

# OUR UNIVERSALIST HERITAGE

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
Heritage Sunday, Nov. 14, 2010  
John A. Buehrens, Minister

## CALL TO WORSHIP AND CHALICE LIGHTING      Walter Royal Jones, Jr. (adapted)

Our call to worship is adapted from “a covenant for liberals” written by the Rev. Walter Royal Jones, Jr., fifty years ago, for the Universalist Church in Gloucester, Massachusetts – the oldest Universalist church in America. Twenty-five years later Jones chaired the committee that drafted a covenant between the one thousand congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Let us join together in the words printed in our order of service:

**Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge  
of love and compassion ever exceeding our practice,  
reverently we covenant together,  
beginning with ourselves as we are,  
to share the strength of integrity  
and the heritage of the spirit  
in humanity’s unending quest  
for reality, justice, and love.**

## FIRST READING

There is a well-known summary of the early Universalist gospel, long attributed to John Murray, who came from England just before the American Revolution, then, as it ended, organized the first Universalist congregation in America, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Many years later, around 1950, the professor of preaching in the theological school then at Tufts University, founded by Universalists, said that the *zeitgeist* of the Revolution had inspired Murray, saying:

“Go out into the highways and by-ways of America, your new country.

Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men [and women]. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

That message heard not just by Murray, but by multiple founders of American Universalism.

## SECOND READING

In 1844 one Matthew Hale Smith published a book called *Universalism Examined, Renounced, Exposed*, based on his twelve years as a Universalist minister. Like his father, Elias, who had also gone in and out of the Universalist ministry, Matthew was not exactly a pillar of stability. He changed his religious affiliation seven times. His own brother Daniel suspected a brain tumor. In any case, one paragraph from his critique merits our attention even today. He wrote:

Universalist congregations seldom increase. They may retain an existence for years. But after they have reached a certain height, they begin to wane. They start with zeal and perhaps erect a house of worship. Then their downward march begins; and in this is seen the tendency of their doctrine. It removes restraint, loosens the bonds of moral obligation, and takes away the motives for attending public worship. Many, in a little time, learn all that is taught. They become convinced that no one will be lost, and that is all they wished to know. Convinced of this they leave the meeting and spend the Sabbath in doing their own pleasure. The congregation of Universalists is thus continually changing. If new members come in they only take the place of those who, under the influence of the doctrine have learned the folly of all preaching, and have come to the opinion that many better methods have been devised of spending the Sabbath than attending meeting, even though it be to hear the threatenings of the Bible explained away.

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The Universalist bell rang, “No hell! No hell!”

We are now beginning our fourth century as a parish. But there were people here in Needham who held that faith 200 years ago, when Paul Revere bell was first hung in our steeple. Then, some fifty years later, half-way back through our history, this parish began to call a series of Universalist ministers: Andrew Adams, John Barry, and George B. Emerson –1855 to 1866.

It’s hard for most of us to imagine what the fear of hell meant for our religious forebears. It was NOT about fear of personal, literal, punishment beyond this life, as in Dante’s *Inferno*. No, it was about being separated from one’s loved ones, forever, and from the love of God.

In 1861, the Unitarian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was living in Cambridge. He had married the beautiful, rich Fanny Appleton. She was the mother of his six children. She had taken locks from the children’s hair and was putting them into envelopes sealed with hot wax when her dress caught on fire. Henry rushed in, try to save her, but Fanny died of her burns. Longfellow spent the next six years translating Dante into English verse. It was cathartic.

A century before, New England preachers like Jonathan Edwards depicted humans as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” dangled like spiders by a thread over the fires of hell. Utterly dependent on God’s grace, in which many feel the call to salvation, but few are chosen. Such Calvinism, by the American Revolution left only one New England adult out of six bold enough to seek church membership, saying, “I suspect, I hope, that I’m among the chosen few!”

Those whose farms and families had somehow escaped any catastrophe, who had prospered materially, often thought themselves the chosen – whether morally or otherwise. *Plus ca change.*

In the Revolution New England was hard-hit, economically and otherwise. Needham lost a higher proportion of husbands and fathers after Lexington and Concord than any other town. My predecessor, Samuel West, went virtually unpaid for several years. The parish was shocked (Shocked!) when he left here to accept the pastorate of Boston's affluent Brattle Street Church. Out in the hills of Central Massachusetts, things were even worse. Many towns went without paid, educated clergy for up to a decade. Laypeople had to wrestle with their anxieties, losses, and with the scriptures on their own.

Out in rural Oxford, Massachusetts, for example, south of Worcester, a family named Davis did just that. One farmer brother learned much of the Bible by heart. Another was literally champion wrestler at every county fair. An uncle, a physician, wrote a tract saying that a good God could not be so unloving as to punish even errant children forever. A cousin, Caleb Rich, began preaching the same message. Most felt that the only valid church was not one set up by the state or town, but a church one joined voluntarily, after an adult decision. In other words, they believed in adult, believer's baptism and adherence to the covenant.

There was no *one* founder of American Universalism. The Davis clan has as much claim as does John Murray, an English preacher to the Universalist church in Gloucester in the 1780s. Murray helped the Universalists in Oxford to organize. But some thirty-five of the 130 charter members were named Davis. Together, they hosted the first conventions of Universalists who were spreading through the New England hill country, preaching not hell, but hope and courage.

This Universalist grassroots rebellion against orthodox New England Calvinism was earlier than the more privileged, intellectual Unitarian rebellion "from the top down."

Universalists did it “from the bottom up.” By the 1820s, during the evangelical wave known as America’s “Second Great Awakening,” Universalists were countering hellfire-and-brimstone fear-mongering by preaching the everlasting love of God, and so effectively that they could legitimately claim over 600,000 Americans “under influence” – although most were simply subscribers to the more than 120 100 Universalist newspapers and magazines; only about a sixth that many were in real Universalist congregations, now spreading beyond New England.

Matthew Hale Smith’s description of how quickly some Universalist churches sprang up and then quickly disappeared seems to be historically accurate, sadly. Contributions went to state conventions led by itinerant clergy, not to local churches. Local loyalty was weak. In the 1840s there was a Universalist church in nearby Newton Upper Falls. Its minister was also a physician. He knew the minister of this parish [1847-50] Charles Dall, and his wife Caroline Healy Dall.

Caroline as the 24 year old minister’s wife had shocked the local farmers and their wives by publishing a collection of essays that both condemned the Mexican war and the subordination of women, in an essay called “Sisterhood,” and called for the immediate abolition of slavery. Then she gave birth to a child that died of malformations at birth. Her attending physician, Dr. Noyes, the senior deacon of this parish and as staunch Calvinist, felt that the child’s death was a judgment of God on the refusal of Caroline and Charles to accept God’s will about all the issues Caroline had raised. So he led the effort to oust Dall from his First Parish pulpit, then to organize a separate, Trinitarian, Calvinist congregational church here in Needham.

Meanwhile, First Parish called a series of ministers who, like the local farmers and unlike the Dalls, weren’t Transcendentalist radicals, but rather down-to-earth, inclusive Universalists: Andrew Adams, John Barry, and George Emerson. One wrote in his journal, “Called to preach supply in a rural district called Needham, which pretends to be a town.” None ever settled here.

The Civil War broke out. Many local mothers and wives wondered whether they would be separated forever from their sons and husbands.

Universalists had grown closer to the Unitarians in their theology, so Universalist clergy serving Unitarian parishes was not uncommon. Like the early Universalist leader Hosea Ballou, most were no longer Trinitarian. They felt Jesus saved souls more by example than by his death. They had also responded to the objection that their doctrine removed moral restraint by giving up Ballou's argument that all punishment was in this life, and none at all in the next, only "death and glory," by taking a more moderate position: that most wicked souls probably have to sit in a celestial corner for a while, contemplating their misdeeds – rather the way my three-year old granddaughter sometimes gets "time out" on "the naughty step," I guess -- before being finally restored to the presence of God's love and that of their loved ones. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, said that the only God he could ever believe in was a Universalist God, "who leaves the latch-string out until the last wayward child has come home late."

Freed of fear of the next life, many Universalists who began in modest circumstances in this one did not only good, but also well. I think of the Washburn brothers of Livermore, Maine. Seven of them, who mostly followed the advice of their co-religionist, Horace Greeley, who said, "Go West, young man!" and produced, among them, five millionaires, three state governors, three congressmen, one US Senator, two ambassadors and the founder of General Mills! Thomas Starr King, a Universalist minister who served Unitarian churches first in Boston, then San Francisco, said that the reason the two movements could not combine was not social class. It was that they were "simply too close of kin ever to marry." And he was right – for another hundred years, until 1960.

I could say much more about the Universalist side of our heritage. This summer, writing my newest book, *Universalist and Unitarians in America: A People's History*, I fell in love with stories of many now forgotten but once prominent individuals on both sides of our family tree. So let me close with just one such story, that of a Universalist business leader, 80 years ago now.

In the fateful year, 1929, *Time* magazine named as “Man of the Year” Owen D. Young. Born in the rural village of Van Hornersville, NY, the only child of a Universalist farm family, Owen became, at the age of 15, superintendent of the Sunday school in his home congregation. Then a summer seminarian, from the Universalist school at St. Lawrence, in Canton, NY, recommended Owen for a scholarship, if his parents would let him leave the farm. They did.

Owen excelled, met his future wife, Ruth, a Universalist from here in Massachusetts, and tried to follow her back to Boston after graduation. Harvard Law School admitted him – then rescinded his admission when they learned he'd have to work part-time while studying law there. So he went to BU Law School, working -- and he earned his degree in just two years.

Soon he was a leading young lawyer in the growing field of public utilities. By his mid-30s he was General Counsel of General Electric, then its next Chairman and CEO. Along the way he also founded RCA, and NBC. As a benevolent business leader, he was ahead of his time. He advocated benefits for all workers – pensions, health insurance, and not just a minimum or “living wage,” but what he called a “cultural wage,” that would allow workers and their families the leisure to contribute to the culture and to advance their education. He wanted the government to provide these things, so that companies would not compete to drive wages and benefits downward. In that way, Young anticipated many of the provisions of the New Deal of the 1930s.

The popular humorist Will Rogers in 1929 wanted Owen D. Young as the Democratic candidate for President in 1932. Not just for these things, but because Young had been prophetic

about the dangers of a second World War. Twice in the '20s this Universalist peacemaker went to Europe to ask the French and Belgians to reduce their demands on Germany for reparations, lest squeezing every last pfennig out of them lead to the rise of a right-wing nationalist, a Hitler. Instead, Young endorsed FDR, supporting the New Deal, unlike many business leaders. Because he believed that if anyone is going to be saved from pain in this life, so should everyone.

Meanwhile, he had made generous pledges to St. Lawrence, where the library is named for him; to a new school of international affairs at Johns Hopkins; and to Universalism in New York and nationally. He helped to build a Universalist National Memorial Church in DC, where a Peace Tower is named for him. When the stock market collapse, Young owed more to charity than he had left in net worth. He kept every obligation – to his family, to his causes, and church. He reduced his own expenses to do so. And in the 1950s, he could be found retired in a modest bungalow – this onetime Titan of American industry – along the side of Route 1 in Florida, tending a grapefruit farm and selling his produce from a stand set at the side of the road.

To paraphrase one modern Universalist, he had absorbed the core of the Universalist message: since we are all going to heaven together, we better learn to treat one another properly, right here and now. Bringing right down to Earth a little of the Eternal and Unconditional Love that, as Dante put it, moves the Sun and other stars, and should move us -- as Universalists still.

So may it be. Amen and amen.