

Unitarian Universalism Yesterday and Today
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, March 19, 2017

Unitarian Universalism is a faith tradition that is deep and wide, a movement whose ideas have been carried on many streams of thought to arrive at where we are today, the result of the coming together of two distinct denominations, the Unitarians and the Universalists. The words of the recessional hymn sung at the joint service commemorating the merger, capture the spirit of bringing the two together: "as tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to reach the sea, our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be free." The two denominations became one body in 1961, and in the doing, created something that is at once new and very old. The Rev. Donald Harrington, a Unitarian who preached at that first joint service, described the consolidation of the two faiths as "partly a new birth, partly a commencement, partly a kind of marriage."

To understand who we are today takes an understanding of the past that brought us here. It's a bit like learning the histories of our two parents before they came together. Understanding the stories of who they were helps us to understand ourselves better.

There are many ways to tell the stories of the Unitarians and Universalists. A common way is by remembering and recounting their many acts of social justice, from the underground railroad to the abolition of slavery, from voting rights for women to civil rights for African Americans, from advocacy for public education to the establishment of the American Red Cross, from caring for the mentally ill to advocating for better conditions in jails and prisons, to name just a few.

We also tell the stories through the names of the more famous among us, those we claim as part of our heritage either because of their professions of faith that were clearly Unitarian or Universalist in nature, or by their affiliation with Unitarian or Universalist churches and institutions: John Addams, John Quincy Addams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, Olympia Brown, Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, PT Barnum, Adlai Stevenson, Carl Sandburg, May Sarton – to name just a few.

Yet another way to understand our heritage is through the story of the ideas and theologies that made the Unitarians and the Universalists

distinct denominations, the ideas and theologies that were carried in people's hearts and minds, ideas and theologies that compelled them to actions of social justice.

Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. *Heresy* in Greek means choice. During the first three centuries of the Common Era, people were free to choose from among different ideas about God and Jesus and salvation. Among the various teachings about Jesus was the belief that he was an entity sent by God with a Divine Mission. In that sense, the word "Unitarian" meant the oneness of God, that God could not be divided into two beings. Another choice during those early centuries of the church was that of "universal" salvation, meaning that God would not condemn anyone to an eternity in hell. Thus, Universalists were those who believed that God would save everyone. In 325, when the Council of Nicea was convened and a unified creed was decided upon, Unitarian and Universalist heresies were suppressed. The Nicene Creed was written, making belief in the Trinity and the concept of hell, dogma. With the Nicene Creed, choice in matters of belief was no more. People who held Unitarian and Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

Then, in the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation took hold in Eastern Europe. In the remote mountain village of Transylvania, an edict of toleration was issued, the first such edict in history. It was in 1568 during the first and only reign of a Unitarian king – John Sigismund. His court preacher was Francis David, who converted to Unitarianism because he could find no scriptural basis for the Trinity. He believed that people should be free to choose among religious faiths, or in words attributed to him, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

In sixteenth century Transylvania, Unitarian churches were established for the first time in history. According to historian Mark Harris, “These churches continue to preach the Unitarian message in present-day Romania. Like their heretic forebears from ancient times, these liberals could not see how the deification of a human being or the simple recitation of creeds could help them to live better lives. They said that we must follow Jesus, not worship him.”

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Unitarianism scattered and appeared briefly in other places in Europe. One particular community flourished for a time in Rakow, Poland. A treatise written by Michael

Servetus circulated throughout Europe, titled, "On the Errors of the Trinity," for which Servetus was eventually burned at the stake.

In England, Joseph Priestly, a scientist who held Unitarian views, was harassed and driven out of England when his laboratory was burned to the ground. He fled to the United States of America where he founded a Unitarian church in Philadelphia, a congregation that still exists to this day.

Universalists were also persecuted in England. John Murray, who is considered by many to be the father of American Universalism, fled the shores of England and set out for the new world when he was forced out of his Methodist Church and ended up in debtors prison. He is credited with establishing a Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts and preaching a gospel of Universal salvation. Murray also served as a military chaplain during the Revolutionary War.

On American soil, while Unitarians shared common theological roots with their European counterparts, they were truly home-grown, beginning in some of the most historic Puritan congregations. What the Unitarians and Universalists shared during those early years of American history was a

rejection of strict Puritan, Calvinist beliefs in hell-fire, damnation, total human depravity, and the doctrine of the elect, whereby only some people are pre-ordained for salvation.

There are many to whom we owe a debt of gratitude today for the deep roots of our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, and there are two whose seminal writings laid down the basic foundations that established distinct theologies around which their respective denominations could form: William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou.

Channing's landmark sermon, *Unitarian Christianity*, laid out in clear and concise terms the basic tenets of a Unitarian faith. Ballou's essay, *A Treatise on Atonement*, laid out the theological and metaphysical basis for belief in Universal salvation.

Channing's sermon, written for the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks, took an hour and a half to preach. It is probably best summed up by a profession of faith written much later by James Freeman Clark, a Unitarian minister credited with spreading Unitarianism throughout the Ohio River Valley in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Clark boiled the tenets of Unitarian Christianity down to five essential

points. Forgiving the patriarchal language and use of exclusively male pronouns, Clark's five points of a Unitarian faith were these:

- The Fatherhood of God;
- The Brotherhood of Man;
- The Leadership of Jesus;
- Salvation by Character;

The continuity of human development in all worlds, or the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.

The Unitarians were an optimistic bunch!

Ballou's Treatise on Atonement took a slightly different view of salvation. He believed that it was humanity that needed to be reconciled with God, not the other way around, and that the atoning spirit of love was available to all persons, not just to Christians. He argued that God would not send anyone to an eternity in hell, that salvation was available to all.

Channing was born and raised in Newport, Rhode Island with a silver spoon in his mouth, so to speak. He was educated at Harvard. Ballou, on the other hand, was the eleventh born child of a New Hampshire farmer.

Ballou was but two years old when his mother, Lydia, died. Lacking formal education, Ballou was ordained into the ministry when the noted Universalist preacher Ellehanan Winchester pressed a Bible into young Hosea's chest and said, "Brother Ballou, I press to your heart the living Jehovah." And thus, Ballou's preaching career began.

For many years, Channing and Ballou lived near each other on Boston's Beacon Hill. They publicly critiqued each other's ideas, but they never spent time together personally.

Over the years, the Unitarians and the Universalists grew on parallel tracks, both growing to be more inclusive of wisdom in religions beyond Christianity as well as religious humanism, atheism, and the findings of science. During the 1930's, they began to share religious education resources. In 1953, Unitarian and Universalist youth groups merged to form what was known as Liberal Religious Youth, or LRY.

When it came time to merge the two denominations into one, there was both excitement and fear. In his sermon on the occasion of the merger, The Rev. Donald Harrington cast a grand vision of the Unitarian Universalist Association with "tremendous potential, born of the world's

response to our new relevance." Still, both the Unitarians and the Universalists had some fears. The Unitarians feared losing their identity, feared being subsumed by the Universalists more exuberant style of worship. The Universalists feared that the Unitarians would spend all their money. Both fears were realized to some extent.

Prior to merger, the Unitarians were organized by geographic districts and the Universalists were organized by State Conventions, many of which had accumulated significant funds. The Rev. Dana Greeley, a Unitarian, was elected as the first president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Greeley, like Harrington, had grand visions for the new association. By the end of Greeley's eight-year term, most of the UUA's unrestricted funds were gone, a significant portion of which had come from the Universalist side of the merger.

There are vestiges of Universalist State Conventions today. One is right here in North Carolina at the Shelter Neck Camp and Conference Center. Another is the St. Lawrence Foundation, which paid a portion of my seminary tuition. In return, I am committed to keeping the spirit of Universalism alive.

The Universalist fear that the Unitarians would spend all their money was partially realized. The Unitarian fear that they would lose their identity was partially realized, too. It was common, prior to merger, for Unitarian sermons to be thirty to thirty five minutes in length. The music was mostly classical and hymns were of the traditional protestant variety. Today, our services include more ritual, more storytelling, and the music ranges from the Beatles to the gospel sounds of Sweet Honey In the Rock, to jazz to folk and the blues. Even so, the Unitarian identity remains strong. How many of us today, when we get lazy, refer to ourselves simply as Unitarians?

Today, the streams of Unitarian and Universalist theologies have come together. The traits of each are distinctive among us. Just like I have my mother's eyes and my father's build and I got my voice from my mother's side and my grit and determination from my father's side, without both of them, I wouldn't be me.

Our merged theology today is expressed less in Christian terms and more metaphorically. It is expressed in our seven principles and the six sources from which they come. It has been described as the one light shining

through many windows. We believe in the unity of all life and the worthiness of all souls.

The Rev. Rebecca Parker lifts up some beliefs we hold in common. “We hold that freedom is a real and essential characteristic of life. We hold that salvation is universal. We are confident that revelation is not sealed. We hold that this world, this life, these bodies are the dwelling place of the sacred.”

Out of this new identity as Unitarian Universalists, some among us are emerging and have emerged as great and famous, like Christopher Reeve of Superman fame and Hillary Goodridge, who filed the lawsuit that opened the way for marriage equality to be the law of the land today. Our faith convictions still move us to work for justice in the world, just as our ancestors did, working for economic justice, for reproductive rights, for LGBT rights, for racial justice and equality, for the preservation of our American democracy, and for care for our climate and this beautiful planet that we call home.

We will continue to be heretics, people who choose beliefs that uphold the flourishing of all life, people who choose the ways of freedom, or as

the hymn sung at the time of merger says: "A freedom that reveres the past but trusts the dawning future more." Let us move forward into that future together.