

Living Universalism
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When I was a kid growing up in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, my religious education on the subject of Unitarianism was quite complete, but my religious education on the subject of Universalism was rather lacking. This is a shame because our Universalist history is deep and rich, and I believe very relevant to our world now.

Who were the Universalists? The earliest Universalists in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century were mostly converts from the Baptist faith. They were drawn from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, from the wealthy to the poor. They were the spiritual descendents of the Great Awakening, and therefore committed to experiential and passionate religion.

The earliest Universalist ministers were usually not trained in a seminary, not because the Universalists did not value education in general, but because they believed that preaching should come out of direct and immediate experience of the Holy Spirit, and not from long study. So, they also tended to preach without writing down their sermons, but rather from the passion of the moment.

What set Universalism apart from other Christian denominations and gave them their name was their belief in universal salvation. They believed that all people would eventually be saved.

To give you a sense of Universalism and its development over time, here are the first and last statements of faith passed by the Universalist Church of America. The first was passed by the Universalist Convention meeting in Winchester, NH in 1803. In the non-inclusive language common at the time, it says:

- We believe, that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest, and final destination of mankind.
- We believe there is one God, whose nature is love; revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.
- We believe, that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected; and that believers ought to maintain order, and practice good works, for these things are good and profitable unto men.

The last was adopted by the General Convention of Universalists in 1935, and stood as the official "Bond of Fellowship and Statement of Belief" until the Universalists merged with the Unitarians in 1961. It says:

We avow our faith in God as eternal and all-conquering love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth, known or to be known, and in the power of persons of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God.

It can be easy for modern Unitarian Universalists, most of whom perhaps do not believe and cannot avow the words found in these professions of faith, it can be easy to consign Universalism to our past, to decide that it has no relevance for us now, to think of it only as a chapter of our history and not as a part of our living faith. I believe this robs us of a rich and vital part of our heritage, and of our present as Unitarian Universalists. I believe the heart of Universalist theology - the belief in ultimate love - is still a theology that matters to us now.

The heart of classical Universalist theology might be best illustrated by a story about Hosea Ballou, who was a famous Universalist minister and theologian from the 1800s. There are many stories about Brother Ballou, as he was called, and some of them may be apocryphal, but they live on in Unitarian Universalist lore as foundational stories. And all such tales matter more in their essence than in their factuality or lack thereof. This story comes to me from UU minister Richard Trudeau, who says, "I have no source [for this story]. I heard it from another minister, who heard it from another minister, etc. I use it regularly."

Here it is.

After Hosea Ballou had preached a sermon about Universalism in a small rural town, a man came up to him and said, "Brother Ballou, I'm worried about my son."

"How old is your son?" asked Ballou.

"Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three? Why your son is a grown man! What are you worried about?"

"I'm worried about his soul. He spends every evening with his friends at the tavern. I'm afraid he may be destined for everlasting hellfire."

"Friend," said Ballou, "I think I can help you. Tonight, just before the tavern closes, let's you and I go into the alley behind it and build a huge fire - a bonfire. Then, when your son comes out, we'll sneak up behind him, grab him, and drag him around back, and throw him in the fire."

"Are you crazy?!" said the man. "I could never do that to my own child."

"God couldn't either," said Hosea Ballou. "God couldn't either. You have nothing to worry about."

Universalism teaches that the love of God is the ultimate force in the Universe. Because of this, no one is destined to hellfire. Everyone will be saved, or in the words of the Winchester Profession, everyone will be finally restored to happiness and holiness.

If we think of this theology as only pertaining to the afterlife, it may seem less relevant to modern Unitarian Universalists. Many of us do not believe in an afterlife at all, some of us believe in reincarnation, and others are not sure what we believe. Some of us may believe in an afterlife in the traditional Christian sense, but not all of us. So, what to make of this theology of love?

But this idea that we are all loved in a truly unconditional way - that there is a love in the Universe that will never let us go and never give up on us - that there is nothing we can do to finally sever ourselves from that love - this idea is an incredibly powerful idea. It can save us here and now whether there is an afterlife or not.

The Universalist Heritage Foundation began several years ago to collect stories that illustrate the power of love. They call them "Love Saves" stories, and they can be stories of any kind of love saving in any way. Some of these are historical stories, but many of them are stories submitted to the Foundation by people writing about their own lives. I'd like to share two of them with you.

The first comes from Paul Sawyer, who is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist church in Hartland Four Corners, Vermont. He says:

Some years ago I worked in Massachusetts at a small intensive day school for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. These were kids that had been bounced in and out of regular schools and programs, and some, even, who by middle school had already spent some time in jail.

These were tough kids with tough lives, and with some regularity, one or another of the students would lose control, and physically lash out at whatever and whomever was around. Part of my job was to help kids in such circumstances, to talk with them, and, when needed, to physically restrain them in order to protect their own, or others' safety.

Now, the school building was a converted old majestic Victorian house, and right inside the front door was a nice entryway. Usually the entryway was pretty sparse, but when the holidays came around, the staff of the school decorated the space with lights and garlands and even a well-decorated artificial Christmas tree.

Every day during the first week that those decorations were up, at some point a student having a hard time would take his or her anger out on that holiday scene.

The garlands would be torn off the wall, the decorations scattered and that tree left lying on its side, branches strewn about all over.

So it became part of our regular staff routine in the afternoon after the kids had gone home to come together to put the entryway back in order. We would remove or fix anything broken, put things back where they went, and set that tree back up in its stand. If anything was too far gone to be saved, we would be sure to replace it by the next morning, so that the room looked festive again before the students came back.

At the end of that week, I asked the principle of the school why we didn't just get rid of at least the decorations. Why spend all this time decorating a space so that the kids could tear it apart? It seemed we would all have an easier time of it if we just took them away.

It's been many years since then, so I don't remember her reply in anything like her exact words - but I'll give you the gist of it: She said that it was of profound importance that we keep putting everything back in - all the decorations, all the lights - and making the room celebratory and warm. She said that we might decide to change our decorations some day, but we would never do so because a child had destroyed something. To do that, she said, would be to send the message that we had given up on them, and we didn't think they deserved a nice space, or a celebration for the holidays.

She also suggested that I be patient, because if we were doing our jobs well, over time, the room would get damaged less and less. But in the meantime, she said, we will buy decoration after decoration after decoration, and we will let them know that their actions won't change our resolve for a good life from them; that no matter what they do, they cannot diminish our sense of love for who they are, and hope for who they are learning to be.

Years later, I remain honored and proud that I got to work in a school that chooses love and hope every day for kids that, honestly, it would be much easier to give up on - kids that, in fact, were used to people and unfortunately to whole schools giving up on them. It was a small thing, that decorated room, but the kids noticed. I'm sure that those decorations, and many other little actions taken there every day made a difference. It certainly made a difference in me, and in my sense of the power of true tenacious love.

My principle was right, by the way. By the next week, though some kids still occasionally lost control, that room, and all the decorations, almost always made it through.

The other story comes from another UU minister, Joel Miller, who served Columbine Unitarian Universalist Church in Littleton, Colorado when this story takes place. It was a few years before the shooting at Columbine High School. He says:

Several years [ago], I was in my office [at the church] when a call came in. It was a call from a payphone (this was before the time of cell phones). I could tell it was a payphone because I could hear the road traffic. A young-sounding voice asked me if I was the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church. I was hoping at the time that it was a call about the Gay and Lesbian choral concert at our church later that week. We had put up posters advertising the concert all over our neighborhood - and the posters would be ripped down almost as fast as we had put them up.

The voice on the payphone didn't ask about the concert. I was asked only this: "Does your church believe it's okay to be Gay?"

Please understand that this neighborhood was dominated by evangelicals, so I answered in what I thought would be the most useful theology: "God loves us no matter if we are gay or straight," I answered.

"Thank you." Click.

Several years later, a young woman came to see me - she had just come out as a lesbian to her family and to her father, who was an prominent minister of a large evangelical church. Her family had expelled her from their home and banished her from their lives. It was this young woman's first and only time in our church, and we spoke for a long time that day. I remember our conversation so vividly because she told me she had been that lonely high school kid whose only ray of hope in life had once been a phone number on a forbidden poster, then a payphone call to a small, new church and its courage in the face of hate. She told me that we had very literally saved her life - for several years just our existence as the Columbine UU Church was reason enough for her to choose life rather than end it.

These stories illustrate the power of what Paul Sawyer calls "true tenacious love." That love saves lives and hearts and souls. That love brings hope to those who are hopeless and help to those who are helpless. Universalism teaches that this love comes from the "eternal and all conquering love" of God, but as each of these stories reminds us, it also comes through us. We can be agents of true tenacious love whether we believe in God or not. This is our call as Unitarian Universalists, the spiritual descendents of Hosea Ballou, Olympia Brown, and so many others.

As Olympia Brown says in this morning's reading, Universalism demands that we feel "love for every human being, because [they are] a human being, without any regard to... position, nationality, race, intellectual attainments or moral worth." We are called to "the recognition of something worthy of our love in every bruised and battered, tempest-tossed, sin-stricken" person we encounter, to have a "spiritual eye which looks beyond the pollution of sin, beneath the hard exterior and sees there the elements of moral beauty - and in that defaced, blurred soul, beholds forever the image of God."

For some Unitarian Universalists, the whole of Universalism is still alive and important, still the heart of their faith. There are still Unitarian Universalist congregations which recite the 1935 statement of belief each week, and hold that as the heart of their faith. But even if this is not true for each of us, I believe that the theology of true tenacious love is an important part of our living faith, whatever our individual theologies. As our covenant says, "Love is the doctrine of this church," and I believe this is the love we're talking about. True tenacious love. Love that never gives up on anyone. Love that embraces the weakest, the poorest, the most despised by human society. Love that embraces the strong and the powerful too, calling them to use that power to care for all, to extend love to others. Love that embraces those who have done unspeakable wrong in the belief that no one is lost forever, no one is ultimately irredeemable. This is the heart of Universalism, and its gift to our living faith.

In the words of Frederick Gillis, "May the Love which overcomes all differences,
Which heals all wounds, Which puts to flight all fears, Which reconciles all who are
separated, Be in us and among us now and always."

Amen.