I'm an anthropology major at UW. For those that don't know, anthropology is the study of humans, past and present. There are four fields of anthropology: archaeology, physical anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropology is the study of human societies and cultures. Cultural anthropologists produce ethnographies, which are scientific descriptions of the customs of peoples and cultures.

In order to finish my degree I was required to take an ethnographic methods course. As the title might suggest, this was a class in which each student was expected to write an ethnography. To do this we were asked to pick a Laramie subculture and study them for a semester. The subculture could be anything from a club or sports team to a religious organization. The only requirements were that the subculture have an active membership and that you picked a subculture you were not already a part of.

I chose to study the fellowship because it met these requirements. Before undertaking this study I was totally unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism. In fact, I wasn't even sure that it was a religion. This total lack of knowledge proved to be useful for conducting field work because I was hyperaware of differences between the fellowship and my own, admittedly limited, experiences with religion. But, I'll admit that genuine curiosity was not my only motivation for choosing the fellowship. Convenience was the deciding factor; I live right across the street from the building.

In order to conduct my research I was asked to use the method of participant observation. Participant observation is the main method of cultural anthropology. In doing participant observation, the researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people. Basically the idea is that the best way to learn about a group of people is to become a part of that group. Some researchers become so involved with the group they are

studying that they permanently join the group, though that is discouraged. Still, most people at least remain friends and go back to visit when possible. A lot of researchers become advocates for the groups they study, helping them negotiate with local governments or representing them in court.

Participant observation allows the researcher to study both the explicit and inexplicit aspects of culture. Explicit aspects of culture are the parts that are easily explainable. So that would be things like “We meet here every Sunday at ten.” Inexplicit aspects are things that are outside of a person's conscious awareness, so you can't easily explain them. These would be things like the sense of discomfort you get when someone stands too close to you.

Cultural anthropologists also employ some other methods in their research. These include conducting interviews, making seating charts, taking pictures, and making maps and drawings. Basically, you try to make a note of everything and then decide later what's important for your research. You take a *lot* of notes every day. These notes serve as the main source of data for the cultural anthropologist.

Ideally the researcher keeps a notebook with them and makes notes while talking to and observing people, but that isn't always possible. For example, people get weirded out pretty quickly if you start writing down what they're saying while they're just trying to have a conversation with you. Because of this a lot of field notes are written down after the researcher gets home or away from the environment they're studying. I've read ethnographies where the researcher just took a lot of bathroom breaks so they could go scribble down some notes.

It's best that you take notes as soon as possible because you start forgetting stuff pretty quickly. Ideally you'll expand upon your original field notes as soon as you get home, but that doesn't always happen. Still, you end up with a lot of notes by the end. I had 48 pages of typed

notes on you guys, along with a stack of handwritten ones, and I wasn't as thorough as I probably should've been.

I observed and participated in several fellowship activities, including Sunday services, coffee hours after services, Sunday night meditation, children's religious education classes, the annual Thanksgiving feast, a planning committee meeting, and the Tuesday night women's book group meetings. I took notes during each of these events, documenting the location, the people participating, any unusual sights or smells, and the general flow of events. I refrained from taking notes when engaging in more casual conversations, choosing instead to write down what I could remember of the conversation once I got home. The only thing I didn't take notes on was anything said during “check in” at Contemplative Yarns meetings. Check in involves the women sharing very personal and emotional information that they would rather keep among themselves. In addition, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with members of the fellowship, which proved to be one of my most valuable sources of information.

So now that I’ve talked about my methods, I would like to talk about my results. This part is going to sound strange because I’m going to talk about you guys as though it’s not about you.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Laramie is located in a red brick building next to Harbon Park. On any given Sunday between 20 and 40 people attend the weekly service. Of those, about ten attend every service. There are roughly equal numbers of male and female members. Most are over the age of 40, though some younger people attend, and there are usually a few children. Still, I was consistently the youngest adult in attendance.

The Unitarians themselves are a diverse group. They come from all sorts of religious backgrounds, from Catholicism and Buddhism to atheism and paganism. The Sunday services

reflect this range of religious backgrounds. The fellowship doesn't have a permanent minister so they have a guest speaker every week. The speakers offer numerous religious and secular beliefs. There were some days when the services reminded me more of a college lecture than a religious service. The UUs are a highly educated bunch, with members holding degrees in everything from sociology to molecular biology. Several of the members are employed by the University.

I found that the reasons people had ended up at the fellowship were as diverse as their religious and educational backgrounds. Some are refugees of other, less tolerant religions. Several women told me stories of churches that objected to divorce or disapproved of any questioning of their faith. Others had less serious reasons for joining. One man said that he had joined in college because going to church seemed like a very adult thing to do. One woman joined after answering a job listing. Still others see the fellowship as a kind of liberal safe-haven in an otherwise conservative state.

These stories fascinated me. I wanted to find out what it was that had drawn people from such disparate backgrounds to the fellowship. What was it about UU that had made them stay?

Investigating the religious beliefs of the Fellowship proved to be easier said than done. If there is one thing the Unitarians are good at, it is disagreeing. Depending on who you speak to, you'll find that most of the Laramie fellowship was raised UU, and that most of them weren't. Some people say the spiritual aspects of the fellowship are extremely important; others think it is not important at all. The ideal UU service should be almost like a college lecture, except that it should be nothing at all like a college lecture. Even when you ask about music, you'll find that the UU's are both wonderful and terrible singers.

Still, I was able to find a number of commonly held ideas. One of these is that UU services should be very intellectual. Some said that their favorite services were ones that were

"almost like a college lecture." Everyone I interviewed said that the ideal UU minister would be extremely intelligent. Not only this, they should be willing to challenge people's beliefs. One man told me that he thinks the ideal minister would "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." He said that when he comes to Sunday services he wants to be challenged; he wants to "wince a little." These sentiments were echoed by everyone I spoke to. It seemed that their least favorite ministers in the past were those who did nothing to challenge the beliefs of the congregation.

I also found that a number of concerns for the future of the Fellowship were shared among both the regular members and the leadership. I was told repeatedly that the Fellowship has a small budget and doesn't receive a great deal of donations. Despite this, no one felt that the outlook for the Fellowship was bleak. They were concerned, but had the feeling that they would be alright in the end. As one member said, the Fellowship "might have to cut back a little, but it's going to be okay."

The division of labor in the Fellowship was described to me many times. A couple of members referred to the 80/20 rule. This is the idea that in any organization about twenty percent of the people will do eighty percent of the work. From what I've seen, this seems to hold true in the Fellowship. The ten or so people who regularly attend every service are the same people that seem to be on every committee. A running theme among the leadership is that they hold more than one position.

When I asked about their religious beliefs, everyone told me about the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. I was hopeful that this might be the unifying belief that I was looking to find. Unfortunately, not a single person could name more than three of these principles. One

woman told me that she couldn't name any of them, but she felt she understood enough about the fellowship to feel comfortable with becoming a member.

When I asked people what they had gained by coming to the fellowship, I found three common themes. First, they were seeking spiritual fulfillment. Many find this fulfillment through meditation, which plays a big role in Fellowship activities. There is a time for meditation built into the Sunday service, as well as Contemplative Yarns. There is a Sunday night meditation group, which, I have been told, "has not missed a Sunday in four years." It seemed to me that the women were more interested in meditation than the men. I only managed to attend the Sunday night meditation group three times, but each time the group was made up solely of women.

Some people disagreed with the importance of spirituality in the Fellowship. One member told me that they think the Fellowship has undergone some "spiritual contamination" in recent years, and lamented the loss of "our good atheists." They said that in any given situation, they go for the logical explanation. Despite this, even this member admitted that "some things defy logic."

Most of the people I spoke to do not believe in any god, but do maintain a belief that there is "something out there." Almost all of the people I spoke to felt that spirituality and rationality should be incorporated into services in equal measure. There is a conception that both of these ideas are extremely important for life in general. One member referred to incorporating both spirituality and rationality into one's life as "being fully human."

The second reason that people listed for coming to the Fellowship was to find social support. One member referred to this as a safety net, or the "sense that someone has your back no matter what." This idea was repeated by everyone I spoke to. Though they may not necessarily interact with other members outside of Fellowship activities, they consider the community to be

the most important aspect of the Fellowship. One member said that he had found a community of "kindred spirits" in the Fellowship. One woman described the Contemplative Yarns group as "a wonderful experience of community and being loved and cared for." Another member told me that coming to the Fellowship gave her a confidence boost because she realized that "I am not the only one who believes the way I do."

The third reason that people listed for being part of the Fellowship was a desire to participate in social action and social justice activities. Among the people I spoke to this seemed to be less important than the other two reasons. This may be due to the fact that I did not get the chance to interview any current members of the social justice committee.

Perhaps the most pervasive and unifying belief among the UU's is the idea that each individual should be allowed to find their own path to moral and spiritual fulfillment. This was summed up by one member who told me "we don't believe the church has the right to tell you what to think." I think this answers my question about why members of the fellowship chose UU instead of some other religion. Other religions and churches certainly offer people the chance for spiritual fulfillment, social support, and opportunities to take part in social action and social justice. However, other religions have some belief system that everyone is expected to follow, while UU doesn't. As I was repeatedly told, Unitarian Universalism doesn't have a creed.

Because of this, the UU's are incredibly tolerant, and even welcoming, of religious and secular ideas. This is reflected in the range of religious leaders who give services, as well as the purely secular services. The members themselves also reflect this idea. Something like ten percent of them are actively Christian, while others are pagans, wiccans, or Buddhists. This diversity is not a problem among the UU's, in fact, they embrace it. This can be seen in the wealth of religious texts in the Fellowship library, and the various religious symbols decorating

the walls of the Fellowship building and the front of their table in the student union. It can be seen in the fact that the Fellowship hosts not only a Christmas Eve service, but a winter solstice service. In my time at the Fellowship it seemed that Christianity was the religion most commonly referred to during services. But it was far from the only one. The UU's strive to incorporate religious diversity. As one member told me, Christianity is "a source, but not a more important source than any other."

The UUFL is extremely good at meeting their congregation's desires. Fellowship members attend the UUFL for three main reasons. These are to find spiritual fulfillment, social support, and for the opportunity to participate in social action and social justice activities. These three desires are incorporated into the Fellowship in a number of ways. Spiritual fulfillment is incorporated through the use of meditation during services, and the variety of religious leaders invited to speak.

Social support is provided by giving members the chance to share their concerns with the congregation during every Sunday service. This is also seen during the check-in period at Contemplative Yarns. The Fellowship also cultivates relationships between its members by hosting events that encourage people to get to know each other and spend time together. Some of these events include the conversation hour following every service, monthly potlucks, Contemplative Yarns every Tuesday night, Sunday night meditation, and a choir, though the choir wasn't active during the time I conducted my research.

Social action and social justice activities are also incorporated in a number of ways. The Fellowship sponsored two families for the holidays, and Contemplative Yarns hosted a third. Their "guest at your table" program collects donations for a charity that digs wells in Haiti. Social action is also incorporated into some of the Sunday services. Every December they have a

“guerilla goodness” Sunday, during which all of the members go out into the community to volunteer their time. There is also a “postcard Sunday” during which several members are given five minutes to describe a cause that is important to them. Addresses, notecards, envelopes, and stamps are then provided so that the Fellowship can hold a mini letter writing campaign.

Despite the fact that most of the members of the Fellowship don’t know the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism by heart, I found that they are very good at implementing them. The members live out the idea of the first principle, that “every person is inherently worthy and deserving of dignity,” by being tolerant and accepting of other religions. They are extremely welcoming and will accept anyone as a member, no matter what their status in the community might be.

The second principle is to “strive for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” The UUFL does this by being a democratic organization that welcomes the opinion of all people. I have found that they “accept one another and encourage spiritual growth” every single week at Sunday services. They allow each individual to have a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” as per the fourth principle. In fact, this was one of the only principles that the members I spoke to could name. They felt that it was extremely important that the individual be allowed to find their own path.

They embodied the fifth principle, “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process” by utilizing the democratic process within the Fellowship itself. Their social action and social justice activities and beliefs embody the sixth principle, to “insist on peace, freedom, and justice.” As to the seventh principle, to “respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” they value each individual for who they are, they value social justice, and they value environmental justice.

Overall, I enjoyed my time with the Unitarians. I've found them to be an incredibly kind and welcoming group of people. They are eternally optimistic and see their problems not as insurmountable obstacles but as challenges that they will figure out how to get through. They are not an evangelical group, though I kind of wish they were. I wouldn't mind seeing them standing out with the fundamentalists Christians in front of the student union, shouting things like "follow your own path" or "respect other people's choices!"

I admit that I started this project as a reluctant ethnographer. I am pursuing archaeology, not cultural anthropology. I'm meant to be dealing with pottery shards, not people. I have never been the type of person to walk up and join conversations. I think I was very lucky to have chosen to work with the UUs because of this. They're one of the friendliest groups of people I've ever met. And despite the amount of work involved in this project, I found that I was sad to see it end.