

**Our Universalist Heritage:
A Modern Movement and an Ancient Heresy**
Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Worship Service presented by Joyce Kronholm
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A century ago the agnostic Robert Ingersol 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's done. I want to thank the Universalist Church too. They at least believe in a God who is a gentleman --- a heavenly father who will leave the latch string out until the last child gets home.”

So now I invite you on a brief jog through the history of universal salvation.

Universalism has its beginnings in the late 18th century America. The dominant theology at that time was Protestant Calvinism. And the dominant theme of the preachers of that time was hellfire and damnation. Calvinism taught that even before birth, the majority of us were destined to hell. Only a few would go to heaven, and who was going where had already been decided; nothing could change it.

Universalism replaced that vengeful God of judgment with a merciful God of love. The underlying theological assumption that has always driven Universalism is this: God's power and goodness salvage all souls. God is too good, too loving, to create any creature and then condemn it to eternal damnation.

For quite some time I'd been thinking of giving a service about Universalism. What gave me an added push was a short conversation with a gentleman Bill and I met earlier this month. Out of the blue he surprised us by asking if we were Christians. We said, “Well, we're Unitarians.” His response was “I guess that's all right”, and our conversation went on to something else. What struck me was this: We'd short -changed Universalism.

We have been Unitarian Universalists since our two denominations joined in 1961. But so much of what we hold dear about Unitarian Universalism comes not from our Unitarian ancestors but from our Universalist heritage. Yet they keep getting the short end of the stick when we talk of our history and our faith.

In terms of history, consider this: By the late 1800s there were approximately 800,000 Universalists in America. We would be thrilled to have numbers like that today instead of the paltry 220,000 members that now belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association. So who are these Universalists and what happened to them all?

One of the first universalists – and by this I mean someone whose theology was universalist rather than someone belonging to a formal religious movement -- was one of the early fathers

of the Christian church. Known as Origen, he was born around 180 CE. He declared universal salvation from a loving God. As you can imagine, Origen was not popular with those in the early Christian movement who were pushing the need to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, the only route to salvation, and he was condemned as a heretic.

Universal salvation floated around the Christian community for centuries, mostly underground and repressed. We have to move forward to the 18th century before we find universalism again expressed.

Entering the picture are George DeBeneville and Thomas Potter. George DeBeneville was born in England of French Huguenot parents who had fled France to escape religious persecution. As a child he was tortured by visions of burning in hell. But one day he had a dream. He became convinced that human beings were not sin filled. Eventually he made his way to America where he continued to preach his mystical, visionary brand of universalism.

You heard the story of Thomas Potter during the children's story and of John Murray who became known as the Father of American Universalism. From his humble beginnings he became the foremost preacher of Universalism in America and minister of the first official Universalist church. Its message of hope and eternal salvation was spreading and by their 1790 convention there were 17 churches. Two years later there 40. The Universalist heresy didn't escape the wrath of Calvinist clergy. One delighted his congregation by referring to the Universalist church as "the Fire Insurance Company" because all its members were assured a place in hell.

At the 1794 convention a young minister was ordained who would become the greatest theologian of Universalism. His name was Hosea Ballou and like all universalist ministers of the day, he had no formal theological training.

Unlike the Unitarians who insisted their ministers be trained in divinity schools, Universalists believed their ministers should be called and inspired by the holy spirit. Ballou's brand of Universalism was called Ultra Universalism because he believed that we were immediately reconciled with God. Murray and others believed that it might take some time before being reconciled with God. Both believed that a loving God saved everyone.

I think Hosea Ballou must have had a sense of humor. On one occasion when riding the circuit in New Hampshire with a Baptist preacher, the Baptist looked over and said to him, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away – and go to heaven." Hosea Ballou replied, "If you were a Universalist the idea would never occur to you."

On another occasion he was asked "What would you do with a man who died reeking in sin and crime?" His answer? "I think it would be a good plan to bury him."

People were drawn to the Universalist message of salvation. Their preachers carried their message of love and hope far and wide. By the late 19th century, Universalists were the fifth largest denomination in American.

Universalists were strongly committed to missionary work, women's suffrage, separation of church and state and social justice issues. They were the first religious group to go on record against slavery – in 1790 – preceding the Unitarians, whose prosperous adherents often benefited from the slave trade.

The first African American to be ordained by the Universalists was Joseph Jordan at their 1889 convention. The Unitarians didn't ordain an African American until well over a half century later. Joseph Jordan became a missionary in Norfolk, Virginia and started a mission church, a pre-school, and day care there. When he died, the church ceased to exist, but the school continued and expanded into the Jordan Neighborhood House. It still exists today.

In 1863 the Universalists were the first mainstream religion to ordain women. By this time, most Universalist ministers went to college, though it was never a requirement. But Olympia Brown did not have an easy time of it entering the St. Lawrence theology school, and an even a harder time finding a pulpit that would call a woman preacher. Still, by 1920 there were 88 Universalist women ministers, the most of any denomination.

Other Universalists became famous, and Unitarian Universalists of today tend to embrace them as our own while usually glossing over which of our “U's” they came from. Clara Barton was the founder of the American Red Cross. Dr. Benjamin Rush, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, founded the first hospital for the mentally ill, opposed capital punishment, and advocated a federal department of peace. Horace Greeley was the editor of the New York Tribune and considered the greatest editor of his day.

Ironically, the greatest challenge for Universalists came from their own success. As their message of a loving God grew, other denominations, in particular the Methodists, toned down their rhetoric of an angry God full of hellfire. Without that terrifying message, people had less of a reason to change denominations.

The Methodists were also organized differently than the Universalists. When a minister died or moved on, they would appoint another minister. With the Congregation polity of the Universalists, they had no such recourse. Either someone would step up, or the church would fade away, like Joseph Jordan's church in Virginia.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Social Gospel movement of Protestant Christianity was at its peak. The movement applied Christian ethics to social problems, including inequality, liquor, crime, racial tensions, slums, child labor, weak labor unions, poor schools, and the danger of war.

This movement also propelled Universalists to think in broader terms. But for the rural churches they had founded, this liberal mindset with its focus on largely urban issues did not hold much appeal, and the rural base of Universalism began to collapse. They were slow to urbanize in a society that was becoming increasingly urban. Unfortunately, they were better at starting churches than maintaining them over the long haul.

After their 1943 General Assembly, no longer called a convention, Robert Cummins, the General Superintendent articulated this vision for the future:

“Universalism cannot be limited to Protestantism or Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is Universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and colorless. A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.”

Their membership shrinking, Universalists cast about for a suitable partner that would allow them to continue. The theological divide over the issue of salvation was too great to consider the Congregationalists, but they finally accepted an offer by the Unitarians to consider a merger. Throughout that process, however, the fear was that the larger, richer Unitarians would subsume the Universalists and their identity would be lost. We confirm their fears when we use only the term Unitarian to describe our faith.

This is a very short version of Universalism. The legacy they gave us was a rich one, an important one.

It demands that we take to heart the idea that every person is worthy of our respect and consideration. It demands that we speak up in the face of oppression and strive to change the world for the better. It challenges us to open ourselves, not just to people like us but to all people.

The Universalists succeeded in changing the moral and spiritual landscape in America forever. Not just our religion, but all religion. Unitarianism may be the big U in our denomination with its power and money. But Universalism has always been the U with the bigger heart.

Unitarian Universalism – 10 syllables, and worth saying every single one of them.

Amen and Shalom.