

September 29, 2019

Our modern faith tradition is merged from two American religious movements. In 1961 the Unitarians consolidated with the Universalists to become the UUA – shorthand for the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Although it made sense to merge the two liberal traditions, they had distinct histories and cultures. Thomas Starr King, the mid-19th century minister, captured the differences. He said: “The Universalists think God is too good to damn them forever. The Unitarians think they are too good to be damned forever.”

In the discussions leading up to the merger there was a lot of conversation jockeying for naming this faith. The Unitarians prevailed. Consequently we don't hear much about our Universalist side. But tomorrow is John Murray Day. I doubt that you'd find many Unitarian Universalist congregations celebrating this day. I'm even more doubtful that you'd find a Hallmark card commemorating the occasion. But, as you heard in the Whistle Stop, John Murray is credited for being the founder of American Universalism. Surely that's worth at least one sermon. So today I want to talk about Murray and, especially, Hosea Ballou's articulation of Universalism..

The Whistle Stop this morning told the story of John Murray's conversation to Universalism and his rather dramatic 1770 arrival in America. But I hope you noticed that Thomas Potter had built a meetinghouse for Universalist discussion groups 10 years earlier. Potter was an illiterate farmer who was influenced by both Quaker and Baptist beliefs. As a self-identified Universalist, he let people of all creeds worship on his land, but was convinced that God would send him a preacher of Universalism. Potter died probably around 1777 – having had his faith in his vision realized. Let's pick up the story from there.

Eventually Murray settled in Gloucester, Massachusetts, serving as the minister of the first Universalist church in America. In 1786 the church won freedom from taxation in a ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, laying a precedent for the separation of church and state.

Murray's Universalism was of the Calvinistic type. Twenty years after Murray's death, Hosea Ballou separated the denomination from its Calvinistic associations. Hosea Ballou was a self-taught preacher from New Hampshire. He made his way to Boston, and was settled in a popular parish. Many Unitarians, including the great William Ellery Channing, snubbed him –and all the Boston Universalists --. Part of the reason was theological, but part of it was social class.

The Unitarians were in the upper social class of the early American experiment. They were formally educated, wealthy, and influential in the early stages of this country's development. They were positive about the ability of humanity and placed great responsibility on humans to, um, chart their own course. Because they exercised much control over their own lives their focus of the Unitarians was on human ability and character. The Universalists, on the other hand, were people who lived off the land. That

September 29, 2019

meant that they lived within the uncertainty and inconsistencies of the cycles of the earth, and had much less control over their own lives. By focusing on the Universe that surrounded them they saw themselves as part of a larger whole. And this larger whole they saw as infinitely and perfectly loving.

I believe this classism exists in our congregations and our association even today. But that's a subject for another sermon. To recap the differences between the Universalists and the Unitarians, the Unitarians rallying cry was *salvation by character*. The Universalists focused on the goodness of God and proclaimed *salvation in spite of character*.

Social imbalance was one thing. But theological differences were another. Despite the Unitarians discomfort with the concept of universal salvation, Hosea Ballou's doctrine of Christ's subordination to the Father gave Universalism a theological position very similar to that of Unitarians. After a hundred years or so of various iterations, the 1935 Washington Avowal of Faith was taken as the official statement of principles of American Universalism. These principles are the universal fatherhood of God; the spiritual authority and leadership of Jesus, his son; the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God; the certainty of just retribution for sin; and the final harmony of all souls with God.

Organizationally, like the Unitarians, Ballou's Universalists considered the individual church or parish to be an independent unit. The church established Tufts Univ. (1852) and Tufts Divinity School (1861). The name Universalist General Convention (adopted 1866) was changed (1942) to the Universalist Church of America. In 1961 it merged with the American Unitarian Association to form the Unitarian Universalist Association .

So what did Ballou preach? According to Rev. Sam Schaal, One of the common texts Ballou used to justify universal salvation is the apostle Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, Verse 22: "For as all die in Adam so all will be made alive in Christ." When the Universalists proclaimed this, they were speaking of eternal salvation: all would be made alive after death. They did not have in mind our 21st century ideas about an inclusive and diverse religious tradition. Yet we would not be fully who we are without their early proclamation. For example:

To say that all will be made alive, that all are saved, is to say that all are worthy. It is to say that all are accepted—accepted by some larger reality that they called God and we experience as Love.

To say that all will be made alive is to say that there is potential truth from many sources. It is to say that other ways of being are, well, other ways of being—not less, not other—just part of the variety of ideas, of life.

To say that all will be made alive is to suggest a certain response, a certain ethic. It suggests we should respond likewise, with acceptance, with love, with radical hospitality,

September 29, 2019

with working for a world where the worth of various peoples might be nurtured, where the worth of the earth itself might be cared for more delicately.

Rev. Schaal continues, pointing out that “in our work here on earth is where that we find the wisdom of our Unitarian heritage—that works and ethics are important. That to be loved by the universe isn’t enough—we then need to carry forth this love in acts of kindness, mercy and justice. And these acts are rooted in a sense of being at home in the world, of being connected to the world, of experiencing *grace*. Of rediscovering, in theologian Paul Tillich’s terms, one’s self, each other and the ground of being,—the ancient Triad of being human.

The UU Hysterical Society – yes, you heard that right – sells tee shirts that say, “Love the Hell Out of This World.” The phrase came not from John Murray or Hosea Ballou, but from the Rev. Joanna Fontaine Crawford, who is very much alive and serving the Live Oak congregation in Texas. Our UUA President, Susan Frederick-Gray, elaborated on this message in the 2019 Winter edition of UU World Magazine: She wrote, “Our Universalist ancestors didn’t believe in hell, except for the ones we create here in this life. What would it mean to show up in the places where hell, where suffering and violence, persecution and inhumanity, prevail and to bring an active, powerful form of love that affirms dignity, liberation, and peace? It would mean leaving the confines of privilege to show up in solidarity, engaging and being in the struggle with those most directly impacted by injustice. It means siding with the national prisoners strike, with refugees and children criminalized and jailed, it means ending police violence, it means showing up against anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic policies and rhetoric, and it means showing up with our sisters in the streets and in the voting booths to recognize the dignity and integrity of women’s lives, bodies, and choices.

To her voice I want to add, showing up in the voting booths to recapture the vision of our country’s aspirational values and to elect leaders who will use their power to stop the assault on our planet.

I wanted to talk about Universalism with you for two reasons. First, we need to understand the soil from which we sprang. Both Unitarians and especially Universalists flowered in the soil of Judeo-Christian ethics and Protestant Christianity. I know some of you don’t want to hear this. Your experiences in some of the fear-based Christian denominations have left deep wounds and scars barely healed. I understand why you don’t want to be reminded of the abuse – which is what it was – you suffered. Out of respect I have avoided saying too much about Christianity during my time here at Tri-UU. But eight years is a long time to be silent about the messenger who brought the idea of love triumphing over law. If we can talk about the Buddha, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and other teachers and exemplars of human life why can’t we talk about Jesus? We can’t we talk about the messenger as well as the message? For as many of you who continue to grapple with the disappointment of your experience of the Christian church, there are an equal number of people at Tri-UU who have had positive experiences in that institution. They are coming from the liberal branches of the mainline Christian and Jewish

September 29, 2019

communities. And every world religion has a liberal branch whose values are completely congruent with our Unitarian and especially Universalist values.

The second, and more compelling reason, is that we can't meet the challenges we face today all alone. We need to have allies and we need to be allies. If we are to reclaim our American democracy and halt the destruction of our planet we are going to have to join with those who share our values. This means joining with the Presbyterian Church of the USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Episcopalians, the American Baptists, the Quakers, and, yes, the Methodists, the ones in the branch called the United Methodist Church. And those are just some of the Protestant denominations that share our values. There are liberal branches and movements in the Roman Catholic church -- think Dorothy Day and the Catholic Workers Movement. The same in Judaism. Reformed Judaism is almost indistinguishable from Unitarian Universalism.

What is being touted as Christianity in these extreme times-- what gets the most media coverage -- is a perversion of the Hebrew bible. It relies on fear and the vision of humanity as sinners in the hands of an angry god. Universalists have trouble believing that Jesus is going to save us from morally bankrupt political leaders or excessive amounts of CO2 in the atmosphere. But they do live with the faith and the expectation that God -- however you define that -- gave us Jesus an exemplar on how to love each other enough to get us through our current situations. We were made to form communities of faith and hope and courage with the assurance that -- no matter what -- God is too good to damn us to hell forever. Could there be a more powerful and simple anchor for Unitarian Universalists, a clearer articulation of our calling in this time? Answering this deeper call of our theology and mission is the quality that ensures our congregations and communities are not mere social clubs but real agents of moral and spiritual change. May it be so. Amen.