

First Unitarian Church

September 18, 2022

We have the word universalism right up front in the name of our faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism. We get so accustomed to hearing it that it would be easy to either take it for granted or to forget about it. But universalism is actually a pretty radical concept. Traditionally, universalism is the belief that a truly loving God would never condemn anyone to eternal hell, and since God is loving, therefore everyone is saved. It's a direct contradiction to the very dominant Christian idea that "you'd better behave, or else." Actually, in recent years it seems to be "you'd better believe, or else," as we've seen some self-proclaimed Christians behaving absolutely unconscionably. At any rate, the idea that sinners and non-Christians are going to heaven is so controversial that it has turned some people's lives upside down.

The man known as the grandfather of American universalism, John Murray, was originally an outspoken fire and brimstone kind of Christian back in England in the 1700s. But he got into a conversation one day with someone who convinced him that the idea of a God who created the whole world and loved all God's children, and the idea of a God who sends some of God's children to hell for eternity, were logically incompatible. So John Murray became a Universalist, and was so moved by it he took up preaching it to others.

It did not go well.

Murray was kicked out of his church and lost almost all of his friends. His wife and only child died. And then he went to debtors prison. When he got out, he fled to America, vowing never to speak of Universalism again. He'd started to feel like the very idea had been a curse on his existence.

But as Murray tells the story, God had other plans. His ship got stuck in a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey. Murray wandered on shore and met a man by the name of Thomas Potter who believed he had been instructed by God to build a chapel in the middle of nowhere. And he had built it.

When he heard that Murray had been a preacher in England, Potter felt certain Murray was the man God intended the chapel for. "The winds won't loose your ship until you preach," Potter told him. Murray informed him that he had sworn off preaching. Potter convinced him to trust divine providence: if the winds hadn't freed the ship from the sandbar by Sunday, Murray would preach. The ship stayed stuck, and he went on to become known as the grandfather of American Universalism.

More recently, a couple of other Christian ministers in America began to teach or preach universalism and they also faced huge consequences. Rob Bell was the founder of the evangelical mega church called Mars Hill Church. About ten thousand people attended services there each Sunday, until Bell published a book in 2011 called *Love Wins*, in which he said, basically, that universalism might be true. That maybe no one goes to hell. He lost his pulpit before the end of that year.

Carlton Pearson is another case. He was the pastor of one of the largest churches in Tulsa, the Higher Dimensions Family Church, with a weekly attendance of about six thousand people. When he came out as a universalist, people left his church in droves. Soon he was declared a heretic by his peers at the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops. Pearson and a few hundred of the remaining members of his congregation eventually merged with All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa. He is named as an affiliated minister there to this day.

Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian means that God or the source of all being is one. The source of all being is mysterious, but we all come from the same source. It is one. That's Unitarianism.

And Universalism means that all are saved.

When it comes to salvation, our spiritual heritage is an interesting one. On the Unitarian side, our puritan ancestors were Calvinists, and believed in the doctrine of predestination. According to Calvinism, it is already determined who is saved and who is not. Before you were even born, Calvinism says, God had two lists. One with the saved, and one with the damned.

In the Puritan's Calvinism, there really was nothing people could do to alter their fate.

People would try to be good and moral because if they weren't, then they'd know for sure they weren't saved—and so would everyone else. If people were good, if they behaved themselves well, then at least they had a shot. No one could look at them and tell right away which list they were on.

But being good and moral was no guarantee. As a Puritan, you could spend your whole life doing your best, but no one's perfect, so you'd always have that doubt. And then after death, stopped cold at the gates of heaven, you could find out that it was all for naught.

And then, wouldn't you feel some regret?

You *could* have cursed your parents after all. You could have worn clothes that were too nice for your social status. You could have been an unquiet woman, yelled at your spouse in public, or joined a coven of witches, because you were already on the wrong list anyway. (Those were all punishable crimes in Puritan days).

Those were the ancestors of the American Unitarians.

Our American Universalist ancestors were not Calvinists, quite the opposite. They found no evidence of hell or damnation in the bible, and they could not square the logic of a loving, benevolent god with the idea of a god who takes pleasure in the eternal suffering of the majority of humankind. And so, they concluded that in the end all people would be saved. No one would go to hell. Where the Calvinists pictured the heavenly gates with a heavy lock and a rigorous admissions process, the Universalists threw open the doors to heaven.

There was one list and everyone was on it.

Some of them still believed there might be a hell, just that no one would stay there forever. A bad person would go there until they had paid the price for their sins, and then would graduate out.

Or, some believed that hell didn't have to be a physical place, it could be a spiritual state.

Other Universalists did not believe in anything they would call hell. Everyone would be reconciled with God straightaway. Everyone.

All versions of Universalism raised some hackles, and some real concerns. Hell-fearing Christians would ask their Universalist neighbors, Why bother to be good if no matter what you do, you are going to heaven anyway?

To which the Universalists would reply, "If you're only good because you are afraid of being punished, but I am good regardless of already being saved, which of us is really the better person?"

Many found it hard to believe that Universalists really meant *everyone*. As in, even the worst people. This is a challenging idea. But early Universalists were aware of very bad people. They knew about the misery humans can inflict upon each other. In fact, it was and is obvious that we humans make hell for ourselves right here on earth.

But Universalists believed that somehow, things would be made right. Perhaps it was that after death, or during conversion, experiencing the unconditional love of a benevolent God would prompt an inner reckoning of all that the individual had done. The worse the individual's behavior, the more excruciating the reckoning would be, and the deeper the sense of unworthiness. Perhaps penance would simply be the natural consequence of love.

Whatever the technical process behind it, universalism was a hopeful faith. Eventually, it led to an embrace of theological diversity. If God loves everyone, and will condemn no one, then there must be more than one path to God. If we are universalists, we cannot condemn another person's religious beliefs simply because we disagree with their metaphysical claims. In Universalism, all paths must lead to the same God or "source of being" in the end.

Now, this is not the same as saying that all paths are equally good. All paths are not equal on earth—some religious beliefs increase division and suffering. They are misguided. They lead to difficult or unhappy lives. But Universalists determined that although we may have much to learn, and that we should work for peace and human dignity, in the end, no path would keep anyone from God. In the mid twentieth century, the Unitarians and the Universalists merged into one denomination, and continued to evolve with new generations.

Today, the embrace of theological diversity and reason is evident in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. Not all UUs believe in God, and those who do tend to define God more as love or a creative force and not in the traditional anthropomorphic terms. I could probably count on one hand the number of times I've heard a UU refer to God as a "he"—and I've been a UU for almost forty years. But without a belief in the kind of father-like God who might send people to

hell, why call ourselves universalists anymore? What exactly do we think people are universally saved from?

I recently read a book called the Power of Ritual by Casper ter Kuile, that got me thinking once again about this question. Ter Kuile went to the same divinity school I did, just a few years later, and he had a ministerial internship lined up with one of my UU minister friends in Massachusetts before changing gears and deciding not to work in congregations. He went on to create the hit podcast Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.

In his book, he argues basically that people don't need church.

As an analogy, he describes the way newspapers used to do a whole bunch of things for people—people would turn to their newspapers not only for news but to see what concerts or movies were coming up, peruse the personals for a date, find a job, buy or sell something in the want ads. Now, he says, all those things are available separately. You get your news online, use a dating app for dates, buy things on Craigslist, etc. Spirituality is like that too now, he says. You don't have to get anything at a church.

Where people used to go to church for community, today you can find a community through CrossFit or yoga classes or game nights.

While people used to depend on churches for rites of passage, today you can be married by a justice of the peace, and have a funeral director at a local mortuary preside over your loved one's memorial services.

People used to go to church to nurture their relationship with the divine and to raise their kids up in the same spirituality. But now instead, you can commune with nature, and teach your kids about religion using books, or not at all, especially if you consider yourself spiritual and not religious—though kids will still absorb a lot of religious messaging from the world around them.

You could do all those things, it's true. Casper ter Kuile is not wrong, nor are any of the other writers who've presented a similar message to their secular audience.

You could do all of those things outside of a church.

But instead you're here. And so am I. Why?

I think it is in part because it would be **possible** to do all of those things, and still feel something is missing. It would be possible to do them without achieving much depth,

Or being very challenged,

It would be possible to do them without being very brave,

Or very bold.

And, let's face it, we need courage to face our lives. We need strength. We need depth.

We need to know who we are in the grand scheme of things. We need each other, and not just in the sense of hello and how are you and what are you watching on Netflix, but in the sense of bearing witness to one another's search for meaning, to our rites of passage, and to the deaths and rebirths of ourselves that we experience all our lives.

This church is to save people from fear.

This church is to save people from the hells of alienation and loneliness.

This church is to save people from the kind of individualism that affirms your importance while starving your soul.

This church saves people from those kinds of hells, and from the hell of hate: hating others, and self hate.

From the hell of judgment: which sets us apart from others and cuts us off from them.

That doesn't mean we can't exercise the kind of judgment that discerns what behaviors and beliefs lead to more justice, mercy, and peace in the world, and which ones lead to more suffering and misery. We need to exercise that good judgment.

The harmful kind of judgment, the kind of judgment we need to save ourselves from, is the kind that pits people against each other, or puts some above others. The kind where you say, "I'd never do that." Or "I'd never be that way." Or subtly, maybe even unconsciously, decide that the other person is bad or is a lost cause.

This church is for saving people, not from some hell out of some medieval tale, but from the worst fate of all, which is to have nothing for certain except for this one precious life, and to realize, in our final days, that it was meaningless or nearly so, because we were never intentional in it, maybe we were too scared to be, and we did not wake up to its potential, to our potential.

So yeah, this church is for saving people. From hells. We gather to save ourselves and each other, and in so doing, maybe we save a little bit of the world. More than any of us could alone.

And—and here's where we really differ from all the a la carte options—we believe this salvation is available for everyone. We are universalists about it. It is never too late. You're not too weird or too awkward or too broken. You were not and are not a mistake. You haven't messed your life up too badly to find meaning now. You don't have to flip tractor tires or do burpees or shop at Lululemon. It's not a heavy lift, and it's not a popularity contest. Just come in. Everyone is lovable. Everyone is welcome.

Everyone is from one source, we are one family, and all are saved.