

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Two Stories Merged Into One”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 9, 2021

Opening Words

Today is a bit of a mashup service. Yes, today is Mothers Day. We remember **Ann Reeves Jarvis** of West Virginia who helped start “Mothers’ Day Work Clubs” to teach local women how to properly care for their children. In 1868 Jarvis organized “**Mothers’ Friendship Day**,” at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation. Today we also remember abolitionist and suffragette [Julia Ward Howe](#). In 1870 Howe wrote the “Mother’s Day Proclamation,” a call to action that asked mothers to unite in promoting world peace. In 1873 Howe campaigned for a “Mother’s Peace Day.” We also honor **Anna Jarvis**, the daughter of **Ann Reeves Jarvis**, who initiated the official Mother’s Day holiday following her mother’s death in 1905. She conceived of Mother’s Day as a way of honoring the sacrifices mothers made for their children.

May 12, I discovered, after Randy and I decided much of the music for our service, will be the 60th anniversary of the consolidation of Unitarianism and Universalism into Unitarian Universalism. I felt compelled to talk about **that** this morning rather than the variety of stories of being a mother that you probably already know and appreciate.

So to our mother and father ancestors who gathered in Syracuse in 1959 to finalize the consolidation plan, we celebrate you today, we celebrate your work and build upon your example.

Reading

From the Joint Merger Commission Information Manual published in 1958 answering the basic question, why merge?

The first and basic “why?” has already become clear. It is no accident that for one hundred years various rapprochements between the two denominations have been made. There is an affinity between them of which there is a growing awareness. The differences which separate become of decreasing importance, the likenesses of point of view, purpose, organization, and operation increase in significance. Such feelings have become so strong and have been accentuated by merger activities and especially the creation and operation of the Council of Liberal Churches to an extent that some individuals and churches have already taken it for granted that merger has been accomplished.

A second why is to be found in the strong tendency toward merger in all possible areas of current American life. It has been found by experience that the competition of many small units frustrates the attainment of goals, is costly, duplicates unnecessarily organization, equipment and personnel, and consequently is less efficient and effective. The ecclesiastical realm cannot escape the influence of this current thinking ... (skipping to the fourth reason)

There is a fourth reason of which many deeply religious and serious minded people are increasingly sensitive. In a world demanding considerable social and religious conformity within several large

patterns of orthodoxy, it is obvious, that by their very natures, religious beliefs and professions, Unitarians and Universalists would be very aware of the existence of each other as individuals, churches, and national movements and would gravitate towards each other in one or more respects ...

In general, it is quite clear that both denominations wish to dispose of the question, one way or another as there is much to be done. Today liberal religion appears to be on the threshold of a new era, a new life where, it seems imperative that, the sooner this question is resolved ... the better ...

Sermon

The parallels between Unitarianism and Universalism were noted almost from their inception. Both gained their identity as protests against Calvinism. Both saw more inherent potential for good in humanity than Calvin did. Both rejected the Puritan's warped view of Election that selected only a small group of "the visible saints" to go to heaven and the rest of wretched humanity damned to hell. The Universalists believed God's love for humanity was so great that none of us would suffer eternal hell fire. The Unitarians recognized goodness in all humanity implanted by God that could be realized through the process of character development. Rather than mired in sinfulness that couldn't be escaped except through Christ's salvific intervention, each of us has a unique potential, a gift to the world, we are called by God to develop for the good of all. Even in the early 1800's, the parallels were noticed by guiding lights like William Ellery Channing of the Unitarians and Hosea Ballou of the Universalists. Sadly, even though these contemporaries both lived in Boston not that far apart, we have no record of them ever meeting in person. What separated them was more than theology, it was social class. Channing was part of the Harvard educated elite of Boston unlike Ballou whose educational credentials and social status were much lower.

So, the final joining together of the Unitarians and the Universalists might have only been accomplished through the support of the son of a Harvard President, Dana McLean Greeley. The conversation about merger began in earnest after the Second World War. The Unitarians had suffered greatly during the Great Depression of the 1930's and done a lot of soul searching. The Twentieth Century was not good for the Universalists. Many of the Universalist churches had been established in rural towns. These were emptying out with the great migration to urban centers. Urban centered Unitarian congregations were growing. They benefited from many people going to college and studying for scientific careers. These folks were looking for more a more progressive form of religion for their growing families that didn't reject evolution, the new cosmology, and the new humanistic and scientific way of thinking.

You'll hear the story that Unitarians were the Humanist urbanites and the Universalists were the Christian rural folk. While that was true in the beginning of the Twentieth Century, by the 1950's there was a good mix of both in many congregations. They had already created a hymnbook together in the 1930's. Sophia Lyons Fahs, our legendary Unitarian religious educator, was writing curriculum for children and youth that was also used by Universalists. The two youth organizations merged in the early 1950's. As the Merger Commission noted, some congregations were behaving as if the merger had already happened. Our congregation here in Albany absorbed the Albany and Troy Universalists many years before this. We had even called a Universalist minister in the 1850's!

On the street level, in our congregations, they were not all that different, but the Christian identification remained stronger with the Universalists. So, when it came time for the hard bargaining in the merger process, there were some difficult moments.

The Joint Merger Commission had built a proposed structure for the process of “consolidation.” They had to consolidate for legal reasons having to do with the protection of assets so a couple of breakaway congregations couldn’t claim the legacy of Unitarianism or Universalism and take all the money.

There were 57 amendments proposed to revise their plan and each one had to be debated and voted up or down by both the Unitarians and the Universalists separately. The thousand delegates from both the Unitarians and the Universalists met in Syracuse in separate conventions and plodded through the amendment by amendment process until they came to the big theological question: the statement of principles for the new UUA bylaws. Warren Ross, in the book, *The Promise and the Promise*, tells the story:

There were, essentially, three factions: the traditional theists, who wanted a reference not only to God but to our Christian heritage; the “universalist” theists, who preferred acknowledging the “great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition”; and the humanists, who would just as soon do without reference to any deity. So strong were the disagreements that the Merger Commission revised its proposal even before it was brought to the floor, then reverted to its original draft. That draft read, “To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in their essence as love to God and love to man.”

Missing from this statement was any reference to Jesus or Christianity which inflamed the traditional theists. They got even more steamed when the humanists wanted to drop the sentence all together. A group of twenty ministers led by Donald S. Harrington of Community Church in New York City proposed adding “our Judeo-Christian tradition” “to heal deep cleavages ... which otherwise may seriously imperil the success of the merger effort and the general morale of liberal religion.” Meanwhile the Universalists had passed the original version by a margin of four to one. There was much late night maneuvering and negotiating into the wee hours the morning until a compromise was finally hammered out. The compromise? Change the wording from “*our* Judeo-Christian tradition” to “*the* Judeo-Christian tradition.” Not everyone was happy but there were enough votes to keep the consolidation moving forward. With overwhelming support in votes by both Unitarian and Universalist congregations, the consolidation was finalized May 12, 1961.

Those two words, “our” and “the,” are powerful descriptors of the detour the new Unitarian Universalist Association took away from its roots. In essence, it tried to create itself ex nihilo without being bound to a religious past and trusting the dawning future more. Part of that creation process relegated theology to be a personal concern rather than a collective endeavor. This gave rise to the fallacy, often repeated about us, “You can believe anything you want and be UU.” Many in our congregations behaved this way in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Individualism dominated and suppressed the drive to grow our corporate identity, purpose, mission, and vision.

The Rev. David Bumbaugh wrote clearly about this in the UU World for their 50th Anniversary issue in the summer of 2011. He contrasts two statements. In 1944, a committee chaired by A. Powell Davies issued a statement of “Five Principles of Modern Unitarianism”:

Individual freedom of belief;
 Discipleship to advancing truth;
 Democratic process in human relations;
 Universal brotherhood, undivided by nation, race, or creed; [and]
 Allegiance to the cause of a United World Community.

Now contrast that with the 1935 Universalist General Assembly new statement of faith adopted, without dissent:

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 men of goodwill and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.

Do you hear how radically different they are? The Unitarian one focuses first on individual freedom within a diverse unnamed faith but without ultimate purpose. The Universalist one is deeply theological focused on an ultimate purpose of overcoming all evil and establishing the Kingdom of God.

Bumbaugh described the difference powerfully:

... this was a theological statement; ... it affirmed Universalism’s ancient, central commitments, it spoke of those commitments in the language of the day, and it rooted the call for social justice in a religious vision. Advocates of the new Universalism dreamed of creating a religion that could speak with power to the emergent one-world community coming into being around them. This led them to engage virtually all the theological categories that had structured their tradition and to reform that tradition for a new time and a new context.

Unlike the Universalists, the Unitarians were more interested in marketing their faith and growing their congregational sizes. It is better to define ourselves less if it means we can include more people who may not share the same beliefs. Or again as Bumbaugh challenges us:

[We are told] we have a moral obligation to grow, to spread our word because we possess a vital message, one that is of central importance to the world and to the crises in which the world is entangled. When, however, we are challenged to say what that message is, what our faith consists of, what defines us as a religious people, often we are driven to an embarrassed silence, or we smile smugly and confess that no one can speak for all Unitarian Universalists, or we stutter and stammer and mutter some half-digested clichés about the worth of every person or the importance of embracing each person’s freedom to follow his or her own spiritual path. Those are **not wrong** affirmations, but they provide **an incredibly weak foundation** for a religious movement **and a wholly inadequate program** for saving the world. [bold added]

Those serious challenges by Bumbaugh are still salient ten years later. Yet today, I sense we are moving in the directions he recommends as we seriously engage in anti-racism work, anti-oppression work and dismantling White Supremacy Culture. That work is driving us beyond the individualism of the past and toward institutional commitments that require deeper foundations than personal preference. We need a faith that challenges us, shakes us out of complacency, and demands action, at times sacrificial action.

Bumbaugh wrote his critique ten years ago. Where are we today?

There are several trends in our congregations that are moving away from radical individualism. One is creating covenants that elevate the way we relate to each other and the community we create together above individual freedom to say or do whatever we want. Covenant work supports building a stronger sense of we rather than being a collection of atomized individuals doing our own thing.

The movement that started in 2013 that directly addresses questions of belief, service, and especially responsibility that Bumbaugh raised is the 8th Principle Project. Here it is:

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 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.”

Beloved Community is the contemporary, universalized language for the theological concept of the Kingdom or Realm of God that directed the Universalists in 1935. The language of responsibility today is framed as accountability. Implicit in this statement is the belief that spiritual wholeness is found through diverse multicultural Beloved Community not through monocultural conformity. The good is served by abandoning the belief in one and only one true way to perfection.

This need for responsibility and accountability is a necessary part of religion we neglect at our peril. The process of growth and development, practically from kindergarten, moves us away from preoccupation with ourselves and toward that which is beyond us. If that doesn't begin to happen in adolescence with a peer group or on a sports team, it kicks in through marriage, raising children, employment, and civic engagement in a democracy. Our challenge is and continues to be widening our sense of we beyond our tribe, beyond our region, beyond our nation, beyond our race and class, and today beyond even our species to the wellbeing of the planet. We can't skip over any one of these steps of widening our embrace of all beings in a systemic whole, a spiritual wholeness of life itself.

And to do that, we need a theological vision that reaches beyond us. The good news is we are on the road to developing that theological vision.

I'd like to close with the Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert's attempt at putting that theological vision into language. He offered it twelve years ago at an event commemorating that famous 1959 consolidation meeting in Syracuse I spoke of earlier. This is his updated revision of the 1935 Universalist statement of faith for the 21st Century:

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.

So be it.

Benediction

We close our service with these words preached by the Rev. Donald S. Harrington, senior minister of Community Church of New York City, offered during a celebratory worship service held in Symphony Hall in Boston after the final consolidation vote in the Summer of 1960.

We have achieved a union which is the result of more than a hundred years of striving, and which now, at last, when the time is fully ripe, has come to completion. It is our tremendous potential, born of the world's response to our new relevance, caused by this new world's need for a religion which is dynamic instead of static, unitive instead of divisive, universalistic instead of particularistic, history-making rather than history-bound, that has made this Unitarian-Universalist merger necessary and inevitable...

This is the vision, the challenge, the opportunity. These are the tasks that wait the coming of the great, uniting new world faith. May we, Unitarians and Universalists and men and women of good will everywhere, strive with all our might to make our lives, our churches and fellowships, and our new Unitarian Universalist Association the vehicles of this vision.