

# OUR UNIVERSALIST HERITAGE

A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
Heritage Sunday, November 19, 2006  
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

One day, when I was a student minister, I was asked to call on an elderly parishioner in a nursing home. All I knew about her was her name, that she was 103, and that she was a “heritage Universalist.” I knocked on the door of her room before entering. “Come in!” she said. Then looking at me, “Are you the paperboy?”

“No, the student minister.”

“Oh. I could have used the paper.”

“Would you like me to get you one?”

“No. Sit down. That is, unless you intend to tell me why I should go on living.”

“Miss Williams,” I answered. “I’m sure I have no such intention.”

“Good,” she said. “Then we can talk. I hate advice.”

Helen Williams\* proved to be a memorable woman – full of humor, human interest, open-ness and wonder about life. “Growing old,” she told me, “is not to be done gracefully – just with amazement.” [\*not her real name]

She died within the year I met her. Toward the last, when I visited her again and asked, “Is there anything I can do for you?” she replied, “Not for me; but there’s something you can do for some of the frightened ninnies in this place. Go tell them that there’s no hell!”

So when she died, I did just that: “Hi! I’m Helen Williams’ minister. She asked me to drop around and tell you that she died with no fear of hell, because she believed deeply that God is simply too good and loving to not to welcome everyone in the end.”

“You know,” said many, “I believe that too!”

And that, in a nutshell, is the story of American Universalism. It shrank, in the end, because too many in mainline denominations came to agree with its central affirmation.

But it started, as did the Unitarian side of our heritage, at the time of the American Revolution, as a protest against the dominant hellfire-and-brimstone Calvinism of American Protestantism. And its leaders were not Harvard intellectuals, Boston Brahmins, and professionals, but rather farmers, fishermen, and ordinary folks who, as my own father used to say, “Know that everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time.” And who believed in a God, as a great skeptic once said, who was at least good enough “to leave the latch-string out until the last wayward child has come home.”

Thomas Starr King, an eloquent minister of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, raised a Universalist, and no Harvard graduate, went on to serve Unitarian churches, and to quip that the difference between a Universalists and Unitarians was simple: the former believe that God is too good to damn people; whereas, the later, being rather privileged do-gooders, often consider themselves far too good to be damned!

America has a historical, cultural habit of swinging back and forth between periods of skeptical individualism and periods of religious revival and spiritual awakening. The so-called “First Great Awakening” came during the pastorate of our congregation’s first minister, Jonathan Townsend, in the mid-1700s, but he was too influenced by the rationality of Enlightenment to hold emotionally crazed revival meetings.

Despite what the current Religious Right sometimes claims, our republic was not founded as a “Christian nation.” In fact, many of the founders were skeptics or rationalists, Deists or Unitarians – such as Tom Paine, Ethan Allan, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. Church membership at the time of the Revolution was at a record low, not a high.

Then came the so-called “Second Great Awakening,” after the Revolution. This is when Universalism became a real spiritual force in America. Wherever Protestant revivalists tried to frighten people toward faith with fears of hell, the Universalists were soon there, saying, “God is love; there is no eternal hell.” Saying faith should be loving, not fearful.

Their message always reminds me of the Muslim woman mystic, Rabia, who said to God:

If I adore You out of fear of Hell, burn me in Hell!  
If I adore you out of desire for Paradise, lock me out of Paradise.  
But if I adore you for Yourself alone, do not deny to me Your eternal beauty.

And it is to the everlasting credit of Universalists that they were the first denomination accept women as equals in the ordained ministry, starting with Olympia Brown, in 1863.

By then, according to some estimates, they were perhaps the 7<sup>th</sup> largest religious group in America, with many small congregations, often in rural hamlets, served by circuit-riders and tent-maker ministers, and just beginning to establish colleges and seminaries – like Tufts in Medford: St. Lawrence in Canton, NY; and Dean Academy in Franklin, MA – just to name a few.

That was mid-way in the nearly 300-year history of this parish. And if you look up there – at the list of my predecessors – you will find that at the mid-way point in that history, from 1855 to 1866 – the ministers of this congregation were all professed Universalists: Andrew Napoleon Adams (1855-57); John Stetson Barry (1858-60); George H. (not B.) Emerson (1860-66). Now how did that happen? Well, here's a reconstruction of the story:

Up until the 1850s, Needham was not so much a town, said visitors, as a rural district, that only *claimed* to be a town; an area of rather thinly scattered farmsteads, with only one church, for all, regardless of differences in belief or emphasis. This is our heritage!

The people in West Needham, now Wellesley, failed to persuade six town meetings to move the one meetinghouse closer to their farms. Shortly thereafter, in 1773, it burned, mysteriously. The timbers around us today come from the 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 1774, Meetinghouse. Built into an updated form in 1836, but still at the original site, by the Burying Ground, near Nehoiden and Central. Where, in 1848, the congregation built a new parsonage.

Last year, on this Sunday, I spoke about the social activist minister, Charles Dall, for whom they built that parsonage, and about his brilliant wife, Caroline Wells Healey Dall. Both were not only Unitarians, but also radical social reformers, and Transcendentalists.

Imagine how the farmers' wives in Needham reacted to a 26 year old rural parson's wife publishing a book of her own essays, one of them called "Sisters," about women's rights; another war in Mexico; another on the abolition of slavery! Radicals! Run 'em out!

Soon the congregation and parish finally divided. Theological conservatives marched off to form what became the Trinitarian Chapel, later the Needham Congregational Church. Local conservative Baptists formed their own congregation. Some in First Parish swore that they would never again have a minister for more than a year. Which is exactly how long Dall's successor, James Hicks, lasted, even after being ordained here. Not even the youngest brother of the founder of American Unitarianism, George Gibbs Channing, could survive in this pulpit. He last two years. Then for the next eleven years, this parish called Universalist ministers. Perhaps because the remaining liberal farmers preferred their more inclusive, less elitist, version of the Gospel.

First came Andrew Napoleon Adams. But he too lasted just two years, before leaving to go into business as an easier way to earn a living than being a country parson. Then came the Universalist publisher and editor, John Stetson Barry, for two more. His health failed, though he continued to write and edit until he died at 46. Starting in 1860, his publishing colleague George H. Emerson preached here, commuting out from Somerville, where he edited *The Trumpet and Universalist Messenger*. Finally in 1864 he was invited to actually "settle" in the town. But when the war ended, he felt called to the Universalist mission in the West – Ohio and beyond. And the congregation again called a Unitarian, Solon Bush -- a humble man, a beloved pastor; and a respected preacher – who in his 18 years oversaw the move of the meetinghouse to this site, the addition of Parish Hall, and who quietly paid himself for what is still the minister's study. It cost \$500; \$50K today.

So what shall we say, today, about our Universalist heritage in this congregation? First, that it was not an historical aberration; it lasted well beyond the three ministers who, around the halfway mark in our history, all came from the ranks of Universalist clergy. Their influence continues. Speaking out for faith against fear-mongering in religion; committed to reaching out, not only to the educated elite, but also to ordinary people.

There's a great story about a women's suffrage rally being held on the Boston Common around 1900. A wealthy Unitarian lady from Beacon Hill appeared in full regalia. Some younger Universalist, perhaps housed at the Bethany Union for Working Women, in Back Bay, said, "What an impressive hat! Wherever did you get such a chapeau?"

"My dear," replied the *grande dame*, "Unitarian ladies on Boston's Beacon Hill do not *get* their hats anywhere; we simply *have* them." And that is how, of course, the Unitarian Brahmins treated the liberal faith. It was something one inherited; but never marketed. Universalists knew better. They knew how *many* out there needed an alternative to the dogmatism, fear, and formulaic belief. *Plus ca change . . .*

In recent years, the Unitarian side of our heritage has continued to support a thoughtful, rational, critical, and even skeptical perspective on religious and public matters; but the Universalist side also helped us to realize that religion is above all a re-linking of mind, to heart, to hands, in everyone.

As Unitarians, we believe that we deal with one Ultimate Reality – not two, or three – and that all names for that Reality, for God, are ultimately one. But as Universalists, we feel deeply that all humanity and all creation share the same ultimate destiny. Not some meant to suffer, some meant for bliss; but all longing for happiness, together.

This poses an interesting question about how we spread our message – our liberal faith, our 'good news' as our Universalist forebears would have put it. For make no mistake, our Universalist forebears were offering an interpretation of the Gospel which simply refused to believe that those of other backgrounds and beliefs were condemned to hell by ignorance, or that those who had fallen and failed could not be raised again.

There's an old adage – "scratch a Unitarian, and you find a Calvinist" – and too often today, I'm afraid, the message we're tempted to spread is more like bad news than good.

“Repent! or the whole planet will end in the fiery pit of global warming! Stop the war! For evil does not cease by evil,” as the Buddhists put it, “evil ceases only by love.”

And there is just the difference I think our Universalist heritage calls us to attend to: Whenever he was tempted to preach doom and gloom, said journalist Norman Cousins, he’d stop himself and ask whether he really knew enough, for sure, to justify an ultimate pessimism. And then he would re-direct his message toward the human power to change course, toward the possibilities, toward hope, not despair; away from anger toward love.

One superficial form of Universalism suggests that salvation for all of us is guaranteed. I’m not going to endorse that view. Another says, “If everyone would only think and act as *I* think they should, universally, then everything would be fine.” I don’t believe that, either. But I will say this: We *do* share a common ultimate destiny, all humans together, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Christian, Muslim and Buddhist, believer and non-believer, humanist and theist. And we do need hope more than fear of hell ahead. Surely we need even more a vision – a vision of the possibility of salvation, of health and wholeness, for all earth’s people.

And so what does our liberal heritage here suggest should be our enduring message then, to one another, and to the world? Perhaps the founder of American Universalism, the Rev. John Murray, put it best when he said, “Go out into the highways and by-ways, and give the people 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 women and men. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and the everlasting love of God.” So may we always. Amen and amen.

\*Hymn 290

*Bring, O Past, Your Honor*

Charles H. Lyttle

Unison Benediction 705

Hosea Ballou

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.

Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace. Amen.

