

*Give them, not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting hope of God. Rev. John Murray*

## Universalism: The Second U

WELCOME

Dominique Hall

THE COVENANT

WE PLEDGE TO WALK TOGETHER IN FELLOWSHIP AND LOVE  
TO CULTIVATE REVERENCE, TO PROMOTE SPIRITUAL GROWTH  
AND ETHICAL COMMITMENT,  
TO MINISTER TO EACH OTHER'S NEEDS AND TO THOSE OF HUMANITY  
TO CELEBRATE THE SACRED MOMENTS OF LIFE'S PASSAGE AND  
TO HONOR THE HOLINESS AT THE HEART OF BEING.

OPENING WORDS

Rumi

Come, Come whoever you are.  
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving  
Ours is no caravan of despair  
Come, yet again come

CHALICE LIGHTING (unison reading) by Rev. Max Landau-Moss

LET THERE BE LIGHT, TO DRIVE AWAY THE DARKNESS  
LET THERE BE WISDOM, TO SHINE ON THE UNKNOWN  
LET THERE BE LOVE, TO HEAL OUR ALONENESS  
LET EACH OF US BE, A LIGHT FOR ONE ANOTHER

STORY *The Story of John Murray*

I talked about Murray extemporaneously. Relying in part on the following excerpt from John Murray: A Brief Biography, by Bonnie Hurd Smith

“ John’s contentment with life ended abruptly when his infant son died and Eliza’s health deteriorated. John moved her to the country, hiring nurses and renting a comfortable cottage. But his desperate efforts were not enough. Eliza died, leaving John heartbroken and debt-ridden. Once again, John was overcome by a sense of personal failure. James Rely was the only friend who could comfort him, and he encouraged John to join him as a preacher of universal salvation. Instead, John decided to “close his life in solitude” in America after hearing stories about the New World’s independent spirit and plentiful resources. With no connections or plans, John boarded the brig Hand-in-Hand bound for New York and served as its supercargo, or business manager.

Before reaching its destination, however, the Hand-in-Hand ran aground on a sandbar off the New Jersey coast. Because the crew required additional provisions, John went ashore in search of food. By chance he encountered an elderly farmer named Thomas Potter who had recently built a meetinghouse on his property for itinerant preachers. Potter was waiting for one to come who embraced universal salvation, as he did, and thus there was no doubt in Potter’s mind that God had sent John Murray for

this purpose. He urged John to preach, but John refused, preferring to leave his past behind and sail for New York as planned.

“The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God,” Potter warned John as John told the story in his autobiography. The wind remained calm for days. John was enough of a believer in God’s intervening hand to relent, and he delivered a sermon on Sunday, September 30, 1770, to the friends Potter had gathered. He felt his sense of calling and purpose return.

While Thomas Potter implored John to remain in New Jersey, John was invited to speak in cities and towns in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. He had to go. While he was attracting opposition from established clergy wherever he went, the public was resonating to John’s powerful preaching style; his oratory was as effective as any they had heard. In 1774, while John was lecturing in Boston, a gentleman from Gloucester, Massachusetts, named Winthrop Sargent paid him a visit and asked him to preach in that distant fishing and trading port. “

MEDITATION

*Acquitted of Universalism*

Robert Walsh

In the newspaper there was a story about a seminary professor in Kansas City who was put on trial by the Southern Baptists, accused of being a Universalist. It’s no wonder they were suspicious. He had stated publicly his belief that all people born into the world are children of God. And as if that were not enough, he also supported the ordination of women. Case closed?

The professor denied the charges. "I'm not a Universalist," he said, and he convinced them. After four hours of deliberation they voted 21 to 11 to let him keep his job.

Now, I confess to being a Universalist. In fact, I am a Unitarian Universalist. But I wonder. If I were arrested and charged with being one, would there be enough evidence to convict me?

The Kansas City story proves that having the right beliefs is not enough. The professor believed that we are all siblings, that every person has a piece of the divine spark, that women are the equals of men in the sight of God. That was not enough to bring in a guilty verdict.

No, if they are going to pin Unitarian Universalism on me they will have to be able to show that I participated in and supported a Unitarian Universalist church. That is the only way to be sure. Beliefs, no matter how noble, must be embodied in a living institution or they will have no convicting power.

READING

*The Winchester Profession (1803)*

***Winchester Profession, New England Convention of Universalists (1803)***

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practise good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.

SERMON

*Universalism: The Second U*

*Steve Finner*

As is usually the case, my sermons are extemporaneous, prompted by notes on an index card.

I took an historical approach starting with origins of Universalism (and Unitarianism) in the early Christian church and quickly went to origins of Universalism in the United States with the arrival of the Rev. John Murray. Universalism enjoyed rapid growth in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially among New England farmers and tradespeople, while Unitarianism appealed more to urban professionals and intellectuals. Over time, the meaning and understanding of “God” changed, being transformed into “live as it is currently understood by many, if not most Unitarian Universalists.

In that spirit, I ended with these powerful words of UUA President Susan Gray, given as part of her sermon at the opening worship this past June at General Assembly.

She opened the sermon by telling the story the story of a village which owned a large and beautiful diamond, but it had developed a large crack on its surface. A diamond cutter happened by, and took the diamond home to repair it. He returned weeks later and had carved a rose into the stone, with the crack being the stem of the rose. So, although the diamond was no longer perfect and flawless, it was nonetheless beautiful in spite of its brokenness. Reverend Gray’s close to her sermon:

*“Brokenness is not the end of the story—it’s in some ways the beginning.*

*There was a time when Unitarianism led some to think that perfectibility—of the character, of our virtues, of society, was the path to salvation. But it was our Universalist forebears who saw the brokenness in the world and loved it all the same. Universalism that saw how love could bring forth a rose from the cracks. And that is the kind of love—that is the kind of religion—that has the power to bring more wholeness, life and freedom for us all.*

*This path—this practice of love—involves risk. Just like the townspeople took a risk in trusting the stranger with the diamond. We have to risk to create that rose.*

*What we are signing up to do together is no easy task. To build a community that can be a container, a cup, to nurture a love that burns so brightly and boldly it acts as a force for justice within our lives, our congregations and our movement as a whole.*

*This would be a resilient community, a community of deep commitment and practice where we don’t let go of one another because we know that “letting go is not loving—and it is far too dangerous for that here.” A community where love and solidarity help us develop a greater capacity for community, for risk, for courage, for truth telling, for vulnerability and joy.*

*This is the kind of love that can change the world. This is the kind of love that can tend a flame strong enough to light up a movement for justice and peace.*

*It's the love of Sunday school teachers offering refuge to children who need those life saving moments of unconditional love and joy.*

*It's the love that opens our doors as sanctuary to families whose lives are thrown into tumult by our immigration policy.*

*It's a love that repairs and replaces a Black Lives Matter sign after a vandal rips it down.*

*It is a love that has the courage to shut down jails and to put our bodies between the violence of the state and vulnerable communities.*

*A love that fights bathroom bills because we know they are an assault on trans people and on all of our bodily autonomy.*

*A love that organizes rides across state lines and networks of reproductive health for women in states where it is under attack*

*A love that won't be silent, that will not rest, until everyone is safe, free, and whole.*

*It is no small thing to be part of a faith tradition where our forebears offered safety on the underground railroad, where our contemporaries offer sanctuary to families under threat, and where each generation before us found their way of passing the faith along.*

*There is a future for Unitarian Universalism where our communities reflect a spirit of compassion and solidarity, where we create space not just to bring our shared interests or our intellects, but our boldness and our brokenness, our dreams and our despair, our vibrancy and our vulnerability.*

*Communities that welcome our children and offer ministry to the needs of families today, communities that gather and worship in ways that name fearlessly the conditions of our lives and the possibility that lives in the joy, beauty and love that is within us all. A future where we build a marginless center and where our communities all have the skills, the language, the spirit, the resources and respect to create a places where not only is everyone welcome but everyone is at home. This is the community I want to be a part of. This is the community that I need—for my life, for my strength, for my soul.*

*Because it is this kind of love—one that makes room for grief and inspires courage—that lives in the fullness of our tradition and holds a power to lead to the fullness of our compassion and humanity. May we be communities that nurture for and in all of us—every single one of us—a love that will not be silent, that will not rest, until everyone is safe, free and whole.*

*My fellow Unitarian Universalists, may it be so.”*

CLOSING WORDS

#704 from Singing The Living Tradition