

UU 101: Past, Present and Future
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Once upon a time...

It's hard to know, actually, when to start the story
Of Unitarian Universalism.
If we trace the theological concepts from which we take our names,
We could talk about Pelagius,
Who disagreed with Saint Augustine about original sin,

Or Arius,
Who incited riots by insisting on pointing out
That there's no scriptural basis for the Trinity.

Or we could start with the post-reformation theologian and medical doctor Michael Servetus,
Author of "The Errors of the Trinity,"
The first person to actually be called "Unitarian"
And our first martyr...
(He was burned at the stake.)

But for our purposes, today, let's start when those theological concepts
Became liberal Christian denominations
Here in the fertile soil of the New World.

You probably know about the puritans who came to the New World from England,
Got blown off course
And landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts where they started the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
What you might not know is that many of the churches
That the pilgrims founded are now Unitarian Universalist,
Including First Parish Church in Duxbury, Massachusetts,
established in 1632,
Where I served as intern minister.

They say that the Universalists broke from the Calvinists
Because they believed God was too good to damn people,
And that Unitarians broke from the Calvinists
Because they believed they were too good to be damned.

There's always truth in jest, and this is no exception.

The best explanation of the difference between the Calvinists
And the Unitarians
Is the "Baltimore Sermon," delivered by William Ellery Channing in 1819.

Starting from the controversial premise
That scripture is meant to be read intelligently, even critically,
With the best scholarship and science in mind,

Channing had four main points of departure with traditional Calvinist thought.

First, that scripture clearly affirmed the unity of God.
Second, that the power of the Christian story
Grew out of Jesus' life and teaching,
Rather than miracles, resurrection, or special divine status.
Third, that God made humankind in God's image,
And so it was blasphemy to say that we are inherently sinful,
And fourth, Christ was sent not to suffer for the sins of humanity,
But as an example
Whose teachings reveal the way to reconciliation with God.¹

So those who try to emulate Jesus, namely the Unitarians,
Must surely be too good to be damned.

Now, on to...

Universalism.
In 1770, a minister named John Murray,
Excommunicated from the Methodist church in England
Came to the New World, swearing that he would preach no more.
By sheer luck (or perhaps it was divine intervention)
His ship crashed into a sandbar not far from the farm of Thomas Potter,
Who had built a chapel on his property 10 years earlier.
He invited Murray to preach.
Murray agreed...so long as the wind didn't shift.
It didn't, and the resulting sermon changed both Potter...
Who finally heard what he had been seeking,
And Murray, who rediscovered his calling.
The farm, in New Jersey, is to this day a UU summer camp.

Murray was a powerful preacher, and gained many followers,
But it was his successor as the primary spokesperson for Universalism
Hosea Ballou,
Who wrote the defining theological work, "A Treatise on Atonement."
In it, he argues that sin is the fruit of the flesh,
And part of God's plan.
The purpose of humankind
is to achieve true happiness, which can only be found
By free will...
By choosing to do what is truly good, rather than what feels good superficially.

Atonement, then, is about reconciliation, justice,
And finding peace within,
While building peace in the world.
The process is ongoing,
And those who die could not possibly be eternally damned for their sinfulness,
For a loving God would never settle for anything short of universal reconciliation.²

¹ Stream of Light, by Conrad Wright chronicles Unitarianism in America. Epic of Unitarianism, includes original text of the Baltimore Sermon.

God is too good to damn us.

The Unitarians and the Universalists maintained separate organizations until 1961,
(though the teenagers of both groups together formed Liberal Religious Youth,
or LRY, in 1953)

But as religious liberals with similar values, they had cordial relationships and much
cross-pollination
Of ideas, congregants, and ministers...

But I'm getting ahead of myself, because in the meantime, both denominations
But primarily the Unitarians
Were influenced by transcendentalism, the fellowship movement,
And by secular humanism.

Did you hear about the latest Unitarian miracle?
Someone saw Emerson's face in a corn tortilla.

The transcendentalists... Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and their contemporaries
Are some of our favorite ancestors.

By breaking out of the exclusively Christian framework
And embracing the divine as expressed in nature,
In literature, and in every person,
The transcendentalists expanded our horizons
And paved the way for our theological diversity.

Caused all sorts of trouble,
Those transcendentalists!

Because when new faith called "humanism" came along
At the beginning of the 20th century...
A faith that rejected not just creeds and Christianity,
But the need for a deity in the first place...
It caught on like wildfire with Unitarians.

The joke goes: you might be a Unitarian if you pray "To Whom It May Concern."

As Humanism became more popular, there was conflict and controversy.
For a time, the Unitarians split into two conferences...

In the East the establishment began to call themselves Unitarian Christians,
While Western Unitarian Conference was dominated by Humanists.

Eventually things simmered down,
And Unitarian came to mean,
"Believing there is no more than one God."

Most Universalists during these years were Christian,

² The Larger Faith, by Charles Howe is the parallel history of the Universalists. Epic of Unitarianism also includes the Treatise on Atonement.

But as humanism spread,
A few liberal Universalists also began to encourage the evolution of their faith.

They issued a call to a “wider Universalism”
That sought wisdom from all world religions,
As well as scientific knowledge,
With the goal of “bringing out that which is God-like in humanity.”

When the Humanist Manifesto was published in 1933.
It was signed by a number of Unitarian ministers.³
And at least one Universalist.

Then in the fifties, we have the Fellowship movement.
This congregation, founded in 1950, was part of that movement.
All around the country...
Groups of people gathered together on their own.
Trained clergy had a minimal, advisory role.
Typically small, at least to start with,
And sometimes aggressively anti-authoritarian and anti-clerical
The fellowships became a home for some of the people
Who were abandoning traditional religion in droves
In the aftermath of the holocaust.

Despite the fledgling fellowships,
Both the Unitarians and the Universalists
Were affected by the dramatic down-turn
In churchgoing during those years.
Both denominations found themselves challenged financially
With decreasing and aging memberships.

In 1961 the two merged
And thus was born the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Membership in the UUA,
Like memberships in our congregations,
Is strictly voluntary.
The congregations themselves
Are the locus of power in the denomination...
And the people
Are the locus of power in the congregation.

The relationship of congregation to denomination
And minister to congregation
Are covenantal,
Based in promises of how we will be together.
It's very different than the top-down
Hierarchical model
Of, say, the Catholic Church.

³ For more on the Humanist Manifesto, read [The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto](#) by Edwin Wilson.

Of course, sometimes that means things get a little....complicated.

The Christians have the bible,
The Jews, the Torah,
The Muslims the Koran...
We...have Robert's Rules of Order.

Many UU ministers and lay people
Were extremely active in the civil rights movement...
Most notably at a march in Selma organized
By the UUA board
After the death of James Reeb, a white UU minister, in 1965.

Some credit the march in Selma and the national outrage
At the murder of Reeb and of Viola Liuzzo...another white UU...
With turning the tide and leading congress to finally pass civil rights legislation.

Though internal power struggles around racial issues took their toll
On the denomination in the late 60's,
We began to grow again in the 80's.
There are many theories as to why that happened.
My favorite attributes the new growth to the
Increasing numbers of women in the ministry.

So Pope John Paul greeted St. Peter warmly at the Pearly Gates,
And asked, "Do I get to go in and meet my maker now?"
"I'd wait awhile," said St. Pete, "she's a little ticked off with you at the moment."

The Universalists ordained women as far back as the early 1800's,
But until the women's movement,
Most ministers were men.
That changed in the seventies and eighties.
Now, more than half of our ministers are women.

Women brought to the table, or to the pulpit as the case may be,
A new perspective, a different point of view...
One that after two thousand years of patriarchal religion
Was perhaps...overdue.

We also saw more people who practice
Earth-based religion come out of the "closet"
To join our congregations.

Classes on Goddess traditions,
Womanist and feminist theologies,
And new age spiritual ideas and practices
Further stretched our self-definition,
And though this stretch, like every other shift
Wasn't completely without controversy and tension,
It hasn't caused any great rifts.

If when the Humanists came along, we figured

That we all believed in no more than one God,
Now, we all believe in one God, more or less.

As I've told this story,
I know I covered a lot of ground.
I'll be available in the sanctuary after the service
If you have any questions or comments.
And this sermon, complete with references,
Will be available online
And also in our foyer starting next week.
Of course, you might want to grab a cup of coffee first...

A survey of Unitarian Universalists across the country revealed that
Our most sacred ritual,
The one practiced in almost every congregation is....

Coffee Hour:
We even have a hymn that starts like this:
Coffee, coffee, coffee,
Praise the strength of coffee!
When we're late to congregate
We come in time for thee!

Here at KUUF, we serve coffee in the foyer after the service.
As you look around the foyer you'll also see bumper stickers
proclaiming that we are the "Uncommon Denomination"
And "Room for Different Beliefs: including yours"
They're part of our answer to the frequent complaint,
"I've think I've been a Unitarian Universalist for years!
I sure wish I'd found you sooner."

Why did the UU cross the road?
To support the chicken in the search for its own unique spiritual path.

As a result, we are theologically more diverse than ever...
Christian, pagan, atheist, agnostic,
Theist, Buddhist, Jewish,
Ecclectic...you name it.

They say if you put three UU's in a room,
You'll have at least four opinions on just about any subject.

Personally, the word that best fits me
Is panentheist...
What I choose to call God
is the spirit of life and love
That I see everywhere,
In everything, and everybody,
And that I believe holds us with infinite compassion.

But what we all agree on is that it's the questions that matter,
Not the answers each individual finds palatable at a given moment.

Lenny Bruce once joked that he knew he'd said something really outrageous
When the Unitarian Universalists got so mad they burned a question mark on his lawn.

So that's what we believe.
What we do is build community.
We worship, celebrate or mourn life's moments of transition,
Care for each other in times of joy and of need,
And work for justice and peace in the world.

We abide by a covenant of right relations,
Which governs how we are together
Rather than what we think or say or do.

We try not to take ourselves or our faith too seriously,
But we don't take it too lightly, either.
In a world where religious divides have led to so much pain,
Destruction, war, and oppression,
Our saving message of tolerance, diversity, and unconditional love
Is one that is badly needed.

Some but not all of us are active in the struggle for equal rights for Gays and Lesbians.
Some but not all of us are actively protesting the war.
We have a new small group ministry program,
The Chalice Circles,
That give people a way to connect more deeply
In groups of 6-12 people.
We have a rich array of programs for children and adults,
And so many events and celebrations
And clubs and meetings that we're running out of room.

As a denomination, UU's are standing up for marriage equality,
Advocating for environmental reforms and sustainable development,
And continuing to work for racial, socio-economic, and gender justice
And against torture, human rights violations, and hunger.

Together, we hold "the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.."
Even as we affirm the individual right of conscience
And the truth that though the goal is the same,
Our ideas about the best way to reach that goal
Are as diverse as can be.

We have raised millions of dollars to help the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita,
And we stand ready to open our homes and our hearts to evacuees.
It's a community of truly FINE people,
With good hearts, good minds, and the courage to put those hearts and minds
And our hands as well
To use in the world.

We have all found strength, friendship, and inspiration
From being part of the UU faith community.

Douglas Taylor puts it this way:

Alone in the world, I was beset with frustration and anger at the world around me—so much injustice and hatred, so little peace and freedom. I longed to make a difference, but my actions seemed insignificant and my words were drowned out.

Then, I came into community, a religious community of hope and love. Here I found support and energy, vision and power, the authority of shared witness. And together we changed the world.

Alone in the world, I was beset by sorrow and hurt in my life—so much loss and emptiness, so little hope and understanding. My tears brought little relief and my burdens grew too heavy.

Then, I came into community, a religious community of hope and love. Here I found support and compassion, wisdom and grace, and the power of shared experience. And together we made life sweeter.

Alone in the world, I was beset by confusion and emptiness in my soul—so much busyness and pettiness, so little depth or connection.

Then I came into community, a religious community of hope and love. Here I found wisdom and encouragement, depth and diversity, and the power of companions on the journey. And together we gave my life meaning.⁴

That's what we are about.

But we are not done yet.

As you can see from our history,
This is a faith that moves...that changes, that shifts, that evolves.

Here's where I see us heading.

The religious right currently has a powerful profile when you look at the political landscape of this country.

Though the separation of church and state is a cause near and dear to our hearts,
There is a growing need for religious liberals to stand up and say:

We are people of faith who support equal rights for gays and lesbians,
People of faith who support a woman's right to choose.

People of faith who want to protect the environment,
And care for the poor and the disenfranchised.

I expect that we will be working on raising our political profile.

Sunday mornings are still the most segregated hour in America.

There's a reason for that...I've worshipped
With an interfaith congregation that comes out of the Black Evangelical tradition,
And it's really different from what we do here.

⁴ In For All That Is Our Life: A Meditation Manual.

Powerful and emotional and uplifting and energizing and engaging.

I expect that we will be pushing the boundaries in worship,
Letting more passion into our sanctuaries,
And maybe even a little bit of transcendence.

I think we're going to learn how to sing better.
The new hymnal supplement brings music from a wide variety of traditions
And puts it at our fingertips,
With words that are in keeping with our values.

Ever wonder why UUs sing so slowly?
It's because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next verse.

I expect that we will get better and better at walking our talk,
In this congregation and across the country,

Small groups are providing the venue,
And the topics include "Engaging Our Theological Diversity"
And "Framing UU Values for the 21st Century"...
Out of these small groups are coming initiatives,
And interconnected networks,
And a revolutionary spirit of abundance.

I expect that as we raise our profile
And get better at building community
And serving our members
And our communities,
Our numbers will grow,
And our influence will grow.

It's an exciting time to be a Unitarian Universalist.

"Our world has never more deeply needed a model of community where differences are seen to enrich

Rather than to threaten,
A way of faith that engages what it does not know,
A dauntless spirit that links fresh words to gorgeous melodies with hope and joy."⁵

Being a part of building that model, living that model,
Is invigorating and challenging,
Nourishing and healing,
Meaningful and rewarding work.

We are and always have been
Part of the vanguard,
The leading edge of civilization's truest and best journey
Toward justice, true equality and peace.
Grounded by our distinguished past,
Flourishing in the present,

⁵ From Rev. Margaret Keip's sermon "The Uncommon Denomination"

We will grow and thrive in the future.

So be it, and so may it be.