and change my views. A faith that, whether I like it or not, compels me to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, including Mormon's like my friend Evan.

A faith that, in a strange way, has some distinct similarities to Mormonism. Both Unitarian Universalism and the Mormon Church are religions with distinct roots in the Christian tradition, but with significant differences in theology that take place in the United States, giving both faiths a uniquely American flavor to them. Both are minority faiths. Both have had the distinction of being called "cults."

Maybe Evan and I weren't so different after all.

A few months later, after quietly attending the Unitarian Universalist church on my own, I was out for dinner with some friends, including Evan. The topic of religion came up and I told him, with some reservation, that, hey, thanks to him I'd started going to Unitarian Universalist church. And you know what he said?

He said "That's great. God doesn't care what house you worship in."

Now, I could have been upset. I certainly didn't believe in God. But there was such an authenticity in the way he said it. He was genuinely happy that I had found a faith that worked for me. He never expected me to change who I was or become Mormon.

And what really gets me about this is that I don't know if I could - as myself today, after being a Unitarian Universalist for ten years - I don't know if I could have the same response if a friend of mine told me that my Unitarian Universalist faith had led them to become a Mormon.

Me, coming from the faith that believes in the freedom of belief. Me, coming from the faith that holds religious pluralism as one of its highest values. Me, who was converted to Unitarian Universalism by a Mormon, would still feel uncomfortable if our roles had been reversed.

You may have seen the Pew research graph that's been making its way around Facebook this past week. It shows religious tradition on one side, and many members of each religion are lean Democrat and how many lean Republican.

And at the very top of the graph is the Mormon church. They are the most Republican leaning religious tradition in the US, that they surveyed, with 70% leaning Republican and 19% leaning Democrat.

Now if you scroll through the list, past the Southern Baptists, past the Catholics, past the "Nones" (that's N-O-N-E), past the Jews, the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, past the Agnostics and the Atheists, you will finally get, towards the bottom of the list, to the Unitarian Universalists. We're third from the bottom with 84% leaning Democrat and 14% leaning Republican.

What was surprising to me about this was that we are more homogenous in our political views, with our 84% Democratic leanings than the Mormons are, with only 70% Republican leanings.

Interesting, right?

The *other* thing that this graph shows is that despite these leanings, neither is a totally monolithic group. Because each group, Mormons and Unitarian Universalists, and every other group on that list, are made up of *individuals*. And it's so easy to take someone from a group, like I did with Evan, automatically assume the worst about them.

But our Unitarian Universalist faith - and this church - challenge us to do more than that. It challenges us to seek the truth in love. It challenges us to seek justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. It challenges us to be our best selves, even when it's hard.

And for me, I am so thankful that I met Evan, who, despite my attempts to avoid, kept stopping by my room. Who, despite our differences, which seemed insurmountable to me, opened his heart and tried to understand. He taught me more about being a person of faith than anyone I've ever met. And maybe he even taught me more about being a UU than anyone I've ever met.

And so I challenge you to open your heart just a little bit more to the people you don't understand, or you don't agree with, or you are afraid of. You might be surprised by how they can change your life.

May it be so.