



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Why Universalism?

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Spoken Meditation

Last week we explored the question “Why *Unitarianism*?” This week, I would like us to explore the related question, “Why *Universalism*?” Comparing these two philosophically liberal religious traditions, the most famous quote comes from Thomas Appleton, who said, “**The Universalists think that God is too good to damn them forever, the Unitarians think that they are too good to be damned forever**” (Buehrens 228). More constructively, the Rev. Forrest Church said, “In a sweeping answer to creeds that divide the human family, **Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny.**”

And during last week’s Spoken Meditation, I invited you to reflect on *your response* to the question “Why Unitarianism?” What first prompted you to come through the doors of a UU congregation and what keeps you coming back? During the silent meditation to follow, I invite you to continue to reflect on those questions.

As inspiration, I want to share with you some highlights from a sermon from The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, who retired recently after more than two decades as president of Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, our west coast UU seminary. Her important sermon “[Keep the Circle Whole: The Challenge of Unitarian Universalist Theology](#)” makes four important points about “some theological options that are outside the pale” even of the broadly inclusive Unitarian Universalism. Her words can help us think through our own responses to

“Why Unitarianism?” and “Why Universalism?”

Parker makes clear that we have room for many different understandings of God as well as for many people who don't believe in God, but **you *can't* be a Unitarian Universalist and “hold the view that God is the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens.”** Many of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears defined themselves against such views of absolute divine sovereignty and predestination. Such views conflict with the cherished UU values such as of human freedom and individual responsibility.

Second, you can believe many different perspectives about the afterlife or that there is no afterlife and find a comfortable place for yourself within UUism, but **you *cannot* believe that there will be an eternal “separation of the saved from the damned in which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering.”** Such a view would violate our First Principle, which proclaims “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Even more problematically, it would violate the entire Universalist half of our heritage, which holds that whatever we mean by salvation is universal, not limited to an elite group. Along these lines, an increasingly popular UU slogan is “Loving the hell out of the world.” That slogan takes the original Universalist rejection of the idea that God would condemn anyone to hell for eternity in a *next world* and reclaims it for today as a universal proclamation of hope for all people in *this world*.

Third, many individual UUs are drawn, in particular, to one or more of our Six Sources for various personal reasons, which is fine within the Big Tent of Unitarian Universalism. But **you *can't* be a Unitarian Universalist and believe in “one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places.”** We're a living tradition, not one that believes we need to hold fast to an absolute truth that was discovered millennia ago. Historically there were hard-fought battles in our tradition particularly with some individuals and groups who wanted to keep the Christian tradition central, privileged, and elevated. But the decisive shift was eventually toward a robust religious pluralism that explicitly *includes* the Jewish and Christian tradition as our *Fourth* Source, but which is ultimately only one among many equally legitimate sources for truth and meaning.

Finally, Parker writes that you can believe many different views about this world and even about the next world, but **“you cannot hold the view that salvation is to be found solely beyond this world.”** There is a long-standing tradition in Unitarian Universalism in valuing *this world* and *this life* — and that our life together on this planet here and now really matters.

Notice that none of those four points is a creed. In each case, **the starting point is the wide, expansive number of positions that one can comfortably hold within Unitarian Universalism.** But there are positions and ways of relating that are incompatible with the core values of our liberal religious tradition, which historically has emphasized **freedom, reason, and tolerance.**

Where do you find yourself in these reflections? Why Unitarianism? Why Universalism?

Sermon

Why Universalism? For me, the most important part of the *Universalist* half of our Unitarian Universalist heritage is that it has evolved *from* a focus on universal salvation for all in a next world *to* a universal call to “Love the hell out of this world.” Today, with the rise of both modern science and religious freedom, it’s much more common than ever before to question the idea that some humans will be *eternally* punished in an afterlife for what could at most be a *finite* amount of “sin” during a lifetime in this world. But our theological ancestors were born into a much different context.

In the the 1700s in North America, there was widespread anxiety about whether one’s self, family, and friends were destined for eternal torment in an afterlife (Howe 5). Most famously, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon in 1741 on “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” But thanks in no small part to the Universalist tradition, we have come to see that the Calvinistic depiction a wrathful, vengeful, jealous God ultimately says much more about the intolerance of the people preaching those hellfire and



LOVE THE HELL
OUT OF THIS WORLD

brimstone sermons than it does about the divine. To adapt a quote from Voltaire, **“If there is any truth in the teaching that ‘God created humankind in God’s own image,’ then humans wasted no time in returning the favor.”** Indeed, those fire and brimstone sermons were much less about “Sinners in the hands of an angry God” and much more about **“God in the hands of angry sinners.”**

Into that context, John Murray, who came to be known as the “Father of American Universalism,” arrived in the North American colonies from England in 1770, six years before the American War for Independence. His message of universal salvation — that all people would eventually be reconciled to God and that no one would be doomed to torment for all eternity — was a bold, powerful, and life-changing message for many people accustomed to threats of damnation from religious leaders. And a major part of the appeal at that time was that he based his reasoning on interpreting the Bible. And although there were previous people who preached a similar Universalist themes, Murray’s had auspicious timing in that his message of *religious* freedom from the established order coincided with the American Revolutionary War’s movement for *political* freedom (Howe 5).

Murray preached, “Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision.... **Give them, not hell, but hope** and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God” (Howe 9). And fascinatingly, one of the roots of our contemporary practice of “Child Dedications” is that back in the late 1700s, Murray opposed baptisms — presumably for Universalist reasons: **if there is no concern about hell and washing a baby clean of original sin, then a Child Dedication is a fully appropriate and sufficient celebration of the hope and joy found in each new life brought into a religious community** (Howe 12).

Some of you may recall that a few years ago the evangelical Christian minister Rob Bell stirred up a lot of controversy and many headlines with his bestselling book *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. I’m interested less in the content of that book, and more that the strong reaction to the book signals that — more than two hundred years after John Murray began preaching “give them not hell, but hope” on our shores — the larger culture is continuing to move toward the message of Universalism.

And although the stereotype of early Unitarian and Universalists was that the Unitarians tended to come from the elite, privileged upper-classes and the Universalists from the lower classes, to look at the life of John Murray, there are significant encounters with the “powers that be.” When controversy was stirred up about Murray’s service as a chaplain in George Washington’s Continental Army given Murray’s Universalist theology (which some viewed as an offensive heresy), General Washington himself “supported his appointment in the face of much criticism” (H6).

At the same time, Murray’s first encounter with John and Abigail Adams did not go very well. In 1788, they were coincidentally on the same ship back to the U.S. from England, and Murray preached one Sunday to the passengers. Abigail Adams’ account was that Murray’s sermon was “a sort of familiar talking without any kind of dignity,” exposing her bias toward what she called “a discourse that would read well” (Howe 7). In 1790, a more social encounter with Vice-President and Mrs. Adams and President Washington went much better with Murray and his wife Judith bringing congratulations to the new President from the recent Universalist convention (Howe 13). Then in 1798, Murray

renewed his friends with John Adams, the new president, dining with him often and meeting the leaders of government. Adams flattered Murray by claiming that Murray had performed ‘a great feat — next to a miracle’ by enticing Vice President Thomas Jefferson to come to church to hear him preach. (Howe 18, 20)

We are often more aware of the ways that Unitarians were close to the seats of power, but there were well-known and prominent Universalists as well. (I should also note that John Murray’s wife Judith Sergeant Murray was a significant early advocate of women’s rights, and I plan a full sermon on her at a future date.)

And although there is much more to say about John Murray, for now, allow me to move on to Hosea Ballou, the leader of the next generation of Universalists. My favorite story about him is of a theologically conservative skeptic interrogating Ballou about the ways that Universalism could lead to the moral corruption of society. He said:

“Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to

heaven.” Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, **“If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.”**

Universalism, of course, was based on an reorientation *from* a narcissistic focus on one’s self *to* an ever-expanding circle of concern for all — what Jesus called (quoting Leviticus 19:18!) “loving your neighbor *as yourself*.” Humanists began making a similar point a century later that one can be good with or without God. Or as Cyrus Bartol quipped in his 1872 book *Radical Problems*, **“I spell my God with two o’s and my devil without a d.”**

Along these lines, it is fascinating to see unlike Murray who essentially *liberalized* Calvinism such that everyone became part of the “elect,” Ballou went much farther theologically. If you remember last week, I said that before the word Unitarian became common, our theological forbears were often known as Arian Christians or Socinian Christians, depending on whether they thought Jesus was a little less than God (the Arians) or fully human (the Socinians). And although Ballou was a Universalist (not a Unitarian), he began teaching an *Arian* Christology (Howe 18), which is one of the many movements that helped pave the way more than a century later to the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism.

Ballou also made a significant shift in his understanding of Atonement. Murray, like many early Universalists essentially expanded a Calvinist perspective *from* a Limited Atonement (of Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross for only a small elect) *to* Jesus’ death being a universal sacrifice for all people, times, and places. But this still often depicts God (“the Father”) as requiring the horrific death of Jesus (“the Son”), which — if you take a step back — looks a lot like **“divine child abuse.”** In contrast, Ballou began to teach that “it is *humanity* that needs to be reconciled to God, not the other way around” (Howe 18).

There is again so much more to say about Universalist history — indeed, the two-volume history of the Universalist Church in America (1770-1970) weighs in at 1,800 pages! — but for now allow me to offer only a few additional highlights. There was significant progress in women’s ordination in the Universalist tradition in the 19th-century (what’s called “breaking the *stained-glass* ceiling) such as that, by the time women gain the right to vote in this county in 1920, “88 women had been ordained as Universalist ministers.” At that time, the Unitarians had ordained 42 women. These numbers, though relatively small, were pathbreaking because “it

would be another half century before the ordination of women became common in American church life” (H57).

In 1889, Joseph Jordan became the first African-American ordained as a Universalist minister (Howe 75). And it’s no accident that Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech was given in at a women’s rights convention held at a *Universalist* church (Buehrens 72). The Universalist message of universal love for all people led them to be early advocates for many social justice causes from abolition of slavery, to women’s rights, to prison reform (Howe 58). Along these lines, another famous Universalist was Clara Barton, who became the first president of the American Red Cross (Buehrens 73-74).

As I move toward my conclusion, allow me to briefly address further the trajectory the Universalists began to take that helped set the stage for their 1961 merger with the Unitarians. The most important influence was the increasingly vocal call that Universalists must fully live into their name. Around 1896, a spokesperson for the Universalists proclaimed,

You Universalists have squatted on the biggest word in the English language.

Now the world is beginning to want that big word, and you Universalists must either improve the property or move off the premises. (Howe 80)

Similarly, in 1943, the General Superintendent of the Universalists said to the annual General Assembly:

Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism *is* universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that *all* are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and color-less.

A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable. (Howe 109)

So, “Why Universalism?” Well, whereas Unitarianism has sometimes lead down a road to extreme Emersonian individualism (of caring mostly about *one’s own isolated spirituality*), the Universalist half of our heritage calls us *out of ourselves and into the world* to love the hell out of this world — into a world filled with far too much hell that desperately needs the life-saving message that we are part of one another, part one human family.

And as we prepare to go from this place and into the next week, I invite you to allow John Murray's historic words to ring in your ear and potentially change the way you might otherwise interact with everyone you will encounter this next week. If Murray were here today, he would call us to **give everyone we meet "not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their despair, but give them the kindness and love."** Together, may we do our part to love the hell out of the world.

Sources

Charles Howe, [The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism](#)

John Buehrens, [Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People's History](#)