

## **Relevant Universalism**

**November 5, 2006**

It would be much easier to talk about our religion and the two primary branches of it if we could track back to one person, like Mohammed, one historical event, like Martin Luther nailing his 99 thesis on the gate of the church, one story, like the Easter story of the resurrection of Jesus, or a leader like Buddha or Confucius, but our Unitarian Universalist faith is not that easy. Are you surprised at the complexity and the winding path that defines the beginning of our Unitarian Universalist religion?

Even less direct is the Universalist side of the family. Some would say that we could be traced back to John Murray, an English man who in a ship wreck landed on the shores of a New Jersey, where he was approached by a farmer Thomas Potter, who had built a church waiting for the “right preacher” to come along and preach a message were in he could find hope. Therefore, John Murray is considered the “father of American Universalism.” However some would say that Hosea Ballou paved the way for the Universalist faith to blossom, others that the wandering missionaries, who were bringing a message of hope not hell; of the saving grace of God’s love not a grace given by some divine tyrant was the beginning of Universalism. Some could even say that it began during the formation of Christianity when the earliest church fathers questioned the corruption of the soul of any person. One of the things we do know is that early American Universalism was marked most clearly by itinerant preaching. Our area right here was ripe and rich territory. The Hosea Ballou family hailed from Richmond New Hampshire and a path was forged between southern eastern Connecticut, Central Mass and southern New Hampshire of those itinerant preachers.

It was a hard way to make a living. One such missionary was Nathaniel Stacy, who lived into his 90’s. In twenty five years of ministry he reported that he had preached in ten states, and delivered over 4799 discourses, 368

funerals and 228 weddings. He also wrote, “the people considered that they were doing the preacher overmuch honor, and quite as much as they could afford to do, to spend time to give him a hearing.... Sometimes we were obliged to ride whole days without enough money in our pockets to buy a meal of victuals, or mess of oats for our horses, and even be compelled to pawn our pocket knives to get through the turnpike polls, and then take a longer route back to avoid the gate, so as to get home again... But someone had to do it or there would be no Universalist societies or congregations.”<sup>1</sup> He himself never had a congregation but instead was a Universalist missionary carrying the message to those who gathered to hear him. He took seriously the biblical message attributed to Jesus, ‘whenever two or more are gathered in my name, there is the church’.

So what was it that had people gathering together? What message was and is given that has relevance today? A way of saying it is this. God didn’t create humans but that humans are part and parcel of all that exists. Dust and ash, microbe and germ, stardust and moonbeam, earth and water, wood and fire an evolution, an evolving creature ever changing and precious. And if this is true then as one Universalist wrote, “humans with the roots of his/her life deep stuck in the soil of the eternity past, is assurance that the blossom of his/ her life shall go on unfurling in the light and air of an eternity to come.”<sup>2</sup> Or more simply said and some of you will remember this statement, “God didn’t make junk.” Humans are not sinful beings, but spiritual beings that will not be damned to eternal punishment.

It would be unfair to have you think this was easily taught and or accepted for one of the earlier 1800 controversies that almost split the Universalist had to do with this belief. Even today it sticks in the craw of some who want vengeance and retribution and a way to control people.

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<sup>1</sup> P 22 *The Larger Faith, A short history of Universalism*. Charles Howe. Skinner House Books, Boston 1993

<sup>2</sup> P 239 Ernest Cassara *Universalism in America* 1971, Skinner House Books, Boston

Some taught that when the human person died they were in need of being restored to perfection and would thus have a period of time, the time of 50,000 years was referred to - those teaching this were commonly called the Restorationist. Others taught that at the time of death the human would be immediately received into eternity. Some taught that this was because of God's infinite love and mercy, others because Jesus had died for human's sin and all was forgiven. As I stated earlier the path was winding and complex. And when the Unitarians and Universalist began earnest conversations about joining together the popular saying was that the Unitarians felt humans were too good to be damned while the Universalist said God was too good to damn. You can only imagine how complicated it became when the humanist controversy exploded within the Unitarian Universalist denomination in the 1940-50's. But this group became increasingly comfortable with the rational and intellectually rigorous study of the evolution and potential of human.

Adin Ballou once noted, there are three classes of those who become identified with Universalism. A few profoundly and truly religious persons, to whom the idea of eternal reprobation/punishment was emotionally unendurable because of their understanding of God as benevolent: A larger class to whom the idea... was intellectually absurd and rationally indefensible and 3. such persons as usually hold upon the skirts of any new movement that seems to promise them immunity from irksome restrictions, larger liberty of thought and conduct and more personal ease, comfort and enjoyment.”<sup>3</sup>

Universalism is at its core a hopeful and hope filled religious philosophy. Do we dare be that, in this day and age, is a key question about the relevance of Universalism today?

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<sup>3</sup> P34 George Huntston Williams. *American Universalism* 1971. The Universalist Historical Society. Volume IX

Are we going to let our Universalist teachings and leanings help us to solve the worlds ills or are we going to be those who hang on the skirts of a religion that seem to grant “immunity from irksome restrictions, larger liberty of thought and conduct and more personal ease, comfort and enjoyment”?

Universalism beyond its freeing and hopeful message that the universe is loving, just, merciful and promising also offers a broader perspective. A view that extends beyond the borders of race, class, ethnicity, gender, religious practices and territories. The Charles Street meeting house in Boston had over 65 world religions symbols of the on its walls and as the central mural had the great nebula in Andromeda on display. Now talk about those images giving one a sense of being just one part of the whole. We know that religions can be divisive and set up warring factions. We see it in Israel and Palestine, in Iran and Pakistan, in England and Ireland, in United States and Iraq. We have seen it. Now we need to ask ourselves whether have we given enough of our energy to get the Universalist message out.

That message was stated in the Universalist declaration of faith in 1935 and reaffirmed in 1953. It can give us a nice framework and a direction. It is a religion that can help us find spiritual fulfillment and a saving message to the world. The Universalist declaration of faith states:

1. We avow our faith in God as eternal and all conquering love.

This states in direct and sure words a belief at the core of the religion. Love is the answer and the question. Love can cure all, can treat all, and is the attitude that the divine and eternal universe operates from.

2. The spiritual leadership of Jesus

Not the belief in the Christ, not the belief in miracles or in the taught or professed dogma but as a spiritual leader. A man, who lived, talked, walked, died and taught about the spiritual nature of our being. Not unlike the other great spiritual leaders either. Not a deity to be worshiped but a

leader to fashion oneself after. Even if you do not, as I do not, consider myself a Unitarian Universalist Christian I can appreciate the message and the culture around me which understands Jesus. And as you become comfortable with the historical Jesus and adopt or modify any lingering Christian teachings- you will still find room here for Buddha, Dali Lama, Moses and the prophets, Mohammed and the best scientist, poets, writers, artists and thinkers too.

3. The supreme worth of every human personality

4. The authority of truth known or to be known

These two statements remind me that we respect the intellect; we appreciate the human mind, personality, character and potential. Humanity is good and is learning how to be a spiritual being while on this planet earth.

5. And the power of person of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God.

This statement does not deny the existence of evil nor does it deny the capacity for evil. But in unequivocal terms it puts responsibility onto humans. Some would say that to believe no person goes to eternal damnation would encourage wanton, willful, reckless, destructive behavior. Instead I say it makes us/ me responsible for my behavior and my actions in the world. It does begin with the power of one, my action, my thoughts, my deeds influence and affect others. Don't you know that too? Of course you do. Now act like you believe it. Find your way and your universal message of hope and helpfulness and bring it to the world.

Lastly the Declaration of Faith states: Neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a creedal test.

This is crucial to our Unitarian Universalist religion. Remember your beliefs do not need to be tossed out to be a member here. And you will not be tested or given a creed to recite in order to join or belong. Isn't this a refreshing thought? Your opinions, beliefs, values, experiences matter and

are needed to help bring our Universalist message of hope into the world for leading us to a universal fellowship inclusive in spirit, unique in influence and comprehensive in forging individual character.

Where to begin? Don't be that third class of Universalist who is looking for the easier and softer way a way of excuses and of not examining your actions and your influence beginning right here. So Be It. Do It!