

How We Are Universalists

Part Two of a Three-Sermon Series

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It is said that the Hebrew prophet Amos was a Universalist, but then the same is often claimed for the Apostles Peter and Paul, Jesus himself, and most importantly that God is a Universalist! Samuel Atkins Eliot, President of the AUA (American Unitarian Association) for the first quarter of the 20th century, wrote that: “More and more people realize that the things that divide them into hostile sects are transient and insignificant compared with the deep faiths of the heart that unite them;” and he sought always for “the unity of the spirit which is the bond of peace” among us and with others. This seeking after the universal in faith, denying no path of the spirit which transforms its followers into better human beings, is something that both the Unitarians and the Universalists held in common from their earliest days. During the 20th century they recognized this and talked about merger, and finally merged in 1961, creating the Unitarian Universalist Association. We inherit a faith which embraces all paths with reason and heart at their core. Because of the Universalists, love is our core principle.

As Rev. Richard Trudeau reminds us, the New England Universalists were initially Christians who believed Jesus’ teachings about the love of God. They quote Jesus in the Gospel of Luke 11:9-13: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For *everyone* who asks receives, and *everyone* who searches finds, and for *everyone* who knocks, the door will be opened.” Jesus portrays God as the good parent saying, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg will give a scorpion? If you then, who are [mortal], know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” This loving God was at the core of their theology. Universalists also believe Jesus’ promise as recorded in the gospel of John 12:32 that: “I, [Jesus] when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* people to myself.” No hell fire and damnation here, just trust and hope. In advising a young new minister, John Murray said, “Give them hope always, not hell.”

These Universalists thought the Bible was clear that salvation, which for them was becoming whole and fully human, would eventually happen to all human beings. They were convinced that a loving God would never condemn his children to eternal damnation. God might become perplexed by us, or angry, or more likely sad, but would never punish us cruelly or eternally. At a time when New England Calvinist ministers were preaching hell fire and brimstone, about “Sinners in the hands of an angry God,” the Universalists compared God to a good parent. Now a parent might give their child a time out to think about what they did, or even might feel a need to punish them somehow. But no reasonable parent would burn, mutilate, or punish their child for all eternity. And as Jesus said, if parents being mortal can show their love appropriately to their children, how much more can God do so! By the early 19th century, this hill country religion drew people out from the Calvinist churches in droves.

By the American Civil War Universalism was the sixth largest and fastest growing denomination in America. People understood love and would rather love God than fear God. They felt that someone who followed God's teachings out of fear of hell was not truly virtuous. Integrity requires free choice, so only those who followed God out of love could truly claim to be followers of God. Any of us who have parented know that holding onto our high expectations with firmness and love can lead to a wonderful child full of confidence and hope; while parenting largely through fear and abuse leads only to children who are fearful, obedient only when under parental control (if then), and who will often be cruel and abusive themselves in regards to others. Universalists say if we are indeed created in the image of God than we ought to be very careful about the God that we imagine. Love is our core belief.

As Rev. A. Powell Davies declared in a mid-20th century sermon entitled *Would Jesus Join a Christian Church Today?*, "Jesus never was a Christian. He was a Jewish prophet upon whose life and work Christianity was partly founded. I am not sure that Jesus would ever have wanted to be a Christian, or that he would want to be one now. I doubt whether he would have felt that any religious institution that narrowed itself to so dubious a theological formula was big enough for the job it was attempting to do. I can easily imagine him telling the story of the Good Samaritan over again and saying with added weight of emphasis, *Go [now] and do likewise*. I can imagine him trying to cleanse the temple once more – whether the temple of our national honor, corrupted by avarice and greed, or the temple of the Christian churches, selling their moral birthright to maintain a worn-out creed. What I cannot imagine him doing is going about saying that Jesus is Christ, the Son of the Living God. Because he never did go about saying it – and, being a Jewish prophet and a monotheist, he never could have said it. Every respectable scholar in Christendom knows perfectly well that Jesus made no claim to be God and was even uncertain as to whether he was God's Messiah – God's Jewish Messiah." Universalists don't require that we affirm any particular notion about God, except that no human can be God, and all are loved.

Universalism's central message is that we are all worthy of love, and that we should love one another even as God loves us. And that all are broken and in need of healing, so the primary responsibility of the congregation is to provide a place where all can be healed, where all can become whole, transformed by love into the best human beings that we are capable of being. Even the 19th century Calvinist hellfire and brimstone preachers, or the 20th century equivalent such as Jerry Falwell, will be transformed by God's love. Whatever you have done, whatever you have felt, in the end love will transform everything, and will be complete. This is a powerful message, and by the beginning of the 20th century many liberal Protestant and Catholic churches essentially adopted this message while staying within their traditional denominations. For Unitarians, this Universalist message became a core part of our theology. By the mid-20th century the Universalists, at least as a separate denomination, had lost their distinctive message and their largely poor and rural churches declined. But their teachings about the power of love had already transformed most of the rest of the churches in America. Most everyone is in some sense Universalist today.

And UU congregations, at least since the 1961 merger of the Universalist Church of America with the American Unitarian Association to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, have grown increasingly Universalist with time. Loretta and I brought our children Sarah and Robert

up within the transcendentalist and humanist congregation that is First Parish in Concord, MA. My parents would come to visit some weekends and my father, the Baptist minister, was always surprised by how crowded it was on a Sunday morning. The readings and sermon were far more humanist than he was used to, and the music was far more classical, but he couldn't get over the absolute absence of threats of hellfire, shame of falling short, or even fear of God. One beautiful Sunday morning as we left church he asked me: "How many people came to worship this Sunday?" My guess: "About 240." "And none of them believe in hell or damnation?" he asked. "I suspect not a one," I said. "Then why don't they stay home and read the New York Times?" he asked. I never did convince him that people join congregations, even Baptist congregations, far more out of love and joy than out of fear.

This changed for my father three years later when my brother David died. You see David, who was two years older than me, discovered in college that he was homosexual. He knew what the 1970s Baptist church taught about homosexuals so he never told my parents. For a decade this was the family secret, David came out to me when I left home for college. We went to great lengths to protect my brother from the hateful doctrines of my parent's church. But then he was diagnosed with AIDS, being gay and living in New York City I guess it was inevitable. David came home to die, and not wanting to lie anymore, told my parents it wasn't a bad blood infusion, or a dirty needle, but that he was dying from AIDS as was his lover and most of his NYC friends. My parents were forced, as parents, to choose between the doctrines of their church and their love for their son. Being good parents they chose their son, and that choice transformed my father's Baptist congregation, so that they too chose love over doctrines, welcoming David into their midst. Love is far more powerful than fear, so after David died my mother became a speaker on gay rights, a Baptist minister's wife assuring these young gay men that they too were loved.

Love is the core attribute of this community and in that sense we are Universalists. At our best, we extend our circles of love to include all of our families, our neighbors, our friends, those marginalized by others, and everyone with whom we come into daily contact. By becoming beloved community, we seek to transform ourselves, and thereby to begin to transform the world in which we live. God knows the world needs such love! This love is not unique to our faith community, but with luck it is the very definition of a faith community, to come together in love to help each other in becoming our best selves. We won't always succeed, at times we fall well short of our aspirations, but we will continue to aspire to be better, and to come closer to all that we are capable of being. I think of my parents, transformed by love! This is how we are Universalist today. In this community, we are the inheritors of at least four basic tenets of Universalism: First, that all are worthy and so all will be saved; love and wellbeing is in everyone's future. Secondly, that we should love one another, that this is the greatest commandment and the truest mark that we are on a path of goodness and wholeness as we make our way together. Third, that we have a need to help to heal the world, as this world is in desperate need of the healing salve of our love. And fourth, the path forward is for us to first transform ourselves, that only by so doing will we be able to truly love one another and bring our best selves to healing the world. This is a path of heart, and mind, and hands which forms the core of our values, as we covenant to walk together in love and into this world.

The Rev. Thomas Starr King, who during the American Civil War helped persuade California to enter the War on the Union side, served both Universalist and Unitarian churches during his ministry. When asked if there was any real difference between the Unitarians and the Universalists, he was fond of saying: “Oh yes, the Universalists believe that God is too good to damn human beings; whereas the Unitarians believe that human beings are too good to be damned by God!” In either case we can rely upon goodness, which in old English is another name for God, to help to make us more whole and more complete. The Calvinists feared that without hellfire and damnation that no one would be good! They believed that people were good only out of fear of punishment or damnation. So they warned their congregations that if you saw a Universalist you should cross to the other side of the street, such feel-good heresy just might be contagious, and put at risk your very immortal soul. However Universalist preachers, like John Murray, argued that without fear of punishment you will attract only honest true believers, voluntarily seeking to worship together in order that they may gradually become their best selves. Rev. Murray set expectations high, and then lured people through love not fear to live up to their expectations and covenants in community.

Until dis-establishment of religion in Massachusetts in the 1830s, the Unitarian churches were supported by tax dollars, collected by the parish collector. In contrast, the Universalist churches were instead supported by love offerings, pledges, hence John Murray’s warning that only those who are willing to contribute to the congregation have the conduct and character conducive to a community of good works. By asking more of their members, Universalists found that their membership was more vested in the congregation, and so they were more likely to do more, and to be more transformed as a result of participating in their community. When Rev. Martha and I encourage each of you to give more, to care more, and to be more, it is out of that same Universalist sense that we wish for you the most that you can be, and become, being transformed by participating in this community: each person helping every other person so that all can become healed and whole. The Universalist profession of love is not simply a “get out of hell free card” but is the basis for forming a beloved community.

Thomas Whittemore, the prolific 19th century Universalist minister, who is one of my favorite role models and chaired the Massachusetts legislative committee that ended taxation’s support of the Standing Order of Churches, feared that with time the Universalist churches would lose their distinct passion for religion, so that they might become no better than the Unitarian or Episcopalian congregations that he viewed as God’s frozen people. So he passionately advocated “warm, ardent feeling in the cause of religion,” “no holding back” but expressing one’s faith with all the audacity and passion we can muster. Perhaps you have heard echoes of Rev. Whittemore when Rev. Martha and I take to the pulpit. I make no apology for it, our faith should move us deeply if it is going to transform our lives. Everyone should come to know, and they should come to truly feel, that they are beloved, that this community holds us with honor and respect, wishing us a place within the goodness of love. As we grow together, in faith, please know that I deeply truly love each of you! Blessed Be. Amen.