

The Second 'U'

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Reading

For people who have been brought up and indoctrinated in the idea that all religion is good for is to save us from hell and send us to heaven in the hereafter, it is difficult to understand how it is possible there should be any religion at all in the gospel of which we speak...

Some say that if all are to be saved at last, there is no reason why we should trouble ourselves to serve God any more; that we might, in this case, just as well give ourselves full license in sin, and take our pleasure, as we live. Now, wherever this notion of religion prevails, there must be felt a very strong and deep-seated antipathy to the gospel of universal grace. For it is plain that if the service of God, in the present life, were such an intolerable burden that nothing but the fear of endless damnation would drive people into it; if it were true that religion consists in obeying God, not through love, but by the constraint of terror, and that the chief value of it is that it is the means of securing our everlasting welfare; then indeed we should have to acknowledge that our views of the gospel are irreligious in their influence. But I need not remind you that there neither is, nor can be, any true religion but what flows from the love of God, and is its own reward.

Hosea Ballou, from [*Why Impartial Grace Is An Occasion of Reproach*](#), 1866

We are Unitarian Universalists...some of us, anyway. We may not all be comfortable with that identification individually, and that's okay, too. But as a way to recognize our membership, our participation in this community, we are Unitarian Universalists, a part of this Unitarian Universalist congregation, which is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which has its roots in the Unitarian and Universalist traditions...

You can see, after a short while, that it grows somewhat tiresome to use all of those syllables, so for practical purposes, it gets shortened a lot. We are "UU"...that's the term we use often among ourselves, because we love using just initials.

And "UU" works okay among ourselves, but to the outside world? Well, they may just think we're having trouble spitting out the words. So we often opt for "Unitarian", because after these five syllables we see the other person already looking puzzled, and we just can't bear to admit

that there are *five more syllables* before we're finished. As understandable as this may be from a practical standpoint, I thought it might serve us well to take a little time to highlight and celebrate what's behind that second "U".

(It became quite evident, after I had begun, that there was no way to cover the entirety, even hastily, of Universalist History, so let's call this The Second U, Part 2, Section 1 – Colonial America.)

First of all, where did we get this name: Unitarian Universalist? It is two words for two particular streams of religious tradition, two histories, two *heresies*, you might say, in Christian church history, that merged to become Unitarian Universalism in 1961. The Unitarian heresy preached the unity of God and rejected the rather tortuous explanations of God as a Trinity, three persons in one (Father, Son and Holy Ghost). The Universalist heresy rejected the notion of hell as eternal punishment for human sin in a life after death, and preached *universal* salvation. Both came to champion the use of human reason in religious matters and to promote toleration of religious and theological diversity.

That last part sounds familiar, doesn't it? But the heresies themselves may seem rather quaint from this vantage point. When was the last time you debated the Trinitarian view of God with someone? (And the fact is that there are Unitarian Universalists who have reclaimed the Trinity as helpful in their understanding of the nature of the Divine.) And *eternal damnation*?...well, you can still catch it being preached here and there in local churches or on the radio, but the Universalists were so successful in spreading their message that quite a few of the mainline denominations, while decidedly *not* adopting a Universalist doctrine, did ease up considerably on the hellfire aspect of their theology. As for us, our focus is on this present life, right?

Right! And I think in large part, we can thank our Universalist tradition for that. What seems like an archaic argument actually results in a distinct concept of what religion is *for*.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First, a brief sampling of some Universalist history in these United States, (a whirlwind tour hitting on some of the most prominent names...just enough to whet your appetite for the upcoming class in the Fall on Unitarian Universalist History):

Dr. George De Benneville, who lived in the 1700's, was one of the earliest contributors to the Universalist movement in this country. Some of you may recognize the name "De Benneville" as the name of the Unitarian Universalist camp in California where many retreats and youth camps are held. This is, indeed, named after George. He was born in London, excluded from the church of his parents in his early teens for admitting that he believed that all souls would be restored to God's love in the afterlife, and, after preaching to underground groups in France and refugee groups in Germany while following his medical career, made his way to Pennsylvania after

getting to know German pietists who were resettling there. He was somewhat unique in Universalist history as, rather than being led to the view of universal salvation primarily through reason and reflection on the Bible, he was inspired through emotional reactions to the visions that he experienced of the all-encompassing and eternal love of God. A Universalist mystic, if you will.

It's maybe not surprising that, with a mystic like De Benneville in our heritage, that Universalism also supplied us with a miracle. John Murray is credited with introducing Universalism to the American colonies. He was a dynamic personality who, having been converted from a fiery Calvinism to an equally fiery Universalism in England, also suffered a series of tragedies during his life there. His wife and baby son died, and Murray ended up in debtor's prison. When he got out, he set off for America, intent on leaving the past behind and never preaching again. He washed up, so to speak, on the shore in New Jersey in 1770 near the home of one Thomas Potter who had also been converted to the doctrine of universal salvation. Potter had built a meetinghouse on his property just the year before, in the certainty that God would provide a minister to preach there, and he quickly became convinced that Murray was that minister. Murray did his best to talk Potter out of this idea, finally agreeing that if the wind had not changed by that Sunday, allowing Murray to sail onward, he would preach in the meetinghouse. Well, you guessed it, the wind kept on as it had been. Murray preached and, once preaching, couldn't very well stop at one service.

He took his Universalist doctrine to other churches all over the colonies, sometimes disguising his message to refrain from outright heresy, trying to let the Scriptures carry the message. But the heresy was easy to spot, and a great threat to those who believed differently. Suddenly he was *uninvited* to many pulpits; sometimes the meetings where he was preaching would be disrupted by raucous opposition. He barely escaped lynching several times. Once, while he was preaching in Boston, a rock came crashing through the window to land on the pulpit, barely missing Murray's head. Murray held up the rock so that the congregation could see, and said, "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational, nor convincing."

In all fairness, Murray's sermons were not always the most rational, either. He was an extemporaneous preacher who relied on the promptings of the Holy Spirit once he was in the pulpit. Some, most notably Abigail Adams who recorded her reaction in her diary after hearing Murray, expressed displeasure with this disorderly form of preaching. What he lacked in rationality, he made up for in fervor, however, and he was undoubtedly instrumental in the establishment of Universalism in the United States. He also worked with others in diverting religious tax money from the established Congregational churches (from which Unitarianism grew) to his Independent Christian Church. This helped to establish rights for religious dissenters, and the Universalists continued to be strong advocates of the separation of church and state; much stronger than the Unitarians of the time who were, in their Congregationalist

congregations, beneficiaries of church/state collusion.

Elhanan Winchester, a friend of George De Benneville's, was another important Universalist preacher of Murray's time, though differing in style and theology. Winchester came from, and later served as minister to, Baptist congregations, when he became convinced of the truth of Universalist theology. He was reluctant to inform his congregation of his new beliefs but his friends (we all need friends like this, right?), his friends spilled the beans and, when pressed by members of his congregation, Winchester admitted his new convictions. This revelation caused bitter disputes among the members, and eventually split the congregation in two. Winchester's congregation became the home of the "Universal Baptists" in Philadelphia. (There was an article in the UU World Magazine about eight years ago about a congregation of Universal Baptists that was still thriving in Southern Appalachia-- Dockery, Bill. "Everyone's Going to Heaven: The Baptist Universalists of the Southern Appalachians", N/D 97; p. 28)

In one of the many confluences of Unitarianism and Universalism well before the merger, Winchester shared his pulpit in Philadelphia with Joseph Priestly, whom he had met in England. Priestly, who had fled England after having his home and meetinghouse burnt down because of his unpopular stand in favor of the French Revolution, is considered by many to be the founder of Unitarianism in the United States.

Winchester also found an enthusiastic supporter in Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Rush had come to Universalism through Presbyterianism; had been one of the planners of the Universalist Convention with John Murray in 1790, and had served on the committee which drafted resolutions condemning slavery and war. Winchester, too, had taken a stand against slavery after having the opportunity to see it up close when he served a church in South Carolina.

Benjamin Rush was effusive in his praise of Winchester, calling him "a theological Newton." High praise! (Rush was referring, of course, to Sir Isaac Newton, and not the Las Vegas lounge singer Wayne, nor the famous cookie, Fig). And his pairing with the scientific Newton pointed to the fact that Winchester was much more of a systematic theologian than Murray. Winchester was not devoid of emotion, but got his message across through well-ordered sermons employing reasoned arguments based on the Bible. The kind of sermons Abigail Adams may well have approved of.

Winchester also differed from Murray in the particulars of how they pictured universal salvation working. Though neither believed in eternal damnation, Murray believed that there was *no* punishment after death, while Winchester allowed for a 50,000-year cooling off period for the toughest customers among us, which would purify their souls and prepare them for life in the presence of God. For Winchester, this also supplied sufficient impetus (without being *eternal*) to

lead a pure and righteous life. The tension between these two viewpoints continues throughout a good share of Universalist history. Those who believed in limited punishment after death (if you can call 50,000 years *limited*) came to be known as *Restorationists*, because they believed human souls through this punishment would eventually be restored to their place in paradise. Those who rejected the notion of any punishment after death were known as (and I love this) *Death-and-Glory* Universalists! (Can't you see that stitched onto some leather jackets? Does anyone want to work on those for us?)

And speaking of *Death and Glory Universalists*, now we come to the man of the hour. I urge you to read, in the most recent issue of the UU World, the article about Hosea Ballou, celebrating the 200th anniversary of his groundbreaking book, *A Treatise On Atonement*, in which he imparted his theology of Universalism, and also, (he was truly a Unitarian Universalist), argued against the doctrine of the Trinity as unscriptural and unsound. (He called it "infinity multiplied by three.") The son of a New Hampshire farmer/preacher, Ballou had trouble with the idea of eternal punishment from an early age, and read and thought and reflected his way to a Universalist view.

If you have Internet access, check out some of Hosea Ballou's sermons online. Thank you to Karen who helped me to sift through his somewhat archaic language and seemingly never-ending sentences to isolate the reading for today...but even with all of that, his down-to-earth reasoning can be so beautiful.

For instance, he says (I'm paraphrasing here), finite creatures cannot commit infinite offenses against God. Therefore, if God condemns humans to infinite (eternal) punishment for finite (temporal) sins, how can that God be considered just?

Further, how am I to believe in a God who urges me, through Jesus, to love my enemies, but who, Himself, loves only His friends and damns the rest to eternal hell-fire?

And further, and the point that Ballou makes in Karen's reading, I do not believe that I should practice my religion out of terror regarding the afterlife, but from gratitude for this life and the salvation that awaits me.

When I look at the history of Universalism and ask myself, how could such a positive message elicit such virulent and violent opposition, the answer is here. There is a fundamental difference of opinion as to what religion is for and where our motivation to do good stems from. Some believe that there *must* be some form of threat to keep us in line; otherwise, we would all wallow in selfish hedonism, criminal activities, or worse. Universalists were kept off the juries in Massachusetts for a time, as, having no threat of eternal punishment hanging over their heads, their decision-making was considered suspect. Their lack of proper incentive toward moral behavior was held in suspicion, not only by the greater society, but also by Unitarians of the

time. This puzzled and grieved Ballou as he felt that he had much in common with them. This was exacerbated by the already uneasy relationship between the generally upper-class, well-educated Unitarians, and the middle-to-lower-class Universalists who didn't put the same value on the academic qualifications of a minister, though Ballou could reason with the best of them.

Thomas Starr King, a Universalist *and* Unitarian minister in the 1800's, described the difference between Universalists and Unitarians quite succinctly when he said, "Universalists think God is too good to damn them forever, while Unitarians think they are too good to be damned forever."

All jokes aside, though an all-loving God sounds all warm and fuzzy, it is a stunning and radical proposition with disturbing consequences. Salvation *for everyone* thwarts our sense of justice completely, doesn't it? Though many of us may not bother ourselves too much with musings about the afterlife, this Universalist theology shows up in our present-day principles when we affirm "the worth and dignity of every person." The worth and dignity of *every* person?...

What about the people who set the bombs in London? What about the people who systematically rape and kill in Darfur? What about the people who carry out daily abuse on their wives, partners, children, parents? What about those who torture, who murder, who flip the switches, who make deadly decisions in comfortable offices, who watch, unfeeling, or turn away, uninterested, as others suffer and die?

I understand those questions, the outrage. I understand because, as we ponder the truly awful and brutal things that people can do to one another, our very beings cry out for justice, or, for lack of justice, simply retribution. Universalism asks us to consider that God, or the Universe, or the Tao, or the Ultimate makes a place *even* for the offender; that God is decidedly *not* made in our image; that God *doesn't* answer to our sense of justice, but carries out a mercy that is *terrifying* in its depth and breadth. Universalism speaks of an acceptance that goes so far beyond what we can fathom; what we can imagine; what we can even bring ourselves to *want*, that we can only call it Divine...Transcendent...*Other*. And this acceptance holds us all, and will continue to hold us all, *no...matter...what*.

Please understand, I am not asking you to *believe* this. I am not asking you to *believe* our first principle. When we say we are non-creedal, we make it clear that you do not have to subscribe to any specific tenets of belief, and there are many, including ministers serving Unitarian Universalist congregations, who speak out in disagreement with that first principle.

But I am asking you to take seriously the challenge put forth by our Universalist history; to hear how these early Universalists refused to ignore the hard words of Jesus, saying, "Love your enemies;" to honor their courage in preaching a universal salvation that changes the focus of religion from fear about the next world, to deep fulfillment in this one.

I don't live rightly because I worry about hell, said Hosea Ballou (again, I paraphrase). I live rightly because I have found through the example of Jesus that it makes me truly happy. Loving makes me happy. Service to others makes me happy. Fighting for justice, though it might be discouraging at times, though our spirits become weary, makes me happy, here and now.

This helped to strengthen the already-existing concern within Universalism for working on the challenges of this world, through social action and human services. This helped to foster openness to non-Christian forms of religious expression, with the acknowledgment that *everyone* was held in this universal love. This moved far beyond the idea of religion as fulfilling obligations in this world that would be paid off in the next. Suddenly, it doesn't even matter if we're *right* or not about our religion. The question is: how will we *be*? I imagine the Universalist evangelist asking not "Are you saved?" but saying, "You *are* saved! *Now what?*" Now what? How will you respond to the grace that meets you everyday? How will you live with this gratitude, how will you share it...how can you not?

We've only traveled a short way on the Universalist highway. I hope to revisit it soon. This is such an important part of our *living* tradition. I know that some of you have expressed a closer kinship with our Universalist roots than our Unitarian ones. I know that there are churches, like Riverside in CA, that call themselves Universalist Unitarian, highlighting their own proud Universalist heritage.

As you may know, Universalism, after the time of Ballou, started to take on other meanings beyond the debate about the afterlife; growing and bravely expanding in its implications, thanks to the strong roots supplied by Ballou, Murray, Winchester, De Benneville. We will continue to explore in this community what Universalism might mean to us today.

Universalist minister, L. B. Fisher spoke to this ever-changing identity in 1921, when he 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."

May we each move to the music we hear, and move together in search of that subtle harmony that can only be found in loving community, in the dance. I close with these words from Father Ballou, as he was affectionately known in his later life:

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.

Many thanks to [Ernest Cassara](#) and his wonderful book, [Universalism In America](#), from which I drew a large part of the material for this sermon.

