

Universal love in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
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It was a miracle that the Unitarians and Universalists ever accomplished the merger. It was May 1960, 600 Unitarian and 400 Universalists delegates were gathered in Boston, holding separate meetings. For each of the 57 amendments to the plan each separate delegation had to vote – each on the others amendments. Each phrase, word, comma had to be identical.

Finally at 1 AM the two groups came to an impasse over the wording of a statement principles. It was the universalists that saved the day – they compromised on the wording and agreed to reconsider the vote on the merger. For at that time in our denominations history, if there was no merger, the universalists had more to lose than did the Unitarians.

At the time of the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961, Unitarian congregations outnumbered Universalists by 2 to one. While the two denominations had much in common, and the merger was approved by the majority of congregations in both denominations, there were distinct differences between the two; differences in class configuration, attitudes, behavior and worship practices, let alone theology. Universalist membership had been declining for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as their distinctive theology became part of the established liberal Christian doctrine. So while the Universalists knew that this merger was in their best interests, they were also concerned that their distinctiveness would be subsumed by the larger Unitarian denomination.

Now standing close to the 50 year anniversary of the merger, their concern remains. Two generations has passed since the merger, with many people coming in to the denomination with little concept of the differences between the two original denominations. However I think the Universalists were right to be concerned for I have a sense that some of their identity has been obscured within our denomination. I have been a UU for twenty years, had taken multiple adult RE courses, knew about the Unitarians Channing, Emerson, Parker, but had never heard of Hosea Ballou one of the preeminent Universalist theologians, until I went to seminary. Should this loss of history be a concern or is liberal religion ever moving forward? I believe that to neglect this part of our history is to miss out on engagement with a profound message in our heritage.

At this 50 year juncture of the merger, it is a relevant to ask who we are now as a denomination and if our merged theology is serving the needs of our members. In the past 20 or so years there has been an increased call for greater depth of spirit, a new spiritual hunger, both for greater connection to community, and a stronger sense of transcendence, of mystery and wonder. These are the qualities that James Luther Adams, one of our 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologians, refers to as intimacy and ultimacy. Intimacy is the connection with ourselves and our community, and ultimacy is our connection with a spirit outside the individual.

As UU's do we have a theology that grounds us? De we have a practice that allows us to connect with the ultimacy?

As a denomination we have also been challenged to define ourselves in a way that allows us to be seen as vital and relevant in the world. Our current President, Peter Morales acknowledges that “we could be so much more” in what we offer the world. What is our saving message for the world? When newcomers find us what is their experience? Caring community, socially committed, liberal theology. Is that message sufficiently focused to make us vital and relevant?

I propose that we look back to the Universalist roots of our denomination to find some energy and spirit to guide our future. Universalists were unique in American History, with a distinctive message. In particular I want to hold up their qualities of boldness and piety as worthy of consideration for our future.

So let’s look back a couple of hundred years – who were these Universalists and what was their message? While there was some Universalist thinking in Europe, American Universalism is home grown. The name comes from the idea of universal salvation – which they preached starting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is important that you understand the historical context - Calvinism was the dominant Protestant theology at the time and promoted the idea that God granted salvation only for an “elect” and you never knew for sure whether you qualified or not. There was absolutely nothing you could do to change the fact that you were either going to heaven or hell and it was God’s decision. Hell was a pretty awful place for the Calvinists – eternal damnation, fire, pain and all that. It was a distressing theology and left people filled with uncertainty and despair.

Both the Unitarian and the Universalists sides of our denomination arose out of a response to Calvinism. In his famous sermon on Unitarian Christianity, William Ellery Channing argued that humans had some agency in the determination of whether they went to hell, that by demonstrating virtue, one could earn a place with God. But the Universalists had the far bolder theology, for their position was that no one was going to hell –no one - god’s love and salvation were universal.

Most of you likely know the famous quote by Starr King where he describes the difference between Unitarians and Universalists – “Universalists think that God is too good to damn them, and Unitarians think that they are too good to be damned by God.” It has become a bit hackneyed phrase, but in essence it perfectly describes the difference in the two denominations’ response to Calvinism – the Unitarians believe that salvation comes through character, self-improvement – being too good to be damned. While the Universalists believe that salvation comes from believing and accepting God’s grace.

What I want to impress upon you is the boldness of the Universalist’s position and how shocking it was at the time. They spoke up about what they believed was a saving message – that God loved humans too much to damn them to hell for all eternity, regardless of what they did in life. They took on the status quo of the powerful church by implying that Calvinism essentially insulted God by viewing God as capricious and judgmental. The Universalists reclaimed God’s love for the non-elect. They challenged one of the dominant oppressions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It doesn't seem bold in our current thinking, but a lot of that is because of the success of the universalist message. Imagine that you are attending church in 1830 where are told that you are a depraved sinner destined for hell if you don't sufficiently repent, and you won't know whether your penance is sufficient until you die. Pretty depressing stuff. Along comes an itinerant preacher, a bit hardscrabble, perhaps not too well educated, and his message is that God loves you completely, that your salvation is guaranteed, and so is the salvation of all humans. All you have to do is open your heart to God's love. Nothing else is required. Why was this brave? They were not rich, they did not emerge from an established church. Their message was not crafted by Harvard intellectuals. They fought against many powerful people in order to preach what they did, and had little support for their work.

Now for the established churches there are several problems with that message. But the primary one was, if God loves you regardless, what keeps you from sinning? If there was no punishment for sin, what was to keep the world from descending into chaos. The Universalist message was so controversial that in many places they were ostracized, considered anti-Christian and in some places not allowed to serve on juries or hold office. But the message spread and by the mid 1800's Universalism was a popular religion in the United States.

The primary spokesman for the universalists message in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Hosea Ballou. He had the boldest message of salvation. If God's love was universal – he would ask - from what do we need to be saved? We need to be saved from our own fear that God's love is limited, that we create our own hell on earth by our fear that we are unworthy. We need to be saved from the fear that keeps us from accessing God's love. His answer to the question why be good if there is no fear of punishment, was to say that God's salvation is so glorious and fulfilling, that it will take away the desire to sin, or take away the sense of reward from sin. It is our lack of faith in God's love that puts us in a position to sin.

The other quality of the early Universalists that I would like to lift up is piety. Yikes – there a religious word, not the type we use typically use in UU congregations. For Universalists, piety was God's saving love put into action -the sincere and intense pursuit of their faith.

Piety was a centerpiece of Universalist spirituality. This leads directly from their primary theological position of God's universal love. As Ann Bressler, a scholar of Universalism states "What the Universalists sought was a new brand of unselfish faith, a faith that encouraged the believer to think of his own interests as inseparably linked with the eternal welfare of the whole body of humanity....." "Universalists praised the doctrine of universal salvation for the social responsibility it inspired and demanded. With their characterization of the universe as absolutely interdependent, egalitarian and benevolent, they stood apart from the prevailing culture's exaltation of the individual."

Piety is an area where you can see the divergence of the Unitarian and Universalist theologies. For while 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians were engaged in social action, for the Universalist social action was the embodiment of God's savings love. Our Universalist forebears were particularly involved in work against capital

punishment and supporting penal reform. For them, the death penalty represented vengeance, and if their God did not require vengeance, then they thought humans should not as well. In regards to slavery, however, the Universalists, like the Unitarians and other mainline protestant churches in the north, made clear their dislike of the institution, but did little as a denomination to work against it.

The Universalist practice of piety involved hope and the belief in transformation – here on earth, not in preparation for some heavenly afterlife. And that hope was for all of humankind. As we heard the contemporary Universalist say “ this is not a passive hope, nor one that denies personal or global tragedy, but one that requires us to keep working for a better future for ourselves and others. This is the essence of universalism for me, hope and its collorary, good works, founded on a theology of love and reason.”

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great modernization and rapid change. People thought that humans had the capacity to transform everything through the great modern ideas. The first World War changed everything by revealing the destructive power of modern man. How could a 19<sup>th</sup> century religion be relevant? Why would God allow such horrible devastation to happen? What can salvation mean at this point in history?

Another Universalist, Charles Skinner, entered into this challenge. No one embodies these qualities of boldness and piety more than this Universalist minister and dean of the School of Religion at Tufts College. Skinner was the voice of the Universalists during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Skinner was a bold thinker, who conceived of universalism, not as doctrine regarding salvation but as philosophy aimed at securing the universal harmony of all individuals on earth. He was concerned that all humans be freed from oppression. “universalists are freemen. Therefore they should be in the front rank of the daring few who are fighting the battles of social emancipation. They have pledged themselves to break the tyrannies of the mind and strike the shackles of tradition from the soul. If they are true to the spirit of their faith, they pledge themselves to free humanity from economic degradation, which fetters it, body mind and soul, in the twentieth century. The logic is relentless, the implication clear. Universalism by its very genius is led into the great social maelstrom, because it is essentially a battle for the freedom of the common man.”

Despite Skinner’s bold vision, Universalism declined in membership for most of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some say they became victims of their own success – that the message of universal salvation became so generally accepted in liberal Christian denominations, that the Universalists lost their distinctive theology.

But they are not gone, for they are us. Their legacy lives on in our denomination. I wanted you to learn about the Universalists because I believe their theology has much to offer us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Lets take on some of the Universalist theology from a 21 century perspective. Universal salvation: Whether you believe in God or heaven or hell, you can still answer the question - Do we believe that all people are worthy of happiness?

Regardless to how much we sin? Does redemption require punishment? Our prison system implies that we believe so. Does Capital punishment reflect your values?

Our first principle states that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Each person, no strings attached? Do we believe that all people are good and deserving in their essence? Worthy of love? Hosea Ballou, an ultra universalist, would say absolutely.

Hosea Ballou would ask us - From what do we need to be saved? Ballou's message has resonance for us now even if we don't relate to ideas of sin and salvation – his 21<sup>st</sup> century message would be that we need to be saved from our own fear that love is limited. We need to be saved from our fear of the limitations of love and goodness and happiness. Of course we know that our earth's resources are limited, but what about love? Is love limited or diminished in our contemporary world? Is our capacity to access love diminished?

Another critical question to consider is the question that was the main challenge to Universalism – if everyone is saved why should a person try to be good? This was the most challenging aspect of the Universalist's message. But I think our 21 century answer is that we have come to realize that we are all in this together. This is where piety is relevant for our time: can we live our faith that the world can only be whole if all humans are happy and fulfilled? How does our 7<sup>th</sup> principle play out in practice of Respect for the interdependent web of all existent of which we are a part? As I read from Bressler “ Universalists praised the doctrine of universal salvation for the social responsibility it inspired and demanded. With their characterization of the universe as absolutely interdependent, egalitarian and benevolent, they stood apart from the prevailing culture's exaltation of the individual.” though she is talking about the 19<sup>th</sup> century her words are an apt description of our current culture as well.

As Unitarian Universalists we are the inheritors of this saving message of love and interdependence, these qualities of boldness and piety. Can we, Christian, pagan and humanist, pantheist, theist and atheist, develop a shared functional appreciation of the universal love that so motivated the Universalists? Can this shared appreciation motivate us to piety – to putting our belief into practice? Are we bold enough to envision wholeness for all beings, and pious enough to work toward that goal.

I would like to propose a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of universalist boldness and piety, a faith ignited and sustained by our belief in universal love. A faith that is grounded in our principles, supported by our community. A faith that resonates in our actions, that motivates us to care about every being. Each of us owes it to the world to figure out what we believe in, what inspires us to care about something outside of ourselves and our immediate circle. And we owe it to the world to act from this belief - that there truly is enough love and justice for all. Amen!

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