Recovering The Universalist Vision

Those with whom I've been sharing in ministry here at First Church Unitarian in Littleton will tell you I have something of a thing for Woody Guthrie, so I know they won't be surprised if I open my sermon this morning with some of his words. In researching a book I wrote on some of the religious and spiritual currents in his life I came across, in the Guthrie archives, an amazing twenty-plus page, hand written, letter he wrote to his wife-to-be, Marjorie, when he was on ship in the US Merchant Marine in World War II. I call it the "Oneness Letter." These are just a few lines:

"This is the highest activity of your mind and heart, this Oneness, this Union; to see all the relations and the connections between all objects, forces, peoples, and creatures…This is why all great religions preach the central idea of Oneness."

These words echo a theme that has been put forth by prophets, seers, and visionaries over the course of human history. These are people who know who they are, and where they are, when it comes to their particular time and place in history. But they can also rise above their specific identities, to see a greater Whole which enfolds us all.

Such prophets and visionaries are often lonely people. They can easily be dismissed as out-of-touch or other-worldly dreamers. If they happen to gain a significant following, however, they may come to find themselves persecuted or killed, especially if that following is seen as posing a threat (real or imagined) to the status quo. Such were the cases with Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi to cite but two tragic examples.

This idea of the essential unity of all persons and things, however, is not always confined to lonely prophets or visionaries. Sometimes it can even become the basis for a broad-based religion. Such was the case in this country, beginning in the late 18th century, with a religious movement called Universalism.

This faith was brought to America in 1770 from England by a one Rev. John Murray and quickly took root in New England. Murray also served as a Chaplain in George Washington's revolutionary army. He and his wife, Judith Sargent would later found the first Universalist Church in American in Gloucester, Massachusetts; which remains one of our UU congregations today.

Murray's most often cited quote is the one with which you may be familiar: "You may possess only a small light but uncover it and let it shine. Use it to bring more understanding to the hearts and minds of men (and women).

Give them something of your vision. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage." [Like many such apocryphal quotes there is some question of Murray's actual authorship here. But, whatever their source, the words capture well the spirit of early American Universalism.]

These words offered a stark contrast to the angry and punishing God of the Calvinists of New England, most famously depicted in a sermon by the Rev. Jonathan Edwards in which God dangles hopeless and hapless sinners over the fiery pit of Hell, into which they could be dropped on a Divine whim. As a counterpoint to Edwards and his followers, the Universalists offered a God of Love who would in time reconcile all of humanity. For the Universalists Jesus was not someone who had to die a horrible death to save us from our innate state of depravity, but rather someone who lived and taught in such a way that demonstrated how all human beings could emulate the love of God. With their ideas on human perfectibility--provided enough human effort was put forth--the Universalists, at times in concert with the Unitarians, strongly contributed to the ranks of many of the 19th century's reform movements like abolitionism, women's suffrage, public education, humane treatment of the mentally ill, prison reform, the improvement of health care, just and fair working conditions for laborers, and the like. By the mid-to-late 19th century they were, by some counts, sixth largest Protestant denomination in

America, before going into a long period of decline; the demographic reasons for that decline are beyond the scope of this sermon I'm afraid.

Fifty five years ago this past spring, in May of 1961, the Universalist Church of America joined with the American Unitarian Association to form our present denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Universalism originally meant universal salvation; everyone, that is, would eventually be saved by the love of God. They debated among themselves for a time as to how this ultimate and final salvation would be actually accomplished, since they also recognized the reality of evil. But their fundamental theology was that of One loving and reconciling God.

The Universalists' understanding of what this Oneness meant changed over the course of their history. In time they moved on from their debates about heaven, hell, and the afterlife to exploring some deeper meanings of Universalism, as they looked for common, universal themes in many of the world's religious faith traditions.

Their theology may seem quaint to many of today's Unitarian Universalists, myself included. But their larger vision, above and beyond their early 19th century theological origins, is one we would do well to keep before us. It is that vision, and its ongoing implications, to which I'd now like us to devote our attention.

I’d like us to consider this universalist vision from a few different, but related, angles: The global, the national—with respect to what’s happening in our country right now—and then within our own Unitarian Universalist movement.

To start with the global, I loop back to Woody Guthrie. He was partly right when he wrote in that letter to Marjorie that "all great religions preach the idea of Oneness." Tragically, Woody was not entirely right. The great religious divide today, is not *between* the various religions of the world, but *within* them.

This divide within some of the world's faiths, particularly the monotheistic ones, is between the exclusivists and the universalists. The words, I would think, are self-explanatory. The exclusivists hold that their faith is the one true one and those outside of it are infidels. The universalists see their faith as a piece of a larger whole, of a larger truth, that will probably never be fully known or realized, but can still be aspired towards. These universalists do not deny that there are marked differences among various religious faiths; neither do they deny that among the peoples of the earth there are differing cultures, societies, histories, and ethnic identities. But they also seek to look beyond these differences for the common ground that points us human beings to a greater awareness of our common humanity.

It was a non-theologian, a good humanist actually, who in more recent years has given us a wonderful metaphor of our universal and common humanity. I refer to the late astronomer, Dr. Carl Sagan, who penned the words I read for our meditation: "A Pale Blue Dot." His words need little elaboration by me or anyone else; they speak for themselves. Recall just a few of them: "The earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate...for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand."

"The Earth is where we make our stand." Those words are both promising and frightening all at the same time. Promising as to the heights to which we as a human species may yet rise; and frightening if that universalist vision of a common humanity is lost and we tear ourselves apart.

The irony, as I've come to see it, contained within this universalist vision is that the greatest threat to it is the fear of the loss or the diminishment of a personal, or even group, identity within certain sectors of our human family. I feel the best symbol for our common humanity is not some kind of a melting pot amalgum, but rather a mosaic in which all the varying and multi-faceted tiles have their own kind of beauty, their own kind of specialness, their own kind of affirmed identity, while also being a part of a whole that is indeed greater than the sum of its parts.

On this note, I offer some commentary on the current political climate in our country. (If I haven't had your full attention up to this point, I probably have it now!) For reasons I can only, a best, partially understand, we have a segment of our population who feel that their identity, their sense of who they are, their specialness, has somehow been trampled on or gone unnoticed or unappreciated.

I have some sense, at least, as to where those feelings are coming from. I was raised in a low-income, white, working class family in southern West Virginia. My father was a self-employed house painter whose formal education went to the eighth grade. In the words of that old Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young song he "worked like the devil to be poor." My Dad loved and cared about his family—my Mom, my three sisters, and me. But beyond his family and his church he wasn't given much reason to feel that his life counted for much, or that the persons in power who were making decisions that affected his life, or his view of the world, really cared that much about him—however much he loved his country. He served in the Navy in the Second World War.

My Dad has been gone for a long time now, so I can't say with certainty where he would be with respect to our current Presidential campaign. But I can see, given his overall station and standing in life, how something deep

within his psyche would have responded well to someone seeking the Presidential office and saying "I'll be your voice." And it wouldn't have mattered if that someone was a self-indulgent, narcissistic billionaire with no clue as to what my father's life was all about. Even the illusion—and that's what it is—even the illusion that some rich and powerful person, who didn't care what he said—however ugly and demagogic—or who he offended, but who supposedly cared about him might have been enough to have secured my Dad's vote.

I won't speculate on the outcome, but will only say that it is the tone of this Presidential campaign that scares the hell out of me. And I don't need to name who it is that's doing the scaring. It's a name that will not be named in this setting here. But setting aside for a moment—if such is possible—what the outcome of this election may prove to be, I'm still left with the deeply troubling question of how we as a nation have come to have a segment of our population—not a majority but still a quite visible and vocal segment—who feel so alienated from any vision or concept of a common good for all, that they are drawn to the hateful and ruthless ravings of a completely self-absorbed demagogue who seeks the office of President of the United States. And more to the point of this sermon: Do we who seek to uphold a universalist vision have anything to say, anything to offer, to this segment of

our citizenry that could possibly be heard by them? Think on that as you go on your way today.

Okay, after all that I hope you can still stay tuned, in both mind and spirit, for one more direction I want to go with our topic for this morning before we're done.

I said earlier that I wanted to speak to how I feel the vision of our early Universalist spiritual ancestors could inform and enhance our current UU movement. This is the final base I'll touch now.

To dip, once again, into our history, as already noted, the Unitarians and the Universalists each got their toe holds in this country in the latter part of the 18th century. In terms of belief and practice they had far more similarities than differences. And yet it took them until 1961 to combine. This was, in large part, because they were separated much more by class or social status than by beliefs.

I know I'm overdrawing this a bit, and I acknowledge that exceptions could be found on both sides, but the Universalists had more of a working class, plain folks, farmers or small town merchant make-up to their congregations. They were people who were sustained and nurtured, in the midst of their hard working lives, in the belief that they were loved and cared for by a loving and caring God.

The Unitarians, again with an admittedly broad brush here, were more of the landed gentry and educated elite of their day. They contributed mightily to the social, intellectual, educational, and cultural life of 19th and early 20th century New England and beyond. Like the Universalists they also contributed to various 19th and early 20th century reform movements. But the two bodies, and their two constituencies, by and large, moved in different social and economic circles.

Perhaps it was the 19th century Unitarian minister--whose father was a Universalist preacher--the Rev. Thomas Starr King, who stated these differences most cryptically when he observed that, "The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn them; while the Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned by God."

Okay, it's a good line, but what does it have to do with Universalism enhancing our current liberal religious movement? I offer this: Our Universalist ancestors demonstrated that liberal religion can cut across, and transcend, class lines; that it does not have to primarily be the province of the professional class, or of the educated elite.

I say this to take nothing away from the careers many of you have, or the levels of education many of you have achieved. For myself, I'm proud of the fact that my three sisters and I were able to grow up in the struggling

working class home to which I've already alluded, and go on to earn Masters Degrees--all four of us--and enter the careers to which these degrees have given us access; which includes two of us being UU ministers.

That said, I continue to be struck by how our Universalist ancestors could put forth a very simple message--one that was at the same time quite profound--that the love of God is available to all, that we can form loving congregations based on this greater love; and have that message resonate with such a broad spectrum of the American public. I have come to believe, after nearly four decades in the UU ministry, that the future life and vitality of our movement depends upon our putting forth an equally broad and appealing message and mission that will reach across class lines.

This message and mission need not, and will not, contain the same language as 19th and early 20th century Universalism. But how about a message from us to all who can hear it, that says you are part of a greater Love, a Greater Spirit of Life that enfolds us all; you are loved and blessed by that which is greater than you know; and we offer a welcoming community, where in the company of seekers, you can learn more of what this greater love and care is all about, and you can be a part it, and act on it for others—and it's not tied to your station in life or to your level of education, or to any other such thing as that. This is the truth that our Universalist fore bearers were attempting to

live out, however they may have expressed it in language other than what I just used.

I hope the spirit of this message I'm suggesting can find even greater resonance in our sister and brother UU congregations around the land. For I believe that the more that message is heard, really heard, the stronger we will be and the more diverse we will become as Unitarian Universalists. And I also think it would allow us—as small a place as we occupy on our nation's religious and spiritual landscape—to hold up a vision of the possible: A vision that persons of all stations in life—stations of race and class and belief—can each and all be a part of a sustaining mosaic that will allow us to continue to meaningfully live on this pale blue dot.

Rev. Stephen Edington

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