



the UNIGRAM

Existentialism

Rev. Dr. Joel Tishken, Developmental Minister

Is Unitarian Universalism existentialist? Are Unitarian Universalists existentialists? Let's start with exploring what existentialism is, and is not. And then we'll move to how the topic connects to UUism.

Existentialism is a thread that can be found throughout Western history. However, it blossomed as an intellectual movement following WWII. Nazi death camps and the nuclear bombings of Japan, in particular, forced the world to confront and question the meaning of everything. How did humanity and the world get to a place where all of this could happen? Is there such a thing as progress? Has humanity learned anything? Do our lives have any purpose?

At its heart, existentialism is about constructing a new form of meta-narrative about humanity and our place in the universe that is outside of classic Christian teleology. Teleology refers to the overarching reason or explanation for a thing. In Western history, for centuries, the overarching explanations for why we are here, human nature, the history and future of the universe, and so forth, those explanations were all Christian. Anything and everything was folded into Christianity's single overarching story and explanation.

As the 18th and 19th centuries progressed, more people began rejecting Christianity, and it became increasingly safe to do so publicly. As they did so, more folks began providing alternative explanations of reality. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared in the 1880s that "All the gods are dead." He wrote that our future was to cross the bridge from the house by the lake, symbolizing the comfortable, easy, mindless acceptance of what we were taught and what everyone else believes, to the unrest and solitude of the mountains. This is the heart of existentialism—unseating Christianity as the central explanation for human existence. Seeking intellectual alternatives became increasingly common into the 20th century and got a huge push after WWII. Would it ultimately be fair to say that almost everything in the 20th century was existentialist? To a considerable degree, yes.

Explaining the basic historical outline of existentialism is easy. What is much harder is explaining what it is. The challenge in defining existentialism is that there is no single ideological school or system of thought we can direct ourselves to. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says this, "In

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There have been so many reflections written in the wake of the recent election. I want to share this one from the Rev. Cameron Trimble, founder and CEO of Convergence. It was first published in the Clergy Letter Project's November 2024 newsletter. It does not sugar-coat the gravity of the future we are facing, nor downplay the importance of the difficult work to be done. But its overall tone is pastoral and uplifting. May we continue walking through this dark night together, hand in hand, in this, our community.
~Rev. Julia

Here's the link: [Trimble.pdf](#).

Sunday Mornings at Our Church in the Woods

Lifespan Religious Education Hour – Sundays at 9:30 am

Join us for our Lifespan Religious Education Hour, every Sunday at 9:30. We have three weekly offerings: Religious Education for Children & Youth, Adult Discussion Group, and Friends & Fellowship. We will also have additional groups and special offerings.

Religious Education for Children & Youth – Yellow / Blue classrooms

Youth RE will take place in the Yellow classroom during the LRE Hour at 9:30. Adult RE programming will also be available, but a child's grownups are always welcome to attend class with their children! When Youth RE is over, the group will move to the Blue classroom for snacks and fellowship while they wait for their grownups to pick them up. During the 10:45 service, all children will be in the Sanctuary with their grownups and church community. Families are invited to sit wherever they are comfortable. We have an area designed for young families with pillows, books, a variety of manipulatives, and a tent at the back of the sanctuary near the tables. A nursery for infants and toddlers up to 23 months is available starting at 9:30 am.

For more information about our Religious Education Program, please contact our Director of Lifespan Religious Education, Jesse Daniel, jesse@uuchurchmuncie.org.

Adult Discussion Group – Red classroom and via Zoom

This group is a chance for people with various personal beliefs to get together and openly discuss a variety of topics. You'll find weekly topics in the eBlast each Friday. Zoom check-in at 9:15, discussion at 9:30 am
<https://zoom.us/j/4326211304> Passcode: UUcm#1859 (case sensitive)

Friends & Fellowship – Sanctuary

Sip some fresh, hot coffee and share in some conversation with friends, new and old, in the Sanctuary. Work through a puzzle together, catch up about the week, or enjoy getting to know someone new each Sunday at 9:30 am.

Sunday Service – Sanctuary and via Zoom

Multi-Platform Worship 10:45 am Online Service: <https://bit.ly/UUCMSundayService>

December's Dedicated Offering recipient is Christian Ministries. The offering will be collected December 8th & 15th. January's recipient is Muncie Resists and will be collected on the 12th & 19th. Check out the Friday eBlast for information about each month's Dedicated Offering.

December 1 – “Composer Lives Cut Short” Dr. James Helton & Rev. Dr. Joel Tishken

December 8 – “Santa Lucia”

December 15 – Rev. Dr. Julia Corbett-Hemeyer

December 22 – “Becoming Hope Full” Hygge Sunday Rev. Dr. Joel Tishken

December 29 – “Futurism” Rachel Yves

January 5 – Rev. Dr. Joel Tishken

January 12 – Sarah Vitale, Muncie Resists

January 19 – Rev. Dr. Joel Tishken

January 26 – Rev. Derek Parker

[Please note that topics are subject to change. Be sure to check the Friday eBlast for more detailed information about the upcoming Sunday service.]

What's Happening in Lifespan Religious Education (LRE)?

Jesse Daniel, Director of Lifespan Religious Education



Santa Lucia is 50! Maybe.

Sunday, December 8th will be our Santa Lucia Day celebration, one that is loved and anticipated by some and oddly pretty secular to others. *We're celebrating a saint? At the Universalist Church?* If you do a quick Google search, you'll find Santa Lucia Day described as a Christian feast day to celebrate Lucia of Syracuse, who secretly fed the Christians hiding in Roman catacombs. Lucia, or Saint Lucy, wore a crown of candles on her head to light her path. So how did Santa Lucia, with her crown of candles, find her way to UUCM? Those who love this tradition do so, at least in some part, because of the woman who brought it to the church- Elsa Reichle. A spit-fire Swedish woman whose smile was almost as big as her heart. I'll let her granddaughter, Kate Murray, tell more of Elsa's story on the 8th. She does it better than me, anyway.

This year is the 50th anniversary of celebrating Santa Lucia Day at UUCM. Maybe. Or maybe it's the 51st anniversary? It depends on which set of notes you are referencing, although both sets of dates were written by the same woman. If you had the privilege of knowing Elsa, this is a very Elsa thing to have happened. And I'm pretty sure she would say. "Who cares? Either way, it's worth a celebration!" So celebrate we will. We'll celebrate the 50 (51?) Lucias who have graced the Sanctuary with their light and hope as we near the winter solstice. Women and girls of all shapes, sizes, and backgrounds who now all share similar memories of shaping Lucia buns, tying red ribbon sashes, and leading star-children through the darkened church. Finding the balance of holding a tray of coffee and buns steady while also keeping the candle wreath securely on her head and attempting to look serene for pictures.

Looking back at those pictures, we can see changes in the dress, the wreath, the hairstyles and fashion choices. We can see a star-child move from a toddler to a tween, and sometimes to Santa Lucia. The decorations change, the crowd ages, but the sentiment stays the same. There is hope and light to be found in dark times, as trite as that may sound. And there is value in embracing the parts of life that bring you hope even if they may seem unconventional, like a bunch of UUs celebrating a Christian martyr.

~Jesse

Exploring faith. Practicing inclusivity. Living justice.

Christmas Potluck

Eleanor Trawick and **Markie Oliver** will host a Christmas Day Potluck Dinner at UUCM on Wednesday, December 25, at 12:00 noon. All are welcome to come and share a meal together. Markie and Eleanor will bring:

- a turkey
- a vegan main dish
- dairy-free mashed potatoes
- butter and sour cream
- turkey gravy
- a couple of pies
- cranberry relish

If it is convenient, please bring a side dish or a dessert to share. (You do not have to bring anything!)

Questions? Contact Eleanor: trawick.eleanor6@gmail.com, or 765-702-7472.

Sharing Gratitude

If you have a note of gratitude you'd like to share in the next Unigram, please send it to uucm@uuchurchmuncie.org, subject line "Sharing Gratitude."



Thank you to all for supporting the work of our local League of Women Voters with your generous Dedicated Offering contribution in September! You supported yard signs and get-out-the-vote materials for this past election. More importantly for the long haul, you contributed to printing and distributing our new Citizen's Handbook that forms the backbone of our effort to engage Hoosiers through civic education.

With gratitude, Linda Hanson

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Make plans to join us for UUCM's annual Candlelight Service on Tuesday, December 24, at 7:00 pm. We'll have a lessons & carols service that concludes with singing *Silent Night* as we pass candlelight through the darkened sanctuary. If you're so inclined, please bring a plate of sweet or savory snacks to share following the service.

If you are not able to attend the service in person you can join the online service here: <https://bit.ly/UUCMSundayservice> *Passcode not needed.*

Existentialism

Rev. Joel Tishken (continued from page 1)

surveying its representative thinkers, one finds secular and religious existentialists, philosophers who embrace a conception of radical freedom and others who reject it. And there are those who regard our relations with others as largely mired in conflict and self-deception and others who recognize a deep capacity for self-less love and interdependence.” So the trouble in explaining existentialism is more than merely that there is no single school of thought—those expressing existentialist ideas disagree to the point that they are opposites.

And, few people ever identified as one either. Two of the most famous names associated with existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, did identify as existentialists, and that may partly explain their fame. Yet the list of thinkers, artists, and others it is fair to call existentialist because they engaged in those ideas and debates, is like a who’s who of the 20th century: Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Stanley Kubrick, Viktor Frankl, Leo Tolstoy, Pablo Picasso, Henrik Ibsen, Fyodor Dostoevsky. It is also fair to call the various movements inspired by widening human rights, from the civil rights movement, to feminism, to indigenous rights, to gay liberation, to anti-colonial movements worldwide, all of them are part of existentialism.

One more thing that makes existentialism complicated is that not everyone that fits under the umbrella of existentialism wanted to replace god in their overall teleology. There were Christian and Jewish theologians whose writings used existentialist themes. Existentialist theology says that organized religion, rules and laws of the church, tradition, biblical literalism...none of these are the tools of faith. Rather, faith comes entirely from within and is personal. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy says that existentialist theology sets out to understand how the individual, through our own freedom and choices, comes to understand god amid the “paradoxical, ambiguous or even absurd character of the reality that humans encounter.”[1] Some famous existentialist theologians include Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber.

These folks still fit under the umbrella of existentialism because they center the self as the central means of making meaning of our own lives.

Putting theology aside for the moment, let’s return to making sense of existentialist thought for everyone outside of theology. As philosophers, writers, artists, activists, and others began to decenter Christianity from explanations of human existence, what did they replace it with? Despite there not being a single school of thought, or very many self-identifying existentialists, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says “one can nonetheless distill a set of overlapping ideas that bind the movement together.”[2] Here are four common themes that I synthesized from a handful of sources.

1) *Existence precedes Essence*: If existentialism had a slogan, this would be it. Existence precedes essence. Existentialism argues that our sense of self, who we are, and what gives us meaning, does not come from a pre-given essence. Our essence—what makes each of us, us—is not given in advance. Rather, we come into existence and it is our task to create ourselves through our choices and actions. Some existentialists have used the phrase *in medias res* (in the midst of) to describe this. Our birth puts us in the midst of a universe that already exists and our task is to find our way and make meaning within our midst.

2) *Radical freedom*: For existentialists, human freedom is both a blessing and a curse. We have the freedom to make our own choices, shape the course of our lives, and determine our own fate. Yet on the other hand, that freedom also brings with it a sense of responsibility, and the possibility of failure. Sartre wrote in his book *Being and Nothingness* that we are nothing but what we make of ourselves. That doesn’t mean we aren’t impacted by our surroundings. However, we are always more than those

things because we interpret and give meaning to them, and have the freedom to reject and change them.

3) *Ethics*: Ethics for the existentialist is an outgrowth of freedom. Existentialists would reject morality that comes from institutions, tradition, culture, and so on, because that is simply conformity. Rather, morality is to be found in acknowledging our freedom, taking full responsibility for our freedom and our choices, and acting in ways that maximize freedom for others. This is another way to derive meaning—ethical behavior that helps others realize their freedoms. This is why many big-name existentialists supported all the 20th century's liberation movements.

4) *Authenticity*: Existentialists were critical of the human tendency to conform to the norms and expectations around us. They considered conformity to be inauthentic; it keeps us from being our best and most authentic selves. An authentic life is lived by those willing to be brave, by breaking with tradition and social convention, and celebrating our freedom to create our own meaning, rather than inherit it.

Are UUs existentialists? It does seem that yes, we are inherently existentialist. Here is why the ideology of existentialism is woven into who we are.

First, from the formative years of Universalism and Unitarianism, both of our ancestral Us offered alternatives to the traditional Christian teleology. Both of them had people who argued that the history of humanity and the universe were to be found outside of bible stories. Both of them had people insisting that human beings were capable of being good without god, and our goodness and morality came from the love of others and our own sense of responsibility. Initially, neither Universalism or Unitarian fully unseated god or Christianity from part of their explanation of reality. But these folks were among the various intellectual thinkers and threads that in time would contribute to the existentialism of the 20th century. Modern Universalism and modern Unitarianism of the 20th century fits within the

definition of existentialist theology, where the center of faith is the self and our need to make sense of the world. From the 19th century onward, both Universalism and Unitarianism also had nontheist thinkers within them whose explanations of reality were little different from other existentialists. By the time of merger in 1961, when Universalists and Unitarians combined to create Unitarian Universalism, there was little to distinguish UUs from existentialists. UUism formed in the same cultural crucible and the same time period as existentialism.

Second, would it not be fair to say that Radical Freedom, and a sense of ethics that uses freedom to advance human rights for others, is a core feature of our identity? In 1863, Universalists were the first significant denomination to ordain a female minister, Olympia Brown. Unitarian Universalism was the first denomination in the US to have the majority of our clergy women. That happened in 2010. United Church of Christ and us were the first denominations in the US to ordain gay clergy. We were the first denomination to ordain a clergyperson who identified as trans, in 1988. Our denomination launched the Welcoming Congregations program in 1990 to make UU congregations more welcoming places for LGBTQ+ folks. And precipitated by a hiring controversy in 2017, the denomination has been steadily putting greater and greater emphasis on anti-racism to the point that the UUA president rarely says anything without it. Constantly pushing the boundaries of acceptance, freedom, and human rights is very much part of what we're about.

Advancing freedom and human rights to include more groups and identities is a teleology. That is our vision of the future and the world we would like to see. I am guessing we've all heard the famous quote by Martin Luther King Jr. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Did you know the original quote that MLK borrowed came from Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist Theodore Parker? He was speaking about the inevitability of abolitionism when he said, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I

see I am sure it bends towards justice.” A long-range vision that promotes Radical Freedom and building a Beloved Community is certainly meaning-making and quite existentialist too.

Thirdly, UUism is existentialist because we place the onus of meaning-making on the self. In UU spaces we regularly hear sentiments along the lines of “we are a community of fellow seekers who support one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” And, we support the notion that while our culture and context provide lots of meaning, we need to do better than simply inherit our meaning. Conformity is where sexism, racism, homophobia, and all the things that are against our values, live. Among us it is laudable to seek answers outside of cultural norms. Our starting place in 1961 was to create a religion...but it's not a religion in the way you're thinking. We're a church... but not the way you're thinking. We have ministers...but not the way you're thinking. And I could go on. Seeing meaning-making as the responsibility of the individual, and putting in the effort to seek new answers, answers that maximize human rights and freedom, is fully UU, and it totally lines up with existentialism.

Let's go back to the four elements we discussed earlier that define existentialism: (1) existence

precedes essence, check, (2) radical freedom, check, (3) ethics grounded in radical freedom and human rights, check (4) authenticity not conformity, check. Unitarian Universalism is already plenty of syllables. I am not going to advocate that we call ourselves Unitarian Universalist Existentialists. But it seems that we could.

Let's conclude our exploration of existentialism with a prayer. I invite you to join with me. As each of us grapples with our essence, our radical freedom, our ethical responsibilities, and our authenticity, may it bring each of us to a place of greater and deeper meaning for us, for this community, and for the place we all have in this paradoxical universe. We will all face times when it will be difficult to find meaning amid suffering, tragedy, and plain evil. When we face those times, may everyone in this room and zoom, find some path through those challenges to finding meaning. This is my prayer and wish; may it be so.

[1] [Existentialist theology - Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[2] <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>

Presented at UUCM November 3, 2024

© Rev. Dr. Joel Tishken



December 2024 / January 2025 UUCM Calendar

Online calendar: <http://www.uuchurchmuncie.org/members/calendar/>

Regular Weekly Events

Adult Discussion Group: Multi-Platform	Sundays	9:30 am
LRE Classes & Activities	Sundays	9:30 – 10:30 am
Worship Service: Multi-Platform	Sundays	10:45 am
Social Hour	Sundays	After the service
Choir Rehearsal (no rehearsals Dec 10-31)	Tuesdays	7:30 pm

December / January Meetings & Events

Staff Meeting	Tuesday	Dec 3	2:00 pm
Worship Associates	Wednesday	Dec 4	7:00 pm
Santa Lucia Bun Baking	Saturday	Dec 7	1:00 – 4:00 pm
Sunday Office Hours	Sunday	Dec 8	9:30 am
Social Justice Committee	Monday	Dec 9	7:30 pm
Din with the Min	Wednesday	Dec 11	5:15 pm
Board of Trustees	Wednesday	Dec 11	7:00 pm
Parents Time Out	Saturday	Dec 14	1:00 – 3:00 pm
Staff Holiday Lunch & Meeting	Tuesday	Dec 17	12:00 pm
Caroling with the Sanctuary Choir	Tuesday	Dec 17	6:00 pm
Membership Committee	Wednesday	Dec 18	7:30 pm
Pastoral Associates	Sunday	Dec 22	12:30 pm
Church Office Closed for Winter Break :: December 23 – January 1			
Candlelight Service	Tuesday	Dec 24	7:00 pm
Christmas Day Potluck Dinner	Wednesday	Dec 25	12:00 pm
Staff Meeting	Tuesday	Jan 7	2:00 pm
Din with the Min	Wednesday	Jan 8	5:15 pm
Board of Trustees	Wednesday	Jan 8	7:00 pm
UU Book Club	Thursday	Jan 9	7:00 pm
Parents Time Out	Saturday	Jan 11	9:30 – 11:30 am
Social Justice Committee	Monday	Jan 13	7:30 pm
Membership Committee	Wednesday	Jan 15	7:30 pm
Stewardship Dinner	Sunday	Jan 19	5:00 pm
Staff Meeting	Tuesday	Jan 21	2:00 pm
Unigram Submissions Due	Wednesday	Jan 22	9:00 am
Pastoral Associates	Sunday	Jan 26	12:30 pm

UUCM Staff & Leadership

Staff

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UUCM Office Hours

Monday

1:00 – 4:00 pm

Tuesday – Friday

9:00 am – 4:00 pm

Sunday Office Hours

Our next Sunday office hours will be December 8,
9:30 am – 12:30 pm.

Rev. Joel's Office Hours

Tuesdays 9:00 – 3:30

Phone and zoom meetings
available at other times by request.

Jesse's Office Hours

Tuesdays 10:00 – 3:00

Items for the eBlast are due by 9:00 am each Thursday.

Please use the [Publicity Form](#) to submit your announcements.

Articles for the February / March *Unigram* are due Wednesday, January 22.

Please send as attached Word or Google docs to uucm@uuchurchmuncie.org

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