

The Missing "U" in Unitarian Universalism
Our Universalist Heritage and Its Meaning for Today and Tomorrow
NYSCU - Richard S. Gilbert – Rochester, NY – October 17, 2009

Standing in this Universalist pulpit in this Universalist gathering talking about Universalism, I am reminded of a gathering of Universalists in the mid-1830's when it was suggested by one layman that there were too many sermons (an average of six at each session) and too few opportunities for business. A plea was made to repress this desire for preaching which seemed to prevail among the clergy.¹ I am here to report that, for good or ill, that desire has not yet been repressed, and I appreciate your willingness to indulge yet another minister talking Universalism.

History is something old and something new,
Too often borrowed, more than occasionally true.
History is what our forebears warned us about,
Our children blame us for - and more.
It is something other people have done
For us, to us, even sometimes with us.
It is something we inherit, sometimes merit,
And observe - or serve. History is the only play in town;
The theater around the corner - or continent,
Just up the next block - or country, or here
Where we stand - and understand - much giving by many -
Taking time by the forelock. We shape history and it shapes us.

I am a born Universalist married to a born Universalist, both children of this Convention. In one sense I am a once-born Universalist. In another sense I am a Universalist born again and again and again. Then halfway through my life I became a Unitarian Universalist. However, I have never forgotten my beginnings.

What is "the missing U" in Unitarian Universalism? I'm not sure I can articulate it better than by way of personal recollection. Despite being a born Universalist I have served historically Unitarian churches and therein lies the problem. When Liz Strong, another born Universalist, was the Minister of Religious Education at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester on Winton Road while I was the Parish Minister, we developed a little ritual. Because of the tendency of many people to abbreviate the admittedly cumbersome "Unitarian Universalist" into the more succinct "Unitarian," Liz and I in a dual reflex action would quickly add "Universalist," usually to the titters, chuckles or laughter of those present.

However, for us it wasn't really a laughing matter. That abbreviation – so common among 21st century Unitarian Universalists – deprives our liberal religious movement of half of its history and a large part of its theology and ethics. The "missing U" of which I speak is no mere absent-minded abbreviation of a religious movement but a symbol of a larger forgetting.

Over a century ago the agnostic Robert Ingersoll wrote: "The Unitarian Church has done more than any other church - and maybe more than all other churches - to substitute character for creed. I want to thank the Unitarian Church for what it has done. I want to thank the Universalist Church too. They at least believe in a God who is a gentleman. They believe, at least, in a heavenly father who will leave the latch string out until the last child gets home."²

The late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church has been an advocate of recapturing our Universalist heritage and impulse. In a 2001 essay he wrote “. . . Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny.”³ His Beacon Press book, to be published next month, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*⁴, will elaborate on that theme. Forrest’s strong articulation of Universalism symbolizes its theological and ethical resurgence in a movement that has too often lost track of its richness – and even its name.

There is no better way to cite the power of Universalism than to call to mind Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), a Founding Father and signer of the Declaration of Independence. He illustrates Universalism, not only as a potent theology, but as a demanding ethic. In a letter to Jeremy Belknap in 1791 he wrote: “A belief in God’s universal love to all its creatures, and that he will finally restore all those of them that are miserable to happiness, is a *polar* truth. It leads to truths upon all subjects, more especially upon the subject of government. It establishes the equality of mankind – it abolishes the punishment of death for any crime – and converts jails into houses of repentance and reformation.”⁵

Early Universalism postulated a theological democracy in which all people were heaven-bound in the embracing circle of God’s love. Having a universalist theology also meant there were ethical imperatives. That belief in universal salvation implied certain behavior. Since salvation was for all no matter their station in life, all were to be treated equally. “Faith without works is dead.”

Just a few historical examples reveal the pioneering ethical thrust of Universalism. The Universalist minister Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797) believed universal salvation mandated that he baptize blacks. He denounced slavery as early as 1774. Benjamin Rush was one of Winchester’s followers. As well as being a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Rush also he was founder of the first hospital for the mentally ill, organizer of the first anti-slavery society in America, promoter of the public school and the "Father of American Psychiatry."

As a prime author of the 1790 Universalist Declaration of Faith and Plan of Church Government, Rush pushed for resolutions of public concern: “We . . . recommend that provision be made for instructing poor children in . . . schools *gratis* . . . (and) We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common Saviour, and the obligations to mutual and universal love which flow from that union, to hold any part of our fellow creatures in bondage.”⁶

Though a staunch revolutionary, in the post-war period Rush advocated amnesty for those “timid” souls who would not fight, calling them “lovers of peace and order” and urging them to come forward because the country needed their “influence and advice.”⁷ He advocated a Department of Peace, “an office for promoting perpetual peace in our country,” to replace the War Department which he detested. There should be a Secretary of Peace who would “establish and maintain free schools in every city, village and township of the United States.” Such an office should end capital punishment, for until this evil is stamped out, “it will be in vain to attempt to introduce universal and perpetual peace in our country.”⁸

The Universalists of the 18th century had pronounced slavery an ethical evil even as Thomas Jefferson, of distinctly Unitarian sympathies, continued to hold slaves. The Universalists

were on record against human slavery in 1790 even as the Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing, a “reluctant radical,” did not publicly oppose it until more than a quarter of a century later. He feared rebuke from his Federal Street congregation many of whom were cotton merchants who benefited from the slave trade’s role in growing cheap cotton for their manufacture. The Unitarian denomination never did take an official stand against slavery, though many ministers, of course, did.

Our Universalist forbears produced the likes of Judith Sargeant Murray, a late 18th and early 19th century feminist who once said: “Whatever is *essential* to the ethereal spark which animates these transient tenements will exist only when the distinction of male and female shall be forever absorbed.” Mary Livermore, active in the temperance, abolitionist and women’s suffrage movement, was called the “Queen of the American Platform.” And Olympia Brown was the first woman minister ordained by a denominational organization, the St. Lawrence Association, in 1863. In 1916, in her eighties, she picketed the White House trying to persuade President Wilson to grant women the right to vote.

But this lecture is not about a “tear and compare” argument comparing Unitarians and Universalists to the favor of the latter. It is not about belittling our Unitarian heritage, which I am proud to claim as a Unitarian Universalist. It is at once a warning against historical amnesia and a celebration of the contributions Universalism has made and will make, not only to our movement, but to the nation and the world.

When the Unitarians and the Universalists were meeting to form a new religious association in Syracuse and Boston, there was the question of its name. Earlier attempts to form the Liberal Church of America and other proposed groupings had come to naught. Neither group’s historic identity could be ignored. We could label this discussion “the great hyphen” or “the great adjective” debate. Which name to put first and why; and does one hyphenate the name? I suppose the public relations people believed Unitarian should come first because it was the more recognizable of the two. It still is.

Despite his focus on Universalism, for example, Forrest Church was named a Unitarian minister in every press release I saw. Yet, if one is a grammarian the agreed upon name makes Unitarian the adjective and Universalist the noun. We are therefore all Universalists. What kind of Universalists? Why Unitarian Universalists, of course! But I won’t belabor the point. I am – we are – proud Unitarian Universalists and heirs of two treasured traditions.

The history of Unitarianism is well known. It had its theological beginnings in the debate over the nature of Jesus in the early church. The Council of Nicea in 325 CE featured a contentious argument between two church fathers: Athanasius claimed Jesus was of the same substance as God; Arius, that Jesus was more than merely human, but was only of a similar substance as God. It seems trivial now, but then it was a crucial distinction. Athanasius won the debate; Arius was banished. Based partly on that decision, the Christian trinity came into being at the Council of Constantinople I in 381 CE, and later adherents of the more unitarian position were known as Arians.

Unitarianism comes to full flower as a theology and as a movement in the 16th century when Michael Servetus wrote on the “errors of the trinity.” He was burned at the stake in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1553 by a reluctant but dogmatic John Calvin. However, an even more important disagreement was over pre-destination – Calvin contended people were pre-

destined for heaven or hell at birth; there was nothing they could do about it. Well, not really, for worldly wealth was seen as a sign of God's favor; poverty of His displeasure. One can understand how this theological view incentivized economic activity. The so-called "prosperity gospel" of certain evangelical preachers today picks up this theme by stating God wants you to be rich, thus again equating wealth and virtue.

This Calvinist determinism reminds me of the quatrain:

"We are the world's sweet chosen few;
Let others all be damned;
There's room enough in Hell for you;
We won't have Heaven crammed!"¹⁰

And so Unitarian theology made its circuitous way through Transylvania, Poland, England, and eventually to America. Here it appeared as a theological and ecclesiastical heresy, breaking with the trinitarian Congregationalists and paving the way for the creation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

Universalism also rejected Calvinist determinism. But as an idea its history goes back much further. It, too, was a heresy – a heretic being one who chooses – fraught with negative connotations for the orthodox, but a badge of courage for Unitarian Universalists.

The distinctive theme here, however, is that Universalism was both a theological and an ethical heresy. As a theological ethic it can be traced back to the Hebrew scriptures. After all, in Genesis 1:31 we read: "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good." Everything - presumably even God's creation of humanity was very good. Noah's God covenants with the whole human race after the flood. The Hebrew prophets proclaimed a universal and ethical God of all the nations. The parable of Jonah and the whale is one of the great allegories of religious literature. The author was trying to point out that the Lord was God of all people, not just the Jews. Even the wicked Ninevites, if they repented, were to be included in God's loving-kindness. It was a major message from a so-called "minor" prophet, an early expression of universalism.

Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan is universalism in narrative form - to instruct listeners that even the hated Samaritans – the foreigners - were God's children. And the Apostle Paul wrote: "In Christ there is neither black nor white, male nor female, neither Greek, nor gentile nor Jew, but all are one." Galatians 3:28. Sounds pretty universalistic, doesn't it?

In the third century, the early church father Origen (185-254 CE) declared universal salvation from a merciful God. Punishment was a self-inflicted consequence of sin. That was radical talk for which Origen was subsequently condemned as a heretic by the Council of Constantinople in 553 CE. And there were others.

All this laid the foundation for James Rely's 18th Century enunciation of universal salvation in England in his book *Union: Or a Treatise of Consanguinity and Affinity Between Christ and His Church*. It was a disillusioned Methodist preacher, John Murray, who brought this heresy to these shores in 1770. Twenty-three years later the General Convention of Universalists was founded.

Universalism grew slowly as a rag-tag scattering of souls who had outgrown Calvinist predestination. Universalism replaced a vengeful God of judgment with a merciful God of love. That love was so powerful, that as one observer put it, “the last sinner will be dragged kicking and cursing into heaven.” There were “no hopeless cases.”¹¹ Or as one wit put it, “Here is how one gets Universalist holy water - boil the hell out of it.”

It was the Universalist preacher/theologian Hosea Ballou who became what I call the first unitarian universalist with his 1805 bombshell on universal salvation, *A Treatise on the Atonement*. It was the first book published in America openly denying the trinity. It was biblically based, as you might guess from a story told about Hosea Ballou and his evangelical preacher-father. Hosea admitted to him one day that he had been reading a universalist book. His father observed him hiding it in the woodpile, and went to retrieve it so he might destroy it, only to find out it was the Bible.¹²

Ballou wrote: “When God made man, he pronounced him very good. Now if man was very good, could he be made good for nothing as easily as is generally represented?”¹³

Jesus saved humanity, wrote Ballou, but not by his death on the cross to take on humanity’s sins, past, present and future, but by the example of the life of love he lived. This was the religion of Jesus – his teachings – rather than the religion about Jesus – as articulated in the creeds; the Jesus of *history*, not the Jesus of institutionalized *dogma*. This spiritual and ethical focus on what came to be called the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man helped lay the theological groundwork for the social reform movement of the 19th and 20th centuries in which both Unitarians and Universalists participated.

Ambrose Bierce in his *Devil’s Dictionary* playfully celebrates our theological heritage: “The Universalist is one who forgoes the advantages of Hell for persons of another faith.”

However, through the 19th and into the 20th century Universalism as a theological heresy became increasingly popular among mainline Christian groups, and Universalism became less distinctive. As historian Charles Howe colorfully put it: “Hell was no longer a burning issue for many Americans; an increasing number of mainline preachers had simply stopped stoking its fires.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, this idea of universal salvation in a new key is central to what Universalism contributes to the religious world today.

The Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, brought up on the hellfire and damnation of the Bible Belt, now in his late 70’s, imagines an afterlife without Heaven or Hell. He says religion is not our ticket through the pearly gates; it’s a way to help us “live now, and love wastefully.”¹⁵

What is this universalism that is so taken for granted among us? What is its genius that it is being resurrected by the best liberal theologians among us? What does it portend for the future of Unitarian Universalism? As the late Universalist minister Kenneth Patton puts it: “The word ‘Universalist’ indicates an intention rather than a fact . . . a journey, a growth, a progress in which we are now involved. . . . It does not yet appear what we shall be.”¹⁶

It begins with the idea of God as love (LOOK BEHIND AT WINDOW); in more contemporary vernacular terms “God does not make junk,” or, if you are more humanistically inclined, you might quote the great 20th century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who proclaimed simply,

but emphatically: "Accept the fact that you are accepted."¹⁷ In more scientific language universalism means we participate in the DNA of the cosmos.

Hosea Ballou translated that theological conviction into an ethical imperative when he wrote: "There is one inevitable criterion of judgment touching matters of religious faith in doctrinal matters, can you reduce it to practice? If not, have none of it?"

We might illustrate Ballou's moral mandate with a story about "A team of Evangelical Christians (who) invaded Shipshewana, Indiana, to bring the lost of Shipshewana to Christ. In front of Yoder's dry goods store one of these earnest souls confronted a Mennonite farmer with the challenge, 'Brother, are you saved?' The farmer was stunned by the question. All his years of attending the Peach Bloom Mennonite congregation had not prepared him for such a question - particularly in front of Yoder's. "Wanting not to offend, as well as believing that the person posing the question was of good will, he seriously considered how he might answer. After a long pause, the farmer asked his questioner for a pencil and paper and proceeded to list the names of ten people he believed knew him well. Most, he explained, were his friends, but some were less than that and might even be enemies. He suggested that the evangelist ask these people whether they thought him saved since he certainly would not presume to answer such a question on his own behalf."¹⁸ That would be an interesting exercise for us today.

A century after Hosea Ballou's *Treatise* Levi Powers (1864-1920) summarized Universalism's appeal and its challenge in these words which resonate in our ears and challenge our hearts. He wrote: "Universalism as an eschatology is a comforting faith for all who think of a future life. Universalism as a regulator of human life is the most exacting and difficult faith which calls (us) to its support. Universalism teaches us the race is so bound together that an injury to one member is an injury to all."¹⁹

Think of Martin Luther King's words: "a network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny – injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."²⁰ Think of the Seventh Principle of Unitarian Universalism, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

It is this universalistic ethic that makes such a powerful case today. In a time when centrifugal forces drive us apart – when nation states flex their muscles, borders are closed against immigration, racial tensions abound, red states and blue states are in contention, religions continue to claim to be the one true way – when all those forces separate us from each other – we need the centripetal power of universalism to bring us back together and remind us that "we are all more human than otherwise."²¹

You will notice that we have moved from the early Universalist emphasis on the salvation of individual souls to the salvation of groups – no, of the whole human race. If salvation is a word that sticks in your theological craw, we might look to its entomological meaning – wholeness. We usually think of salvation in terms of individuals; why not in terms of communities? Why not as the whole human race? After all, our theological ancestors proclaimed a theology in which individual salvation was "no more important to God than the salvation of any other human being."²²

Historic Unitarianism placed its emphasis on personal spiritual development – salvation by character. Think of the staunch individualism of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Great prophets they were, but the institutional liberal church would not have survived without people for whom the salvation of the *community* was crucial. On the other hand, the Universalists “encouraged the believer to think of his own interests as inseparably linked with the eternal welfare of the whole body of humanity.”²³

For Universalists the individual exists for the community quite as much as the community exists for the individual. It was, and is, a reciprocal – an interdependent relationship. We are both individuals and members. Too often Unitarian Universalists remember to be creative individuals, but forget to be cooperative members. As historian Conrad Wright put it succinctly: “Joining a church should not be quite the same thing as joining the National Geographic Society.”²⁴

Early Universalists, even as late as the mid-1930’s used the biblical metaphor the Kingdom of God. They avowed their faith in “the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.” Today, many of us, while appreciating the historic importance of the embracing Kingdom of God from which none are excluded, prefer the more inclusive term “Beloved Community,” which is non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical and more theologically inclusive.

Beloved Community is a rich symbol: theologically it means we are loving members of that which is greater than we; it means we are members of a worshiping community at local and national levels; it means we are a vital part of the political communities in which we live; we partake of a nation-state which must take its place in the community of nations; it means we are global, even cosmic citizens - we are creatures with our own stories which are folded into the great narrative of Cosmic Evolution.

It is that universalistic theology that undergirds our prophetic stance to end racism in our nation and in the world; that mandates our effort to end poverty in the midst of plenty at home and abroad; that enables us to support marriage equality for same-sex couples; that advocates for a health care plan that includes everyone no matter their ability to pay; that promulgates non-violence as the way to resolve human differences; that understands religion is about life meaning which transcends the consumer mentality of contemporary society; that realizes the universalist impulse must guide us to preserve our planetary home not only for ourselves, but for generations to come.

Universalism as a theology and as an ethic in the 21st century is still about love – but love reinterpreted for our time – when our concern is not for our individual salvation in some heavenly hereafter, but for building a Beloved Community in the here and now. Love is still the core value - love in personal relations as a committed affection and responsibility for other human beings; love as justice when spoken in public and love as care for the earth. Our Unitarian Universalist Association is now committed to a campaign of social justice entitled: “Standing on the Side of Love.” Universalism has been doing that for centuries.

However, lest we become grandiose in our aspirations, we do well to remember that this love begins with us in our families and in our congregations. If we cannot model this love in our own intimate communities, we are ill fitted to lead in the social and ethical issues of our time. I have the feeling that one of our critical weaknesses as a religious movement is our inability to move beyond a rugged individualism in our own congregations to a place of membership in

a religious community, modeling what true community can be. If we can't do that, how can we build the Beloved Community of Love, Justice and Sustainability?

I remember the only slightly tongue-in-cheek words of the late Max Coots, my minister in Canton during seminary. In his sermon *What Is a Unitarian Universalist Church?* he spoke about one symbol of our togetherness: "We make no claim of being exclusive keepers of a special revelation nor presume to have all the answers by which to provide a fire escape for those who fear hell, or an automatic passport to those in hopes of Heaven. Where two or three of us are gathered together, I only know for certain that coffee will be served."²⁵

I think of another minister who understands the universalism of community which embraces diversity. Stephen Kendrick, minister of the Universalist Church of West Hartford, Connecticut, had taken a theological poll before being called to be its minister. He wrote, "A third of the congregation considered themselves ethical Christians, a third considered themselves theists, and a third considered themselves humanists. I resolved from the first day of my ministry that it was my job to retain that balance."²⁶

That is a purely universalistic stance – one that embraces diversity without judgment; that celebrates our different ways of looking at religious faith; that understands our theological agenda is not to convert others to our way of thinking, but to share our own, to listen to others and to celebrate what unites us. As Forrest Church wisely reminds us: "We are weaned on the rational presumption that if two people disagree, only one can be right. This works better in mathematics than it does in theology; Universalism reminds us of that."²⁷

Historically we have too often been on a theological search and destroy mission, always defining ourselves in contrast to Christian orthodoxy. But the rebel is never free. Heresy is not being against orthodoxy; heresy we know means being able to choose. And that is what we present to the world – the radical notion of being able to choose – to build our own theology – to grow our own souls; to commit ourselves to healing a fractured and broken world; to ally ourselves with the builders of the Beloved Community. We are heretics, yes, but happy heretics who choose life, love, justice and peace over all else.

If I were to try to articulate a unifying statement of Unitarian Universalism inspired by this Universalist history, it might parallel the 1935 Washington Avowal of the Universalist Church of America:

We avow our faith in an indifferent, but benign, Cosmos;
 An interdependent web of existence of which we are a part;
 A creative impulse that pervades the universe,
 Manifest on earth as nature,
 Over time as history,
 And in humanity as love;
 The spiritual leadership of all the great prophets of the human spirit who lived in love for justice;
 The church universal composed of all the generations
 Who have shared birth and death and all that lies between;
 In the priesthood of all believers who care for one another;
 In the prophethood of all believers who seek the reign of righteousness.
 In the free and disciplined search for truth in religious community;
 In the authority of truth known or to be known;

In the inherent worth of each human being,
 the dignity of every earth citizen;
 In the power of people of good will and sacrificial spirit to build the Beloved Community of
 Earth.

And so I admonish this gathering of Unitarian Universalists to heed the words inspired by anthropologist Robert Ardrey and given liturgical expression by our own Universalist minister David Bumbaugh: "Let us dedicate ourselves to the proposition that beneath all of our diversity, and beyond all our differences, there is a unity which makes us one, and binds us forever together in spite of time, death, and the space between the stars."

¹ Russell E. Miller. *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church of America 1770-1870*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979, p. 134.

² Robert Ingersoll. (Unknown source).

³ *UU World* Nov/Dec 2001, p. 18.

⁴ Forrester Church. *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009.

⁵ Quoted in David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985, p. 55.

⁶ Quoted by Emerson Hugh Lalone. *And Thy Neighbor As Thyself*. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1959.

⁷ Elliot Wright, "A Founding Father Worth Having," *American Report*, March 26, 1973, p. 15 (quoted).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Judith Sargeant Murray. 1782. In 1790 she wrote "On the Equality of the Sexes."

¹⁰ Source unknown.

¹¹ Charles Howe. *The World*. July/August 1993, p. 13.

¹² Story told about Hosea Ballou. *Unitarian Universalist Christian*, Vol. 60, 2005, p. 7.

¹³ Harris, p. 12??

¹⁴ Charles Howe. *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*. Boston: Skinner House, 1993, p. 76.

¹⁵ Via Maureen Fielder and interfaith radio 7/31/09.

¹⁶ Kenneth L. Patton, *Expanding Universalism*, monograph.

¹⁷ Tillich. "Accept the Fact You Are Accepted"

¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, "The Testament of Friends," *The Christian Century*, 2/28/90, 212.

¹⁹ Levi Powers ??????

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. "A Network of Mutuality," *Singing the Living Tradition* # 584. Boston: Beacon Press/UUA 1993.

²¹ Author unknown.

²² ??????

²³ See Razor bottom 2

²⁴ Conrad Wright. *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in UU Churches*. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989), p. 10.

²⁵ Max Coots, "What Is a UU Church?"

²⁶ *The World* July/August 1993, p. 14.

²⁷ Forrest Church, *UU World*, 2001, p. 19.