

Our UU Heritage and Future
Sunday, August 14, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

Nearly a century ago, Lewis Fisher, dean of the Ryder Divinity School in Chicago, a Universalist seminary, in his book Which Way? wrote, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move.”

This answer has always been true for Universalists, for Unitarians and today for Unitarian Universalists. We are never satisfied that we know all there is to know, have found the absolute best understanding of the world and how to live in it, or can trust that no one else has anything new to teach us.

A little history showing that movement: In 1817 William Ellery Channing laid out what it meant to be a Unitarian at that time. In 1817 that was a Unitarian Christian. His sermon had three parts, how Unitarians saw the Bible, the explanation of the Unitarian rejection of the idea of the Trinity, and the rejection of a wrathful God who needs a blood sacrifice in order to offer people forgiveness. As I share quotes from our past, I have left in the use of man for people, he for God, and brotherhood for unity between all people. That we no longer use man and he and brotherhood in these ways is just one of the many ways that our faith has moved.

Channing said on the Bible, “We profess not to know a book, which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the BibleWe reason about the Bible precisely as civilians do about the constitution under which we live; who, you know, are accustomed to limit one provision of that venerable instrument by others, and to fix the precise import of its parts, by inquiring into its general spirit, into the intentions of its authors, and into the prevalent feelings, impressions, and circumstances of the time when it was framed. Without these principles of interpretation, we frankly acknowledge, that we cannot defend the divine authority of the Scriptures. Deny us this latitude, and we must abandon this book to its enemies.” An interesting early take on our Constitution as well as on the Bible.

There are three famous nineteenth century American Unitarian sermons. Channing’s was the first, “Unitarian Christianity or “The Baltimore Sermon.” By the second sermon, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1838 Harvard Divinity School Address, the Transcendentalists were moving Unitarian Christianity to a different place. In his essay “The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism” Dr. Barry Andrews writes of the Transcendentalists, “In spite of the diversity of interests represented in the group, almost all of them were Unitarians and most were ministers or former ministers. According to one count, of 26 who were closely associated with the group, 17 were Unitarian ministers — all but four, that is, of the men. This was no coincidence, since the movement — in spite of all its literary, philosophical, and political dimensions — was essentially a religious one, an outgrowth of early 19th century Unitarianism.” The Transcendentalists were among the first Westerners to read Eastern scriptures. One can hear the influence in a description of a spiritual experience by Margaret Fuller who said, “I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought the self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the all, and all was mine....” I can hear some Buddhist influence there.

For the Transcendentalists, faith was a very individual experience. Emerson said in his Divinity School address, "Meantime, whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition... It cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing....Emerson continues with one particular person of influence, "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there....He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.'" A very unorthodox way to see Jesus and oneself and a move from Channing's more orthodox Unitarian Christianity.

The third of the famous nineteenth century historical American Unitarian sermons was Theodore Parker's 1841 "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity." Parker said, the permanent truths of Christianity were Jesus' teachings to love God and one's neighbor, all doctrinal ideas about Jesus were changeable and transient. He said, "Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus... why (should) the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority."

By the end of the nineteenth century David Robinson tells us in his book, The Unitarians and the Universalists "The drive of ...radicals was to organize western (American) Unitarianism on an 'ethical basis'- not to require any statement of theistic belief of those individuals, ministers, and congregations accepted as Unitarian....the western radicals...had established 'Freedom, Fellowship, and Character in Religion' as their motto. It was as notable for what it omitted as for what it included: no mention of God, Christ, the church, or the Christian tradition," quite another move indeed.

That was the way early Unitarianism moved. Universalism's movement also can be traced in its history. Robinson in The Unitarians and the Universalists says, "The Winchester Profession was a brief summary of the Universalist creed adopted at the 1803 meeting of the New England Convention of Universalists in Winchester, New Hampshire....(It said,) Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

"Article II. We believe that 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.

"Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men." I expect that last was there as reassurance because some claimed if one gave up the idea of hell there was no reason to be good.

Robinson continues the Universalist history, "In the winter of 1804-5, only slightly more than a year after the adoption of the Winchester Profession, Hosea Ballou wrote, A Treatise on the Atonement, the most significant theological work in the history of American Universalism," not a sermon like the 3 of

Unitarianism but a long essay or treatise. Robinson suggests that early Universalism was simply Calvinism with a different outcome. There was not a saved elect, but all were saved by Christ's atoning death. Robinson writes, "Ballou's innovation to Universalist thinking was not that he rejected the salvation of an elect few and made Christ's death a universal atonement..., it was that he rejected the entire concept of the necessity of a vicarious atonement to reconcile God to humankind." Ballou said of the idea of a loving God requiring a blood sacrifice and then that that sacrifice only saved an elect few, "Why the above ideas should ever have been imbibed by men of understanding and study, I can but scarcely satisfy myself..."

By the beginning of the twentieth century Universalism, like Unitarianism, was moving beyond its Christian roots. Robinson again in The Unitarians and the Universalists writes of Clarence Skinner's influence on the Universalist side of our tradition. "Skinner's importance to Universalism was his leadership in the denomination's move from a conception of Universalism as a theological doctrine to a broadened notion of Universalism as a working philosophy aimed at securing the universal harmony of all individuals on earth...(an) expansion of the notion of brotherhood was...part of a long process by which Universalism was evolving from Christian sectarianism to universal religion." Mid-century "in a 1945 book called *A Religion for Greatness*, Skinner outlined a 'radical religion' based upon a 'vital, meaningful relationship between the self and the universe,' a religion that he thought of as 'Universalism' in a modern sense.

While Skinner moved Universalism in its social and philosophical thought on the faith, the Universalist Kenneth Patton moved the idea of what Universalist worship might look like. Robinson writes, "Kenneth L. Patton has been prominent in efforts to revitalize the concept and form of worship in the liberal tradition through recourse to the symbolic resources of world religion....Patton, himself a poet and hymnist, insisted that 'religion cannot operate without symbols' and tried to bring to bear religious symbols from every world tradition, East and West, on the formation of (Universalism as) a world religion." Today many of our congregations have a symbols from a variety of world religions displayed in their buildings. Ours is in our foyer.

We don't stand, we move. When I came into Unitarian Universalism in the early 1990s feminine images of the divine were being explored in adult religious education curricula such as "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" and "Rise Up and Call Her Name." In the statement of our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources a new principle had been added in 1985 shortly before my time among you, and in my own time as a Unitarian Universalist a new source was added in 1995. They were our seventh principle, we affirm and promote "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part", and our sixth source, "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." We began to see the environment and our interactions with the earth and all its creatures not just humans as a part of our Unitarian Universalist spirituality.

Today Unitarian Universalists are looking critically at the ways our faith has and is benefitting from and been influenced by white supremacy. A possible eighth principle is being considered, we "covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

We have been called out and called in by the black, indigenous, people of color among us. A close look at our history shows the ways we have been blind to white supremacy and benefitted from it as individuals and as a faith. Even the white abolitionists among us of whom we are so proud did not see African Americans as equal to themselves. We had Indian boarding schools disinheriting students from their culture. We promised moneys to black Unitarian Universalists and then reneged on that promise. And that is just a beginning to a list.

While we may not stand but move our past does influence our future. One can see the Universalist influence in the phrase, "a diverse multicultural Beloved Community." One can see the Unitarian influence of the drive to organize the faith on an ethical basis in the words, "by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

I don't know whether the 8th principle will be adopted or whether the whole of our current principles and sources will be changed into something completely different. I do know that addressing the issue of the way white supremacy has and is keeping us from the ideals of our unitarian universalism is an issue for our time if we truly long to become a diverse, multicultural beloved community in Unitarian Universalism's future. Many congregations have made a commitment to do this work by adopting the 8th principle as a congregation. The first vote on it for the denomination will happen next year at our annual General Assembly.

I end with a meditation by Roddy Biggs, a queer BIPOC young adult seminarian seeking to come into our ministry. They write, "Though at times I may forget who I am or who becoming,
my dreams: they matter. When I make space for all that is;
When I move away from that which no longer serves me,
When I make space for the new possibility in the circumstances;
My dreams do matter.
They matter; they hold many truths and many turning points;
they matter; though at times I may convince myself they don't, they do,
for they call me back in time and forward still.

My dreams matter. They matter, as they pull me inward and yet simultaneously push me outside of myself;
My dreams matter; they matter as they speak to the breadth of love, of pain, of hope, that rest deep in the fabric of my blood and bones.

My dreams matter, as they are connected to the dreams of my ancestors;
connected to all who have graced this earth before, who grace it here and now,
and will be connected to all who grace this earth, when I, when we, grace this place no more;
my dreams, they matter; your dreams, they matter; our dreams, they matter.
They matter."