

“Universalism” (Third in the “Roots of our Faith” series)

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at 1st Unitarian Honolulu, 23Jan11

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You of a certain age must remember this:

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant, they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism. Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass.

Take kindly to the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive [That] to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

Some of us have heard this, the so-called *Disiderata* so many times it feels stilted. But in the late 1960s, it felt like the proverbial balm of Gilead, like we could take a deep breath and exhale. It was certainly calming in a time of tremendous tension.

We wanted to believe the attribution that it was found at Old Saint Paul's Church, Baltimore, AD 1692, but anyone who'd read an original document from even the 19th century knew it couldn't be.

In fact, a Hoosier, Max Ehrmann wrote it in the early 20th Century.

The line, “you are a child of the Universe . . . you have a right to be here,” was especially meaningful to those of us in the 60s who were sensing that human beings were being disrespectful

of planet Earth, and that maybe we were a plague, in much the same way the climate change crisis has us again questioning our species' success. Back then, in extreme cases it could become a kind of self-hatred. Mr. Ehrmann's prose poem resonated with those of us who thought a purposeful rebalancing of humanity and nature was a better way.

For me, on a feeling level, it captures the spirit of gentle, loving, sensible Universalism.

And I'm not the only one. A few years ago, the Unitarian Rev. Dr. John Young wrote:
[Ehrmann's writing] *"exemplifies the combination of freedom tempered by an activist social conscious, mysticism tempered by rationality, and tolerance empowered by spiritual democracy and clear-eyed spiritual universalism."*

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I once heard a Northern Irish Presbyterian minister preaching about the way to Salvation. He said "and hwuut can save yahr soul from eternal torment? Noothin'. Noothin' Noothin' Noothin' Noothin' Noothin' Noothin' Noothin' Noothin' Noothin'! -- Noothin' but the blood of Jesus.

And that's the liberal version. That minister was least offering a way out, we have a chance to escape the flames.

There are stricter versions. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination divides humanity into the elect and the damned. All are sinners, but nonetheless, a very few, without reference to character or good works, will go to heaven. Everyone else, without reference to character or good works will be damned forever.

You do much good work in the world, caring for your families, making enormous sacrifices for others; you do good work here with this church. But according to these Calvinists, this will not save you--you'll burn along with the vast host of the damned!

The idea of hell is ancient and varied. Some traditions have it as a cold place. A strong revival of the idea of hellfire came in the time of Jonathan Edwards and a series of Great Awakenings, the first of which began in the second quarter of the 18th century.

These revivals were in large part a reaction to the Enlightenment's making old time religion less relevant, less powerful.

For centuries, the authorities used the idea of heaven and hell to control the behavior of the common people. Do your job, stay out of trouble, act with Christian charity, and you might get into Heaven. Sin with any sort of regularity and you are most definitely going to Hell.

Some of us here may have been raised in faiths that taught this doctrine. Some of you may, as children, have had nightmares and daydreams about yourself being literally damned to hell. Well, you do *know* you've sinned. And when you sin, you have to be punished, don't you? Makes sense.

Seriously, my mother was raised Methodist in the 1920s, and was never able to fully rid her psyche of a sense of inherent guilt and shame.

My dear friend and colleague Jeremy Taylor, the accomplished dream-worker and Unitarian minister, describes Universalism like this:

[In contrast to the Unitarian heresy, which is a phenomenon of the west,] Universalism is a global heresy. There are heretic Christian Universalists, heretic Muslim Universalists, heretic Hindu Universalists, and heretic native shaman Universalists. It appears in all religious traditions, which more or less agree that if you are considering the Divine in its entirety— “It is impossible to imagine, in good conscience, anything that does not have its origin in the Divine. Anything worthy of the noble name God must, by definition, be the source and support of all.

“And so, say the Universalists, (in all their varied accents and traditions) since it’s impossible to imagine anything . . . that does not come from God in the beginning, it is equally impossible . . . to imagine anything that does not return to God in the end. Therefore, all are saved.”

When I was preparing this talk I ran across a website entitled “God is not a sadist.” What I found there was the website of the Universalist Christians Association. It is not associated with the Unitarian-Universalist Association. Here is their statement:

We believe:

1. That God the Creator loves and cares for each individual with a Parent’s love.
2. In the spiritual authority and leadership of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
3. In the trustworthiness of the Bible as containing a revelation from God.
4. In the certainty of just retribution for sin.
5. In the final harmony of all souls with God.

This is a clear expression of classical Trinitarian Universalism that has survived unto the present. More than survive, since 1990 it is having a revival. It is very similar to what all Universalists believed up until the beginning of the 19th century, when ‘our’ Universalists began adopting liberal notions.

Some, perhaps many whom we might recognize as Universalists attend Unity Church of Hawai’i. Its headline is “Realize our oneness with God and each other.” And then “We offer love, encouragement and acceptance to support you on your spiritual journey.” Sounds good, but I’ve had some tell me there’s a steering of their congregants towards an accepted set of beliefs. I intend to attend a service there next Sunday.

Here’s what you need to know to have minimum Universalist ‘literacy.’

Like Unitarianism, Universalism has its roots in Greek philosophy and the early Christian Church. For the first 300 years of the Christian era, universal salvation was accepted by every one, for did not the Apostle Paul write in his Letter to the Romans (5:18):

“Therefore as by the offense of one (Adam) judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so, by the righteous of one (Jesus) the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.”

That is, all are saved.

With the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire, the politicians got involved, and soon universalism was condemned as a heresy.

It survived in an underground existence, until the wraps were taken off during the initial openness of the Reformation. Soon it was condemned again, by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant leaders. This should not come as a surprise.

It went underground again, emerging 200 years later in the safety of the Enlightenment of the 18th century.

Unitarianism began in Poland and central Europe and England before being transported to the American colonies.

Universalism as we know it, began in America. Although English Presbyterian and Dissenting preachers had inspired some of its pioneers, the first Universalist church anywhere was erected in Massachusetts.

Here are the three most important names in Universalism:

A Frenchman, **Dr. George de Benneville**, first preached the doctrine of universal salvation in 1741, and he continued until his death in 1793. De Benneville Pines in the San Bernardino mountains, a U-U retreat, honors his name.

John Murray, an English Methodist who after a horrific series of personal tragedies, emigrated to America, the next closest thing, his friends said, to committing suicide.

His ship missed New York harbor, and he waded up onto Jersey shore. By chance the man who took him in was a townsman well enough to do that he had built a church to provide a place for itinerant Universalist preachers. For Murray, this was a Sign. He did preach there, successfully, and traveled up and down the eastern seaboard, finding in Massachusetts—having been ploughed for years by the Congregationalists—the most fertile soil for his message.

He founded the first Universalist Church in Gloucester, Mass at New Year's, 1780. Murray Grove, on the Jersey shore, a U-U retreat, honors his name.

Hosea Ballou, son of a Calvinistic Baptist preacher, was converted to universal salvation by other preachers in hill country of central New England. Supported by the freedom of the Enlightenment, Universalism was in the air. Ballou is important because it was he who steered Yankee Universalism toward Unitarian ideas, and liberality in general.

His most famous work is *The Treatise on Atonement*, which he wrote in 1805, when he was 34. In it, he emphasized the use of reason, which brought him and the movement alongside the Deists and Unitarians. He rejected the trinity as unscriptural and against reason, likening it to belief in "infinity, multiplied by three."

But the core of the book deals with the nature of God and Man. Murray argued, that "as finite creatures, human beings are incapable of offending an infinite God." He replaced the

appeasement of an angry God with that of God as being of eternal love who seeks the happiness of his human children.

Universalism thrived under his leadership. By the mid-19th century, Universalism was the 6th largest church in America.

We heard Richard (Valasek) tell us a little bit about Clara Barton, “The Angel of the Battlefield,” and founder of the American Red Cross. She emerged in 1861 as the result of our Civil War. We should add that her almost exact contemporary in England, Florence Nightingale, “The lady with the lamp,” began her great nursing work 8 years sooner, because England’s Crimean War began in 1853. Miss Nightingale, by the way, was an English Christian Universalist.

But by the 1870’s Universalism began its slow decline. The main reason is that the more liberal Protestant churches began to tamp down the hell-fire, and shift focus. One by one they began adopting the idea of Universal Reconciliation.

Another factor was Universalism’s weakness of structure. The Universalist faith had never attracted the rich, it was always just getting by, and although its resolute stand in favor of democracy and freedom accomplished much to separate church and state, it was so resistant to authority of any kind that it never developed a strong organization.

At a retrospective of the 60s, someone asked one of the panelists, I think it was Abby Hoffman, if the Beatles were right that “all you need is love.” And Abby said, “sure, all you need is love. Love, and organization!” Well-organized love is what F.A.C.E. is trying to do.

Throughout the 19th century, despite many similarities and shared interests, the Universalists and Unitarians kept their distance from each other. It was said that the Universalists thought the Unitarians “were insufficiently Christian,’ and the Unitarians thought the Universalists “made light of sin.”

James Freeman Clark had proclaimed the five points of the Unitarian faith

1. The Fatherhood of God
2. The Brotherhood of Man
3. The Leadership of Jesus
4. Salvation by Character and
5. The Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever.

As you see, the Unitarians believed in ‘salvation by character.’
The Universalists believed in ‘salvation irrespective of character.’

There were also differences in class feeling. The Unitarians were disliked for being associated with high-mindedness, lots of old money, and the superior air of the Boston Brahmin.

The Universalists were looked down on for being raggedy, middle class at best, and anti-establishment.

After a long courtship with the Congregationalists, the Universalists negotiated a merger with the Unitarians, effective in 1961, and Universalism was never heard from again — or so we thought

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Unitarians have relied heavily on reason, on the rational mind, to drive a stake through the heart of superstition, and to correct social ills. It's in their nature to deconstruct, examine, figure out what's right and wrong and what should be done about it. And the Unitarians have done a ton of good. But Unitarians can and do get into a habit of criticism, and criticize themselves into a kind of depression, where the emphasis is on the bad, the imperfect, the woes of life and woes the world.

Universalists put the emphasis on the belief that everyone is blessed. There's a steady optimism based on their faith that it's all going to be OK in the end.

There's a line in one of our Affirmations: "to the end that all souls may grow into harmony with the Divine." This has a strong Universalist flavor. Their emphasis is not so much on head, as on heart. Their beliefs called them to pass on God's love in their lives, here on earth, and they responded in a hands-on way. Clara Barton, the battlefield nurse, is a good example, as is Horace Mann's work on behalf of public education.

Universalists were quicker than the Unitarians to welcome women into full participation. They were the first to ordain women, and the first to establish a national women's organization. They became leaders in prison reform, abolition of slavery, mental health, and public—*secular*—education.

The merger of the two in 1961 has been mutually beneficial. They got to partake of and contribute to Unitarian organization and financial strength. The Universalists got to keep their churches and keep their faith alive, although it may seem like being on life support.

And Universalism can uplift a heavy Unitarian heart, bearing witness to joy and wonder.

Universalists have always been more about deep feeling, about love and inclusion, with a faith based on intuition more than argument. They responded less to the Deistic-Unitarian idea of God as First Cause, and more to God as an "indwelling life" pervading the scheme of things.

In his talk, given at General Assembly a few years ago, the Universalist Rev. Dr. Thomas Chulak said that "in the 1960s and 1970s the Unitarians dominated, as might be expected because there were three times as many Unitarians and twice as many of their churches.

"We were challenged on all sides, by civil rights, and human rights, the nuclear threat, the need to live in harmony with the natural environment. The religious right was growing stronger."

The resources of the Unitarians we found insufficient, said Dr. Chulak, and despite all the earnest activity, membership was down. Universalism to the rescue! "Under the very noses of the Unitarian majority," he said, "were some approaches that hadn't been considered. This new world needed more community, spirituality, inclusiveness, and love, to balance reason, rationality, and individualism."

There wasn't anything wrong with the Unitarian approach, he thinks--it was just incomplete.

So although we don't hear much about Universalism per se anymore, it has, like a river that has drawn from many tributaries, has branched out and reunited, braiding with Christian charity and

rational religion, diving underground repeatedly, only to burst forth again, unexpectedly, in our time, helping to power the new Unitarian-Universalist spirituality, an impulse which, many believe, has much to do with the growth, the general strengthening of liberal religion in America.

Near the beginning of my time here I tried and failed to communicate adequately the apparently universal longing to be connected to the Source of All. I spoke of St. Augustine's intuitive cry to his God: *thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee*. He's saying we love God and wish to be in Divine embrace.

The Universalists had an original intuition of the goodness of the Creator, or if you prefer, of Creation. They're saying God loves us, and we can bathe and be uplifted in that—in being cherished.

Creation has given us life itself, plus wine, and sex, and babies, and sunsets, and poetry, and double rainbows. Should not our response be to give thanks, and rather frequently? Some religious people praise God constantly. When I am asked to provide a grace before a meal, being thankful for everything is all that ever occurs to me to speak of.

Universalism as an independent religion is dead, and yet it lives. It pops up in sensibilities like Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life."

Our own 7th and final Principle, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" seems to me a Universalist sense of our place in creation.

If you're ever on the mainland, on the East Coast, you might take a chance and attend services at a Universalist church. I've found in these churches, in the poet's phrase, that there "peace comes dropping slow."

May we Unitarians leaven our intellectualism and urgency to right social injustice with a sense of awe for Creation, and an abiding gratitude for this life we have been given.

May we relax and let the humble, gentle Universalists shows us paths of righteousness and simplicity.

May we be thusly infused with a full measure of the very best kind of Christian charity, you know, the kind Jesus taught—concern for our soul, and concern for the souls of others, thy neighbors.