

FAMILY REUNION WITH OUR U AND U AND UU ANCESTORS

The Reverend Cynthia Barnes Johnson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County
October 2, 2016

READING: Daniel O'Connell, then minister of the UU Society of West Redding, Connecticut, wrote the following about what he called the process of conversion to Unitarian Universalism:

“Newcomers know that the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist isn't as simple as signing a membership book, but we don't talk about the process of conversion much. The religious sense of the work conversion means to turn around, to find new ways to live your life base on your beliefs. It has been said that there is a four-step process of conversion to Unitarian Universalism. The four steps are simple, though possibly not easy.

IDENTIFY YOUR HISTORY: We each are born into a world we did not create, speaking a language not of our choosing to parents we never met. To some degree, we are not responsible for the world we were born into, the circumstance of our birth, or the religious heritage we were immersed in...And yet, here we are. To plan your journey, you would do well to know your own map of where you have been.

ARTICULATE YOUR HISTORY: We never finish the process it seems. But too many never really get started. With questions like: Why are we here? Where is the joy in my life? What do I willingly give my life to? What do I believe about life death, the divine, spirituality, religious experiences and ethical living?

TAKE SOME SPIRITUAL RISKS: If you don't believe in God, try prayer anyway. If you don't like being around the poor and destitute, work in a soup kitchen. (This takes some spiritual risks.) If you're afraid of death, volunteer in a hospital. If you're not creative, write poetry, paint, journal or sing. Use your spiritual fear like a Geiger counter---not to steer away, but to run headlong toward. Such risk-taking will help you grow spiritually and it will modify your theology, which in turn will suggest new spiritual risk-taking.

BECOME AN ELDER: When we first get involved with church, we need to pay attention to our spiritual needs. Many of us come here for the first time fresh from or in the midst of crisis. It is right and natural and important to find the church can serve our spiritual needs. But the path to a depth-oriented UUISM cannot simply stop there. Once we identify our history, articulate our theology, and take some spiritual risks, we must take our “ministry” or service, out into the larger world, through and with our “church” community.

We can move from being just a spiritual seeker to more than that: to a creator, sustainer, and nurturer of the beloved community, to work to provide a church home for others not yet met, but just like us...thus coming back full circle. Where are you on your journey?

FAMILY REUNION WITH OUR U AND U AND UU ANCESTORS Rev. Cynthia Barnes Johnson

I hope no one here this morning read the Fellowship's October newsletter so casually that he or she is expecting a sermon about geology because I referred to the Niagara Escarpment and looking under the surface to see what we could see. The key word you may have skipped over was “metaphorically.” My sermon is about Unitarian Universalism history and culture: what happened before any of us arrived and how and why that is important in our individual journeys.

But I did do something special for the geologists among us. When I see an open space on Dottie's grid reminding us about the work needs for the rapidly-approaching Sunday, my eyes go first as to whether the space for “FLOWERS” is filled. This week I was lucky to be the first responder to bring something for our lovely new table – and so I decided my floral arrangement could be oriented toward geology.

I have placed my vase of flowers from our autumnal gardens in the center of my very modest rock collection; 90% of my collection resides within the parameters of this bamboo tray this morning. Over the decades I have picked up small rocks I find beautiful and put them in my pocket. Just a few months ago, in connection with our de-cluttering efforts, I decided to give my shell collections away in hopes some little child would find them an affordable treasure at the resale shop. But I decided I wanted to keep my rock collection. This morning the variety of rocks represents the diversity of ideas and individuals and traditions within Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism. The flowers from our garden are a celebration, the way Unitarian Universalism feels to me. Door County artist Jeanne Aurelius's vase felt like the right one to hold the flowers.

Something weird happened this week when TWO different four-color Unitarian Universalist magazines arrived in the mail. One was the quarterly UU World that is mailed to all members and to non-members who subscribe to the magazine. The Other magazine was the very first issue of a magazine aimed at Seekers: "If you are just getting acquainted with Unitarian Universalism, I hope these stories and images give you a useful glimpse into our spiritually curious, community-minded, intellectually restless, and justice-oriented faith community." I expect that our Fellowship will want to buy a bundle of 25 to make available to the men and women come here, seeking something for their lives. My life was shaped into who I am and what I believe because my mother was a Seeker about 65 years ago -- and so I have been and continue to be.

Aha! I had a revelation while I was working on this sermon. I am usually pleased by my occasional revelations, and this one revealed to me a fundamental truth about my life.

I see the world through the lens of growing up a mid-century Unitarian humanist, and seven decades of seeking and finding has deep roots there. The words that I said every Sunday at the Church of the Christian Union – Unitarian in Rockford, Illinois, are the foundation of my beliefs, values, and waypoints. In the church of my childhood, "God" was a word I didn't hear. I heard other words large enough to anchor my life:

On the front of the order of service:

*This is a liberal church...
we seek to make religion as intelligent as science,
as appealing as art, as vital as the day's work,
as intimate as home, and as inspiring as love.*

Every Sunday we said our Affirmation of Faith together:

*We believe in the Moral Purpose of Life
and the emerging Brotherhood of Man.
We stand for Tolerance, Reason, Liberty,
Individual Responsibility, and the Ethics of Jesus.
We believe in the quest for truth, the path of love,
the goal of character, the life of service,
and the inspiring fellowship of the church.*

The Church of the Christian Union – Unitarian, was a church community that was a merger of Baptists and Unitarians in 1870. Dr. Thomas Kerr, a Scottish immigrant, who had earned a degree in medicine at Iowa State and practiced in Elgin for seven years before studying for the Baptist ministry, was called to First Baptist Church in Rockford in 1860 – resigned the Rockford pulpit to go to Hannibal, Missouri, but was encouraged to return to Rockford by the Rockford Baptists in 1869. In the intervening period, Dr. Kerr had been exposed to the teachings of Charles Darwin. The Rockford Morning Star observed, Dr. Kerr "*outgrew his environments and began to preach a broader, richer, sweeter gospel*" to which some of his parishioners took exceptions and brought charges against him. In August, 1870, following a sermon explaining his liberal views, Dr. Kerr resigned his pulpit. 48 Baptists left the church with him and, with 65 members of the ministerless Unitarian Universalist church, organized the Church of the Christian

Union. 104 people gathered October 21, 1870, to adopt by-laws which contained no fundamental dogmas or stated creed...

Much later, at the time of Dr. Kerr's 70th birthday, the newspaper observed:

The doctor is essentially an intellectual man. His discourses which are always interesting, always interesting, always worthy of analytical attention, are often difficult to follow because of their intense intellectuality and the continuous and accumulative ideas which he piles Pelion on Ossa...Dr. Kerr is a worshipper of facts. A new fact in the scientific world makes him glow with enthusiasm.

So, unlike most people, my native language is humanism, and as a teenager it I sometimes used it harshly. I was always aware that other churches spoke God Language. Every few years I mention a specific non-shining moment of my teen years.

I was in a group of junior high friends at a sleepover, and the conversation had evolved into a discussion about Hell. And I said: "If I were offered a choice between going to Heaven or Hell, I would choose to go to Hell because it would be more interesting." Within minutes Stella (who was Catholic) started to cry about my lack of faith and the group morphed into a few girls gathered around Stella and a few girls gathered around me because of my bravery and startling perspective.

Decades later I sometimes told that story to the youth group in the Sunday Schools in the churches I served. Once the youth group clapped in glee, and I told them that I regretted what I had done at some level because I hadn't learned yet to be respectful of other people's faith perspectives. That was yet to come, especially in being a chaplain at Parkland Hospital. When I'd asked whether I would be expected to carry a Bible with me, I was told "No" because we should enter every hospital room prepared to listen and be of some comfort in the words and images of the person we were visiting.

Sometimes I feel like a 1953 Chevrolet convertible model grounded in the language and images of a vanished time and place, but the truth is that my journey has been increasingly multi-lingual and increasingly passionate about the need for inter-faith dialogue and outstretched hands to be present in our hurting world. Along the way, I've learned a lot about God Language from academic study, working with others in multi-faith communities, and challenging myself to prepare my occasional brief church services at Scandia to make them accessible to the men and women who attend. These days I am reading and thinking about God Language from Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation in Santa Fe with his meditations that invite us "...to discover, experience, and participate in the foundation of our existence—Love...following the thread of Love..." in a unique blend of liberal Christianity and Eastern mysticism. Among my favorite poems is one I wrote about God in 1990, imagining our encounter in Dallas.

A Theophany, Please

I want to tell you about some Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist ancestors I've met along the journey... The first one predates Unitarianism because he lived during the theological turmoil of the Protestant Reformation. A Spanish physician Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician, who studied the Bible and concluded that the concept of the Trinity, as traditionally conceived, was not biblical. He wrote books *On the Errors of the Trinity* and another book challenging doctrine (*Christianismi Restitutio*). Servetus was eventually arrested, convicted of heresy, and burned at the stake in 1553 under the order of John Calvin. (from Wikipedia or ???)

American Unitarian history from UU website: Unitarian churches were formally established in Transylvania and Poland (by the Socinians) in the second half of the 16th century. There, the first doctrines of religious freedom in Europe were established under the jurisdiction of John Sigismund, Transylvania's first Unitarian king – and, to date, still the only Unitarian king. The early Unitarian church not only rejected the Trinity, but also the pre-existence of Christ as well as well as, in many cases, predestination and original sin... Ultimately, the dominant Christology believed that Jesus was a man, but one with a unique relationship to God.

Mark Harris: The origins of Unitarianism in North America began with some of the most historic congregations in Puritan New England where each town was required to establish a congregationally independent church that followed Calvinist doctrines. Initially these congregational

churches offered no religious choice for their parishioners, but over time the strict doctrines of original sin and predestination began to mellow.

By the mid-1700s a group of evangelicals were calling for the revival of Puritan orthodoxy. They asserted their belief in humanity's eternal bondage to sin. People who opposed the revival, believing in free human will and the loving benevolence of God, eventually became Unitarian. During the first four decades of the 19th century, hundreds of these original congregational churches fought over ideas about sin and salvation, and especially over the doctrine of the Trinity. Most of the churches split over these issues. In 1819, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon called "Unitarian Christianity" and helped to give Unitarians a strong platform. Six years later the American Unitarian Association was organized in Boston, MA.

For me, one of the most inspiring descriptions of being responsible for the content of our beliefs was written by Abiel Abbot Livermore (1811 – 1892) was a Unitarian minister, one of the founders of the Western Conference of Unitarian churches, the editor of the *Christian Inquirer*, and completed his career as a professor in and President of Meadville Theological School. This selection is from his essay "Reason and Revelation"

Finally, [Unitarians] feel a solemn and awful responsibility, resting upon every individual soul, to decide for itself, according to its best light, what it should believe and do. The interest here is personal, not social. Human authority is not admissible. Calvin cannot decide, Arminius cannot decide for me; I must decide for myself. God has put upon me, and I cannot, I dare not, shake off the responsibility.

It will not do for the Council of Nicea, nor the synod of Dort, nor the assembly of Westminster, to step between me and [God], and to determine for me what [God] has taught, and what I must receive.

Solemn interests I have at stake. A mighty business is upon my hands, which cannot be done by proxy, though popes and councils should tender their aid. The soul, in such high matters, must do its own work with God's assistance, not with [human] interference. My own free mind is worth more to me in settling the grounds of my duty, and my destiny, than the wisdom of the whole world besides, backed by all its great names, and its vast authority. My conscience, my judgment, my reason – these living principles in my soul, set there by God, kindled by his inspiration, fanned by his spirit – these hold me accountable to [God] with an adamant strength.

From Ahlstrom and Carey's *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity*, pp. 219-220, adapted by Cynthia Johnson

Universalist ministers preached the doctrine of universal salvation in what were later the middle Atlantic and Southern states. By 1781 Elhanan Winchester organized a Philadelphia congregation of Universal Baptists...one member was Benjamin Rush, famous physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

John Murray practiced what he preached. After suffering immense misfortune and tragedy in his homeland, including imprisonment for debts and the deaths of both his wife and infant child Murray sailed from England to America, a despairing soul, set on "quitting the world."

Retirement, however, was not to be. After landing on New Jersey Coast, a providential wind from the heavens, combined with the unyielding enthusiasm of one Thomas Potter, waylaid Murray's early departure and returned the preacher to a pulpit. Settled once again in ministerial harness in the New World, Murray's courage was severely tested. Twentieth-century Universalist chronicler, Clinton Lee Scott, recounts:

"The heresy hunters were not long in finding their prey. Ministers in pulpit and in print assailed Murray, both his theology and his character. They succeeded in stirring up sentiment against him until he was looked upon by many as a public enemy. He was accused of being a British spy, and pelted with stones on the streets of Gloucester. The Gloucester Committee of Safety ordered Murray to leave town, but he refused to budge."

A dramatic incident ensued when a stone crashed through Murray's church window, narrowly missing his head. The dauntless preacher lifted the rock high and exclaimed, "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither reasonable nor convincing...not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth."

Clearly, John Murray spoke from anguishing personal experience when he proclaimed, "Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage..." He exemplified bravely
No more evocative summary of the Universalist path can be found than that uttered by John Murray (1741-1815):

"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."

Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. They discovered from their biblical studies a new revelation of God's loving redemption of all... The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and this eventually became central to their belief that lasting truth is found in all religions, and that dignity and worth is innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class.

One of the most important thing I learned in seminary is that each time a congregation splits into two separate congregation, it is because the people who leave want a more pure/true way of being religion than they think is true than the congregation they are withdrawing from. Having that as a lens through which I see contemporary religious strife is a useful lens in today's world.

I remember the merger of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961. I suspect that those of us who were reared within one or the other denomination still feel more connected to their home church. The New Englandness of Unitarianism still stirs me with its rigor, but the kindly hearts of Universalists nestle up next to my Unitarianism. I have been delighted for many years by the optimism and good humor and passion in Universalist hymns. Our grey hymnal contains fewer hymns with Universalist roots.

There are many readings by Universalist ministers that inspire me, including this one by the late Forester Church in Entertaining Angels, in which he talks about religion in terms of windows. In describing his own theology, Universalism modified by Christianity, he said this:

"[The Universalism I embrace] ...holds that the same light shines through all our windows, but each window is different. The windows modify the light....refracting it in a myriad of ways, shaping it in different patterns, suggesting different meanings.

Fundamentalists, whatever their persuasion, claim that the light shines through their window only. Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshipers, they conclude there is no light. But the windows are not the light. The whole light -- God, Truth -- is beyond our perceiving. God is veiled. Some people have trouble believing that God looks into any eyes but theirs. Others have trouble believing in a God they cannot see. But that none of us can look directly into God's eyes certainly doesn't mean God isn't there, mysterious, unknowable, gazing into ours.

One final thing. Though the light of God is refracted through our windows in many distinctive ways, when the times comes for us to die, the same sun sets on each of our horizons. This we should be able to perceive. The principle challenge of theology today is to provide symbols and metaphors that will bring us, in all our glorious diversity, into closer kinship with one another as sons and daughters of life and death." (p. 13)

And just last night at dinner, Al and I agreed that Forester's Church's definition of God is the one we like best: "'God' is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each."

The Gospel of Universalism
Hope, Courage, and the Love of God

Tom Owen-Towle, Skinner House, 1993

No-Hellites

If one believes that God is love and is incapable of condemning and destroying the innocent, one will have trouble with hell and infant damnation as the Universalists did.

--Angus MacLean

The Universalists were known derisively in denominational circles as “no-hellites.” Whereas mainline American religion espoused the Calvinist doctrine of predestination (salvation for some, damnation for others), Universalists steadfastly believes that no God would ever condemn to eternal blaze the same creatures that deity infused with life.

Universalists, much to the chagrin of the orthodox, would even spin playful yarns, poking fun at the concert of a fiery pit. Our spiritual forebears took their religion seriously but never grimly. They employed humor as a healing balm in an often treacherous world. Once, when Hosea Ballou’s doctrine of universal salvation was roundly questioned by his congregants who asked what he would do with persons who died reeking in sin and crime, “Hosea replied, “I think it would be a good plan to bury them, don’t you?” As Unitarian Universalist minister Charlotte Justice Saleska smilingly jests, “There was definitely no below for Mr. Ballou.”

The no-hellites became an attractive, burgeoning religious alternative on the American scene, reportedly reaching status in 1888 as the sixth largest denomination in the United States. This hopeful faith helped to dampen the fires of hell in this land.

Nevertheless, the embers still smolder in contemporary society. A Princeton Religion Research Center survey recently asked, “Do you think there is a Hell, to which people who have led bad lives without being sorry are eternally damned?” and 53% of the respondents said yes. Unquestionably, the imagery of hell-fire and damnation still haunts people. Children lie awake at night sometimes in fear of the final judgment. Adults suffer torrents of anxiety on their death beds. The doctrine of hell, however modernized, stands as official Christian dogma.

Furthermore, Universalists claimed sin to be a personal matter, eschewing the doctrine that we were paying for Adam’s sin. Being unique individuals, we had ample opportunities during the earthly sojourn to do our own sinning, in short to be original sinners.

[As the twentieth century winds to a close] [CBJ: In our hurting world] there is a pressing need for a faith that aspires to diminish, if not quench, the fires if hell during this existence and beyond, whether on the streets or within the spirit.

Hallelujah for the no-hellites!

Whenever I challenge myself to speak about UU history, I enjoy it but not as much as when I pick some topic I’m genuinely pondering and develop a sermon through the creative process. That said, if there are people who would like to know lots more about U and U and UU history, I am willing to lend you materials from my extensive U and U and UU library. Within the last few weeks, I decided I am not yet reading to give my books to this congregation or to fledgling ministers, but I am newly willing to lend my books. And I would probably find it irresistible if I became aware than several Members and Friends of UUFDC were interested in further exploring UUism.

What is happening soon is something very practical: a two-session workshop called “How to Talk About Unitarian Universalism at Home and Work and in Your Neighborhood.” I’ve taught my class in many UU congregations, but I teach it here only every five or so years. The sign-up list is on the bulletin board near to the nametags. Please don’t sign up if you can’t attend both sessions on October 12 and October 19.

“I Avow My Faith” Richard S. Gilbert

I avow my faith
In a benign Cosmic Creativity,
A creative impulse that pervades the universe,
Manifest on earth as nature,
Over time as history,
And in humanity as love...
In the priesthood of all believers
 who care for one another;
In the prophethood of all believers
 who seek the reign of righteousness...
In the inherent worth of each human being,
 the dignity of every earth citizen;
 In the power of people of good will and sacrificial spirit
 who seek to transcend their finitude
And work to create the Beloved Community of
 Earth. Amen and Amen.

As the twentieth century winds to a close, there is a pressing need for a faith that spires to diminish, if not quench, the fires of hell during this existence and beyond, whether on the streets or within the spirit.

Hallelujah for the no-hellites!

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CHIMES

PRELUDE

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHALICE LIGHTING/OPENING WORDS

UNISON AFFIRMATION

DOXOLOGY

JOYS AND CONCERNS

HYMN A Hundred Years Hence Frances Dana Gage 1852, revised
(Universalist hymn printed in your Order of Service)

READING “The Process of Conversion to Unitarian Universalism” Daniel O’Connell

OFFERTORY

MOMENT OF QUIET

SERMON FAMILY REUNION WITH OUR U AND U AND UU ANCESTORS
Rev. Cynthia Johnson

HYMN Touch Not the Cup (printed in your Order of Service)

CLOSING WORDS/EXTINGUISH CHALICE

POSTLUDE

Unitarianism[[edit](#)]

Main article: [Unitarianism](#)

Historically, various forms of [Nontrinitarianism](#) have appeared within Christianity. The term may refer to any belief about the nature of [Jesus Christ](#) that affirms [God](#) as a singular entity and rejects the doctrine of the [Trinity](#), as affirmed by the [mainstream Christianity](#): a consensus of Christian bishops at the [First Council of Nicaea](#) in 325. Nontrinitarianism was especially prevalent during the theological turmoil of the

Protestant Reformation. A Spanish physician, [Michael Servetus](#), studied the Bible and concluded that the concept of the Trinity, as traditionally conceived, was not biblical. His books *On the Errors of the Trinity* and *Christianismi Restitutio* caused much uproar. Servetus was eventually arrested, convicted of heresy, and burned at the stake in [Geneva](#) in 1553 under the order of [John Calvin](#).^[25]

The term Unitarian entered the English language via [Henry Hedworth](#), who applied it to the teachings of [Laelio Sozzini](#) and the Polish [Socinians](#). Unitarian churches were formally established in [Transylvania](#) and [Poland](#) (by the [Socinians](#)) in the second half of the 16th Century.^[26] There, the first doctrines of religious freedom in Europe were established under the jurisdiction of [John Sigismund](#), Transylvania's first Unitarian king. The early Unitarian church not only rejected the Trinity, but also the [pre-existence of Christ](#) as well as, in many cases, [predestination](#) and [original sin](#) as put forward by [Augustine of Hippo](#), and the [substitutionary atonement](#) of Christ developed by [Anselm of Canterbury](#) and John Calvin. There were several different forms of [Christology](#) in the beginnings of the Unitarian movement; ultimately, the dominant Christology became [psilanthropism](#): that Jesus was a man, but one with a unique relationship to God.

I begin with “Ultimate Reality” AKA “the Mystery” AKA “the Holy” AKA “God” because I know that there is a reality in which I am an infinitesimal speck of consciousness. Sometimes I name it, probably in order to facilitate my awareness of it. My favorite names are the Holy or the Mystery. Sometimes I use “God” as a nickname. Using the name “God” sometimes facilitates my relationships with my brothers and sisters on our common human journey. Sometimes I am startled by the great differences in using the same name to represent such different understandings. On the whole, my being able to use the word “God” and let the reality behind that word speak for itself is a positive thing in my life. I like Forester’s Church’s definition of God best: “‘God’ is not God’s name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.”

Sometimes I refrain from all naming, especially when I am fully present to vastness in which I live and breathe and have my being. The vastness is not personal. It is neutral in that it is governed by the laws of nature, some of which are beyond human knowing. At the same time, it often feels to me like a compassionate and caring presence. Within its vastness, there is order and chaos, beauty and goodness and evil and love. I am part of the whole thing, too. This organic, fluid, evolving vastness is affected by what I do. When I respond to its beauty and appreciate the goodness and am in awe of the patterns of order, I am part of what makes that Ultimate Reality bend toward justice and love. We affect the unfolding of the universe by our hate and selfishness, too. Carl Jung reminds us of the presence of evil:

Evil needs to be pondered just as much as good, for good and evil are ultimately nothing but ideal extensions and abstractions of doing, and both belong to the chiaroscuro [key ar ‘skyur o] of life. In the last resort there is no good that cannot produce evil and no evil that cannot produce good.

(Woodruff and Wilmer, [Facing Evil: Light at the Core of Darkness](#), p, 259.)

I feel a responsibility to have my personal life be a good part of the ongoing creation. I am drawn into being a better person when I imagine myself as a co-creator. I will live as a conscious part of it for a finite number of years, but I came out of that vastness and will be part of it forever.

Even as my life resides within the Mystery, I am not aware of it much of the time. Most of my time and energy are filled with the dance between “Self and Others”. There is a lifelong tension between self and others as one grows and changes. Creating a self and living as an individual within many communities is the arena where religion, ethics, and psychology intersect for me.