

Lost Universalists
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December 13, 2006

5 As Unitarian Universalists many of us deeply appreciate having UU friends from
around the region and across the country. This fall I was pleased to help welcome my
new colleague in the UU Church of Delaware County in Media, PA. With joy, pride and
high expectations in October that church installed the Rev. Peter Frederick as their called
minister. After that celebration the leadership and staff of that church thought November
10 would bring a bit of a rest before the speed of church life in December.

 They were wrong. The church in Media is among the hundreds, including ours
that is a UU welcoming congregation. This means we have gone through intentional
education and discussion and voted as a membership body to become explicitly open and
welcoming to gays, lesbians, and transgendered people. As a symbol of this ongoing
15 work years ago the Media church placed a rainbow flag on their main sign out on the
road. In November that flag was stolen, torn and burned and then returned to the main
sign. Somebody was sending a message.

 Unfortunately, that community wasn't alone among UU churches with similar
problems this fall. In Baton Rouge, LA the congregation decided they wanted to
20 communicate better with the broader community so they spent \$30,000 on a wonderful,
electronic sign to place on their main road. On a week when they were displaying a
message regarding equality around sexual orientation someone took a baseball bat to the
sign and did significant damage. Near the South Jersey shore, a UU congregation has

been renting a space for worship and programs from the Catholic Church for years. That UU congregation was publicizing an upcoming speaker on Gay rights when they received an eviction notice from the Catholic Church. The Catholic landlords broke the lease in order to prevent the speaker from bringing a specific message.

5 For me these incidents kick up many emotions including sadness and anger. I believe they also demonstrate a profound need to examine and embrace our Universalist roots. Many of you know that Unitarianism and Universalism were two different religions in America from the early 1800's until they formally merged in 1961. However, the truth is that the merger was dominated by the Unitarians. One example is that when
10 the two denominations were discussing merger both presidents said they would not run for president of the newly created religion. Upon merger, the Dana Greeley, the President of the American Unitarian Association changed his mind, declared candidacy and became the first president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It is not a coincidence that when many of us shorten the name of our religion we say that we are Unitarian, not
15 Universalist. This lack of naming represents how some of our heritage has been lost. Many of us believe that it is a good time to do some reclaiming.

 One of the best ways of knowing our roots involves telling the stories of our ancestors, and Hosea Ballou is a great person to start with. With very little formal education Ballou grew up to become the main leader for many decades of a group of
20 radical religionists known as Universalist Christians. These Universalists believed that God's love and atoning grace were trump cards over every problem or circumstance known to humanity. He preached far and wide about this truth which revolutionized

people's minds. No matter how sad, broken or off track we become God will restore all people to wholeness in an eternal heaven.

Reminiscent of modern debates about parental philosophy those arguing against universal salvation said that a God with no punishment would encourage bad behavior.

5 Parents who don't discipline their children will have kids running wild and misbehaving.

Analyzing human behavior in this world Ballou said that people who care for themselves and others with generosity will be happy and find rewards.¹ Those who are selfish and wicked will have their hearts hardened and will suffer in this world.

In a lesson with tremendous importance for today Ballou never wavered in his
10 opposition to the role of fear in religion. He asked “what is this religion which is founded on the fear of future misery? Is there any real sincerity in it? Is there any of the true love of God in this religion?” He believed in a simple, but challenging truth, “Love for the good cannot be induced by fear. Perfect love casts out fear.”² Compared to many preachers of the day Ballou was significantly raising his evaluation of human nature. “If
15 (people) realized that sin is inherently unpleasant, (they) would attempt to avoid it.”³

Ballou's organizational effort led to success spreading the Universalist belief far and wide and by the mid 1800's making it the fourth largest religion in America. In the year of his death in 1850 there were 800,000 adherents to the Universalist faith. Today after merger we have 250,000 adherents to the two faiths combined.

¹ibid

² ibid (Casara). p. 108

³ ibid. p. 136

However, many Unitarian colleagues, some of whom were the Harvard literati-
types, looked down upon Ballou and others as their lesser educated Universalist brothers.
One joke about the difference between the two groups goes that the Universalists believed
that God was too good to send people to hell and the Unitarians believed that they
5 themselves were too good to be sent to hell. The Unitarians of the day – like William
Ellery Channing – believed that in order to receive salvation people had reason and free
will, which they had to use in doing good works. Ballou disagreed strongly.

Ballou consistently proclaimed his belief in “Salvation Irrespective of Character”.
That is what he called it, “salvation irrespective of character.” To illustrate he often gave
10 analogies like the following. When you love your home you don't require the kitchen
floor to be clean, before you sweep up the dirt and mop the floor. You love your home
and you want to take care of it. When you love your garden you don't require it to be
weed-free before you work on it. You do your labor of love in the weeding and then you
go on to plant, water and tend to the garden. In the same way God doesn't require people
15 (his children) to be sin-free before he loves and saves us. Just like a good parent, God's
love is unconditionally abundant.

I hesitated before using these analogies today because I think some people might
get stuck. First, many of us don't think of ourselves as dirt or weeds. With this objection
we could analyze this story and take great offense. But that would be a shame because
20 we would lose a tremendously valuable interpretation of spirit. As I said earlier, relative
to their contemporaries Ballou and other Universalist ancestors actually thought quite
highly about human nature. But the thrust of these or any true Universalist theological

analogies is about a loving, committed God who regularly help us, improves our lives and makes us better. This highlights the main point of the Universalists and Hosea Ballou. It is not about us. The main point of his theology was not about you, me, or people at all.

For Hosea Ballou the main point in his theology had to do with God.

5 That leads to the second possible problem with seeing how Ballou's ideas and life can help us today. We UU's have a religious community where we cherish a wide spectrum of theologies and philosophies. We love the fact that we have atheists, agnostics and theists. We continue exploring our theologies of how the sacred is within us, around us and beyond us. Many of us don't believe -like Ballou did- in and all-
10 powerful, all-knowing God who plans and controls all. Over the last centuries many of us religious liberals have come to believe in our human power, choice and responsibility. So how can we translate the meaning of this story to have any authenticity or resonance with our own personal theologies today? Almost 200 years later we have to ask ourselves do we still have a need for an abundantly loving God and salvation.

15 Let me tell a story from the Buddhist tradition, which I believe illuminates wisdom in regards to this question. I found this story written by the author Joyce Kornblatt in my new favorite magazine *Parabola*.

Patacara has set off with her husband and new-born baby to visit her family in a distant village. En route, the family is caught in a storm. The husband goes off into the
20 forest to cut down enough brush to build a shelter. He doesn't return. Patacara waits through the night, protecting her child as best she can from the elements, and in the morning she finds her husband's body, the fatal snake-bite visible on his arm. She wails

out her grief, but there is not time to arrange for his burial- she must get her children to safety.

At a rain-engorged river, Patacara realizes that she cannot ford across with her child and the needed medicine and food in her arms. So she carries the baby across to the other shore and lays him down rapped in a shawl. Then she wades back through the swirling waters to get the medicine and food. While she is waste deep in the river a hawk picks up the infant and vanishes. Knowing she can't catch the hawk something keeps Patacara from literally drowning herself in despair.

Back in the village Patacara becomes known as the “lost lady” walking in circles and screaming her grief into the indifferent sky. She doesn't know what else to do but remain consigned to “death-in-life” with her grief of no release. But one day, the story goes, Buddha, sees this woman on her endless rounds of lamentation and recognizes in her heart an indestructible clarity. It is to that essence that he speaks, “Sister, recover your presence of mind.”

At this point Patacara realizes that she will find life again in life. She went on to reorient and dedicate herself to a life of service to parents who have lost their children.⁴ In her next years she felt an assurance some know as wholeness. Ballou called it being with God and Jesus. Others know it as Allah, or the Goddess of compassion. You may think of it as the Agape or the beloved community. At times we all need the voice of a friend to tell us we are going to be OK. “I know you are suffering and things are very dark for you. I just want you to know that I am sending you love and light. This too shall

pass. You will be OK. You will get back to center.” This story shows what I believe very deeply - that we all do have a need for the kind of transcendent powers of love and redemption that Patacara found in the wake of her tragedy.

This story also shows a bit of the development of Universalism over the last 100
5 years. The Universalists came to also embrace a belief that the best chances for salvation in this world come with a combination of positive human actions with God's grace.

Patacara participated in her own salvation by helping others.

Universalist, Olympia Brown was one of the first ordained women in the United States and she spoke boldly about the importance of standing up for this faith. In the
10 1900's Rev. Clarence Skinner was among many Universalist leaders in the social gospel movement. Believing that we have to put the arms and legs of action on our prayers Universalists came to build community churches interacting with neighborhood needs and calls for world peace. In these ways we have also come to embrace the ontology of hope and universal possibilities. At times we may not know how we or others will get
15 better, but we hold on to hopefulness.

Going back to the anti-gay issues facing our sister congregations thankfully in this pulpit for at least 25 years people have been preaching the gospel that people can love and be partners with whomever they wish. Commitment, honesty and love are good wherever they exist. We are proud to stand in a religious movement with the Media church who in
20 recent weeks have stood vigil and explained more explicitly to the wider community what Welcoming Congregation means. The UU's of Southern Jersey are going to find a new

⁴*The Sacred Task of Grief*, by Joyce Kornblatt, *Parabola Winter 2006p. 77*

home, the folks in Baton Rouge are going to fix their sign and it will contain similar messages in the future. We will not abandon our belief in an abundantly loving God for all souls. No we will not abandon our belief in an all-powerful love.

5 A challenge for us this morning involves how we explore or acknowledge the available salvation for the people who burned the flag, smashed the sign and evicted the congregation. Reminiscent of Dr. King, in his closing years Ballou came to believe more than ever that whenever people can get out of the creedal debates in their heads and live more fully in their hearts we will all become Universalists. How can we more strongly embrace this hope in universal salvation? How can we build a stronger multi-racial,
10 community church with spiritual growth and renewal of spirit? How can we spread the word throughout the land about love – the most powerful force in the universe?

AMEN