Lessons from Our Universalist Story

Earlier this spring when Jim Barisano was organizing the Goods and Services Auction he asked if I could contribute a “Sermon of your Choice.” I told him I’d do it provided that the sermon be done before the end of this church year. My assumption then was that I’d be finishing up my ministry here by the end of this year. Well, as John Lennon so famously reminded us, “Life is what happens while you’re making other plans.”

The life that happened, as you well know by now, is that I’ll be spending a third year with you. We are not as pressed for time as I’d originally thought. But when Joyce Williams purchased the auction sermon she and I made plans for me to do it on this Sunday. So here we are. I will devote some of our service next Sunday to saying a bit about my plans for our third interim year; but for today, let’s get to the matter at hand.

The matter at hand, as Joyce requested, was that I speak to the Universalist side of our Unitarian Universalist story. I’m pleased to do this. Your church here came from the Unitarian side of our UU family. As it happened, the first UU congregation I served was of a historically Universalist church up in Maine—which was a hotbed of Universalism at one time. Even though that church was fully in the UU fold by the time I got there, learning of its history did give me an appreciation for our Universalist spiritual ancestors that I may not have otherwise had.

My jumping off point today, however, is not with a figure from our Universalist history, but rather from my oft cited Woody Guthrie. In a letter he wrote to his wife-to-be, Marjorie, while serving in the United States Merchant Marine, Woody got onto the topic of religion and wrote these words:

“This is the highest activity of your mind and heart, this Oneness…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.

This idea of the essential unity of all persons and things can sometimes 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. A portion of his most often cited quote is in our Order of Service today: "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 apocryphal type quotes there is some question of Murray's actual authorship. But, whatever their source, the words capture well the spirit of early American Universalism.

Murray had been a Methodist minister in England, and was greatly influenced by some of the Universalist writings he came across while there, to the point that he left the Methodist ministry. He hit a string of bad fortune, including the death of his first wife and a stint in debtor’s prison, before deciding to seek a new life in America. He had not intended to be the bearer of Universalism to America. Quite the contrary, he came to our shores as a way of leaving the ministry altogether. In his own words he wanted to “lose myself in America.”

But the universe had other plans. How John Murray became the progenitor of American Universalism is one of those stories that sounds pretty fanciful, but is supposedly true. Before Murray got here, Universalist writings, mostly from England, had found their way to America and had generated a degree of interest. One such interested person was a fellow living down on the south New Jersey shore called Thomas Potter. He was so taken with Universalism that he built a meeting house on his property and said that God would send a preacher to proclaim the Gospel of Universalism right there in his meeting house.

It so happened (I do not make this up) the New York City bound ship that Murray was on, coming from England, got stuck on a sand bar right off the coast from Potter’s land. Murray was among those who went ashore to see if they might find some food and water for those on the ship while they waited for the wind to change enough to get them on their way. Of course, he runs into Potter. After a certain amount of probing and cajoling Potter gets it out

of Murray, that he's really a Rev. Murray, preferring to be an ex-Rev. Murray, who has become attracted to Universalism.

That was all Mr. Potter needed to hear. He informed *Reverend Murray* that God would not cause enough wind to come up until he (Murray) went to his meeting house and preached Universalism. Figuring he had nothing to lose, Murray agreed. Potter rounded up all of his friends—feeling fully vindicated by now—and Murray preached his sermon on the truths of Universalism. Wouldn't you know, the wind came up, and the ship, with Murray back on board, continued on. Murray took the whole episode as a sign that he was called to bring Universalism to America which is what he then set out to do.

The place where all this happened is now the site of our Unitarian Universalist Murray Grove Retreat and Conference Center, where I'm sure you can read an even more detailed account of the story I've just told.

Murray's words, as cited earlier, as well as the message behind them, 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 to unto himself, and who would not condemn anyone to an eternity of horrible punishment for deeds done in their temporal, earthly lives.

I can imagine how Universalism would have resonated well with early New Englanders—especially those who were trying to eke out a living buy farming the rocky New England soil, or fishing off its coasts, or doing labor type jobs in its towns and cities. These were the people who were primarily drawn to Universalism as it took root in New England.

Here were people, many of whom spent six days out of the week busting their buns trying to support themselves and their families. The last thing they probably needed was to go to church on their one non-working day to hear about how they were terrible sinners whom God *might* choose to save, but who could just as easily drop them into the pit of Hell.

These folks may not have had much in the way of a formal education, but they were still probably bright enough to know that something's not quite

right here. They didn't have to be philosophers or theologians to wonder what is the point of my struggling earthly existence if what's waiting for me in the afterlife could well be even worse?

These were the kinds of people who were drawn to the churches John Murray and his new wife, Judith Sargent Murray, help to found around New England. The first such church they founded was in Gloucester, Massachusetts which continues to operate as a UU congregation to this day.

If it was John Murray who planted the seeds of Universalism in New England, it was the Rev. Hosea Ballou who tended and nurtured the garden. Ballou was from rural New Hampshire, the son of a Baptist preacher who became a Baptist minister himself. His formal education went to the third grade, but he became a brilliant, self-educated individual. His studies of the Bible, and his probing into the various types of religion eventually made him into a Universalist minister.

In 1803 Ballou wrote the defining document of American Universalism titled *A Treatise on the Atonement.* In a small, and admittedly oversimplified nutshell, Ballou's point was that 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.

In 1817 Ballou began 35 year ministry of a Universalist Church in Boston, which in time became the "mother ship" of American Universalism.

By the latter part of the 19th century the Universalist Church of America--as it came to be called--was, by some counts, the sixth largest Protestant denomination in America. With their ideas on human perfectibility--provided enough human effort was put forth--the Universalists 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, and the like. While primarily a working class denomination they also set great store in education and founded St. Lawrence University in upstate New York and Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

The first woman to be ordained to the ministry and have her standing recognized by and major denomination—in the case the Universalist Church

in America was the Rev. Olympia Brown. She was among those who helped move Universalism westward beyond its New England base, while also championing the cause of women's suffrage.

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 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.

By the 1880s, by whatever means such measurements were taken then, the Universalist Church in America was the country 5th or 6th largest denomination, well outpacing the Unitarians. And then they went into a long and slow decline. The three buildings used by the church I served in Rockland, Maine are indicative of this trend. The original Rockland Universalist church was founded in the 1830s and was housed in a small, white, clapboard, quintessential New England structure. The Universalists of Rockland moved into their second building in 1880 at the height of the Universalist movement. It seated some 400 people and was the largest meeting house in the whole county. They filled it up. By the time I arrived in 1979 that building was long gone and they were meeting in a very attractive and modest building with a sanctuary a little smaller than this one. Their structure has since been through a couple of expansions, and it serves their purposes very well today.

So what happened? Well, to put it in marketing terms, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th the Universalists lost their corner on the liberal Christian market. In the early 20th century a liberalizing trend moved through American Protestantism—with the fundamentalists on one side and the moderates/liberals on another. The Protestant churches who went in a more moderate to liberal direction were not all that far removed, theologically, from the Universalists. The Universalists, in general, held onto their liberal Christian identity longer than the Unitarians did. So if in a given

community you had a Methodist or Congregational or even a Baptist church that had taken the more liberal line, then the Universalists were no longer the only show in town for religious liberals.

Then came the Depression. It hit the Universalists much harder than it did the Unitarians. In the manner of a family living from paycheck to paycheck, the Universalists—by and large—lived from one budget cycle to the next. They did not have some of the old money to sustain them in the way that a number of Unitarian congregations did.

So it was demographics and economics that led to their decline. Then, following the Second World War the Universalists came to realize that their definition of Universalism was no longer largely understood within an exclusively Christian framework, and that they had more in common with the Unitarians than ever before. Among those endorsing the first Humanist Manifesto, as issued in 1933 for example, were both Unitarian and Universalist ministers.

In point of fact, the Universalists had never been all that far removed from the Unitarians in matters of religion. Their differences, as we've already seen, were much more along class lines. By the early 1950s those class lines had become less pronounced and the Universalists entered into consolidation talks with the Unitarians which eventually resulted in the formation of our present denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961.

So what do we take from this story in addition to, hopefully, learning a bit of our UU history? I offer a few items for your consideration.

While the consolidation of the two denominations was done in as equitable as way as could be done, culturally speaking we as a united denomination became considerably more Unitarian than Universalist. By "culturally speaking" I mean we took on, and have taken on over the past near 60 years now, more of the culture of the Unitarians: Well educated, reasonably affluent, and living the kind of reasonably secure lives that allow persons to pursue some of the finer things of life. Nothing wrong with that, of course. I can put myself in that category.

Those cultural differences are built right into the story of the Universalists and the Unitarians. For just one example I go back to Rev. Ballou: While he was having his ministry in Boston as the most prominent and influential

Universalist of his day, William Ellery Channing—one of the founders of American Unitarianism—was also having his long-term ministry in Boston at what is now the Arlington Street Church. And yet there is no record or indication that these two highly prominent American ministers ever even met. They and their congregants simply did not move in the same class circles.

While there were probably exceptions on both sides, the Universalists were working class and the Unitarians were the culturally elite. This is what prompted the mid-19th century Unitarian minister, whose family also had Universalist ties, the Rev. Thomas Starr King, to wryly observe, in a line I know I've cited before, 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."

To come back to our day, as we seek to attain greater levels of true diversity in our congregations, are there some clues we might take from our Universalist ancestors? To be sure, we have some serious matters of race to deal with—as we spoke to in our service back on May 7. Without diminishing those crucial efforts in any way, I think we also need to look at how we might break some of our barriers of class. This is one of the issues I'd like us to explore in what will be our third interim year.

For now, I offer this: 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, and 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 of 19th and early 20th century Universalism. But how about a message from all of us, to all who can hear it, that says you are part of a greater Love, and 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 about what this greater love and care is all about, and you can be a part of it, and act on it for others. Finding this greater love is not tied to your station in life, or to your level of

education, or to any other such thing. This is the truth that our Universalist forebears were attempting to live out, however they may have expressed it.

I hope the spirit of this message I'm suggesting can find even greater resonance here and in our sister and brother congregations across the land. For I believe that the more that message is heard, really heard, the stronger we will be, and the more truly diverse we will become, as Unitarian Universalists.

"This is the highest activity of your mind and heart, this Oneness…to see all the relations and the connections between all objects, forces, peoples, and creatures…" So said Woody Guthrie, and so—each in his or her own way—said John Murray, and Hosea Ballou, and Olympia Brown as well as a host of our other Universalist spiritual ancestors. Let's close our service on the same note as we sing our closing hymn "We Would be One."

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