

Dragged Kicking and Screaming into Heaven

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As we approach the 50th anniversary of the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism, it is an appropriate time to be retrospective. At merger some feared the demise of Universalism. Outnumbered three to one they were understandably anxious, but also mistaken. That has not happened.

What happened is that we ended up with a Unitarian form of polity and Universalist theology. In 1961 there was no way to know this would transpire because it could only happen as subsequent generations lived out what it meant to be neither Universalist nor Unitarian but rather Unitarian Universalist. The lived experience must precede its theological articulation.

I want to tell you how I came to know this truth in my heart and realize that there is no more important message. The Apostle Paul experienced his conversion on the road to Damascus, mine came after arriving late in Buffalo, New York.

Conversion: a definitive, sometimes overpowering, moment that brings you to embrace a religious faith. What does “conversion” bring to your mind? Does it seem as out of place in a UU environment as an altar call? Is it a little scary? Have you ever heard a Unitarian Universalist speak of having had a conversion experience? Have you had such an experience? A moment which divides one’s life into before and after; a moment in which there is a spiritual transformation, a shift in one’s inner reality that changes the way he or she views the world. Such a moment once seized me and I was transformed—from a Unitarian into a Universalist!

It happened in the fall of 1980, at the annual meeting of the New York State Convention of Universalists. Donna and I arrived late, slid into a pew, and turned our attention to the Reverend Gordon McKeeman, who had already begun the keynote address: “The Persistence of Universalism.”

It was the beginning of our second year of ministry. Donna and I were co-ministers of the First Universalist Church of Rochester, New York, but we didn’t know very much about Universalism except what we were learning via osmosis from a loving congregation. I’d studied the basics in theological school—how the early church father Origen argued for universal salvation, how John Murray founded the first meeting house in 1780, and why some, the Ultra-Universalists, were called the “death and glory” school. However, since I had been raised Unitarian in Chicago, the Unitarian ethos rather than Universalism is what had been bred into me. Or so I thought.

I sat admiring the stained-glass and carved beams, half-looking, half-listening until I heard McKeeman say: “Universalism came to be called ‘The Gospel of God’s Success,’ the gospel of the larger hope. Picturesquely spoken, the image was that of the last, unrepentant sinner being dragged screaming and kicking into heaven, unable ... to resist the power and love of the Almighty.” (The Universalist Heritage, Keynote Addresses on Universalist History, Ethics and Theology 1976-1991 p. 49) What a graphic, prosaic picture—the last sinner being hauled, by his collar I imagined, into heaven. What kind of a God was this?

Suddenly what I had learned in seminary and was imbibing from our congregation came together and I got it: this was a religion of radical and overpowering love. Universal Salvation insists that no matter what we do, God so loves us that She will not and cannot consign even a single human individual to eternal damnation. Universal salvation—the reality that we share a common destiny—is the inescapable consequence of Universal Love.

Some of you must be wondering, “What is this guy talking about?” God? Why use that language? Why describe it as love? How else can we describe that which created, undergirds and sustains us? How else are we to speak of the idealized parent behind every parent – the archetypal Mother and Father of us all?

Many contemporary Unitarian Universalists dismiss this.

After all, most of us don’t believe in a personal God, much less in God’s love. At most we will concede that the Divine, being synonymous with the natural order, works in and through us. But ours is not a God who talks to you when you are in doubt, rejoices with you when times are good, or carries you through life’s trials. Our God is more abstract and less personal, more a symbol and less a felt presence, more in our heads and less in our hearts, an idea we argue about rather than an intuition we rely upon. In our understanding, caring is not something that flows from God.

As former UUA president Gene Pickett put it, “[Our Purposes and Principles] describe a process for approaching the religious depths but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves.”

Nonetheless a smug elitism bolsters an attitude among too many UUs who look down on those who believe in God. These “sophisticated cynics” [Forrest Church called them] portray God as an all powerful, all-knowing, bearded, white man enthroned in Heaven and then, of course, dismiss him as make-believe. But I have grown weary of those who scorn God.

What is God? What is God really? God is the un-begun and unknowable, the unfathomable and ineffable that is as close as the next heart beat, as ordinary as a mote of dust, and as precious as a newborn. God is the mystery at the core of all things. God is the mask we place upon the infinite and the garb we drape over the sacred so that we might enter into relationship with it. For we, of all the manifestations of the eternally unfolding creation, are blest to awaken to and knowingly witness and savor a miracle—life. Then in transmitting and building upon the creation with our own lives, we seek to address that which is beyond naming, the divine mystery that is both parent and partner. We say: “Our Father and Kami, Hail Mary and Gaia, Jesus, Abba, Siva, Allah, Brahma.”

One of Elie Wiesel’s stories ends: “God created man because He loves stories.” This is to say God is relational. We say it this way because we find it more believable when we invert reality. God did not make us in Her image. We made Her in ours. Why? So that we can identify with and relate to Her, so we can address and be spoken to, can love and be loved by. That is the way we are built. God, which is how we speak of experiencing the mystery behind all things, must be relational because we are relational. The bond we feel to another human being, which is what we learn in our mother’s arms, is the prototype for all our relationships. To the degree that we let the rational tyrannize our faith we fail to address this human need for intimate connection and sense of belonging.

I pray. I pray to the God who dwells within, among and beyond us. I pray to God for the same reason I write in my diary, talk to a friend, or spend a quiet moment in reflection

because what I know of God I find in communion with myself, with those I love and with the world in which I move and breathe and have my being. I talk with God because I need to relate to the world that is within and beyond me. I want to experience its realness and dearness; and UU abstractions of God simply don't meet my emotional needs or take me to that sacred place.

Even being as analytic as I am at this very moment is to step away from the immediate experience of that divine mystery rather than into it. But a God who drags the last unrepentant sinner kicking and screaming—no, actually profanely cursing and resisting—into heaven we can envision, we can admire, we can have confidence in, we can have feelings about, we can even laugh at. It is a personification of the Most Holy rooted in a powerful, sometimes overwhelming, feeling, an experience that transcends description, a yearning that defies analysis. What a relief to feel that ultimately there is nothing I can do to alienate myself from God's loving embrace—the almighty but tender arms of the creative force that upholds and sustains all life.

Universalism's insight is that you cannot coerce people into loving one another. The commandments are not threats. If they are not fulfilled God will not withdraw His love. No one could ever draw true love out of another with punishment! God's love is given to all and is a more positive force for good than fear ever will be. Not just stronger than fear, it is stronger than death. Love survives and it abides in us, all the departed reside inside us.

Behind this is a simple truth: in being loved we learn to love. Those who are loved will in turn love others. Those who feel another's love, a manifestation of God's infinite love, within themselves will in turn feel so good about themselves, so connected to life and so full of compassion, that they will not be able to help but to spread that love for they will overflow with it.

This was the feeling that captured me thirty years ago; this is the belief the world needs today as much as ever. The image of the sinner being dragged into heaven transformed how I saw the world because it took my unconscious early experience of being raised and being loved by a family embedded in a Unitarian community—and made it paramount. Henceforth I could say: I will make mistakes and fail; I will do thoughtless, hurtful things. I may be scorned by the world, may be no-good and rotten to the core, may even reject the love that is offered me, and still I am beloved by the Creation that made us all.

The “Gospel of the Larger Hope” is a gospel of inclusion that proclaims God's enduring and undaunted love for all. What puzzles me is why it didn't sweep the world? Why after the boom in the first half of the 19th century did it collapse? Why is it the afterthought in Unitarian Universalism? Why is Universalism and its proclamation of unconditional, uncompromising, all-embracing and over-powering Divine Love more difficult to believe in than the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth? Why is it easier to believe the unbelievable than to believe we are one human family beloved by God?

What we yearn for is unconditional love but it is contradicted by our experience. Instead, the principle message each of us received over and over again was this: behave and be loved, behave and be loved. The implication is those who are good and compliant are loved, all others not. Universalism calls this “partialism.” In other words, people have taken their own experience of conditional, judgmental, imperfect human love and ascribed it to God.

Today, given the ongoing strife in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, the decades old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and the genocide in Darfur, Universalism is as important as ever. The world needs to know that God's Love is boundless, but we have abandoned the language and retreated from this ancient proclamation, our good news.

Theism offers religious liberals a language to carry into the world. It is a useful language—and abandoning it exacts a cost—because it is the vernacular of ordinary people, 95% of the American people. [Pew Research Center.] Say, “God is Love and God loves you as you are, loves you and every member of our human family” and people will at least have an inkling of what we mean.

The world needs to hear about this faith that soothes wounded hearts and shapes attitudes that embody the Spirit of Love rather than that of wrath. In the face of neo-tribalism we need a message that challenges the “axis of evil” rhetoric, contradicts the “us” versus “them” mentality, and proclaims the oneness of the human family. There is only “us” beloved by a God who, dismissing free will (You heard me correctly. You do not get to decide.) and embracing the saintly and despicable alike, created both Mother Teresa and Saddam Hussein, supported both Obama and McCain, loves both Bush and Ben Laden, and drags Hitler into heaven as well.

This is a truth almost too shocking for us to assimilate, but “... beneath all our diversity and behind all our differences there is a unity which makes us one and binds us forever together in spite of time and death and the space between the stars.” [David Bumbaugh.] It was to the unrelenting tug of this reality, which I know as God, that I gladly submitted that long ago day.