

“Universalism: Legacy and the Future”  
 Greenfield Convocation  
 November 27 - 29, 2006  
 La Salette Christian Center  
 Attleboro, Massachusetts  
 Paul Ratzlaff, Anchor

Moderator Tom Wintle called us to order at 3:10.

Father “C” welcomed us and introduced us to the Center, formerly located in “The Castle” which burned down. The Center is known for its “Festival of Lights,” which attracts many thousands, including buses from New York. On the Shrine’s logo, sin and reconciliation are symbolized in the “hammer” that drove the nails into the cross and the “pincer” that removed the nails.

“Our life goes on in endless song ... how can we keep from singing?” We then checked in: Some were songs of contentment: Thanksgiving shared with multiple generations. Quality time with grandchildren and pride in their accomplishments and potentials. Climbing a mountain top in Colorado, traveling to Norway, Sicily and the Carolinas.

Some were songs of lament; “things fell apart,” the refrain, “too busy,” “worst summer,” “failing septic systems because bay is rising,” “ALS”

Others were songs of exaltation; “ALS –no signs of progression for the last 6 months;” “son blooming at 35,” “normal birth of Max Stirner Pawelek,” “Democratic government in New Hampshire for the first time in 80 plus years;” “Really happy with no **buts;**” “High Anglican ritual – cool!” “First time seeing two red foxes playing;” “UU Magnum Opus – 4 pages long;” “Traveling the U.S. with the Teacher of the Year.”

There were songs of aspiration and commitment: Good energy in anti-racism training, Gamaliel, Transgender Day of Remembrance, Commission on Compulsive Gambling, gutting and rebuilding houses in New Orleans,

Yet others were mixed melodies: “11-year-old crying anticipating his mother’s trip away;” “Aging young adults forming a ‘Do Something Group’;” “Capital campaign for a ‘green’ building,”

Some were whimsical: “supervising Catholics in spiritual direction;” “ultrasonic rock opera;” “Dad, talk some sense to my brother – you can’t meet a person in college and then marry them!” “Popery – potpourri, what’s that got to do with lighting a chalice?”

Members shared reports on late and absent members: Joel Miller captive of plane delays; Rosemary Bray McNatt is sick, but hopes to get here. Frank Carpenter broke a disk in his back. Bob Thayer reported on other announced resignations and absences. We may need conversation about whether to institute greater flexibility in attendance, as many members are retired.

Nina Grey, Program Chair reviewed our program.

Bob Thayer addressed “why we are here.” Our Lady of Peace announced that they were selling their property. Bob acted quickly to line up a central place that could be trusted. He knew La Salette from the Retired UU Ministers having held its meetings here. Business session should include discussion of our location.

We adjourned for social hour.

At the Monday evening session, Joel Miller who had arrived checked in.

Josh Pawelek presented his “Wall of Universalism,” six large sheets of paper on the wall, 0 - the Present, with dates and captions of historic people, and moments. Josh invited us to add our favorites, if not included. Josh queried if, as he was taught, Universalism was the “standard theology” of Christianity in its first years? Was Jesus a Universalist? Depends on which texts you focus on. Woman at the well is a pivotal story.

Josh reviewed historical figures and movements that believed in universal salvation through the centuries.

Braudel moment! Albigensians may have been primarily a populist movement, not so much a theological movement.

It gets very busy with 1700s, hence one panel. Many familiar names, de Benneville, Relly, Murray, Caleb Rich, etc.

Passing mention of legends of Relly’s book washing ashore in Gloucester, like Murray and Thomas Potter – our version of the “virgin birth!”

Anabaptists in the US influenced early Universalists. Schwenkfelders and Dunkers emigrated as communes to south central Pennsylvania because they were thrown out of Germany for their Universalist beliefs. They were in conversation with de Benneville and others.

Blossoming of congregations and conventions in late 1700s.

First great awakening (c. 1740) may have been seed for universalist stirrings.

In the 1800s, the Winchester Confession was a pivotal movement, and in the 1830s a defining controversy was the Restorationist conflict.

We noted the ground-breaking role of women in Universalist ministry.

Added a note about Universalism expanding to a major religious movement in US, 600,000 to 800,000 strong.

P.T. Barnum’s envisioned healthy neighborhoods for the working classes – an example of Universalist written all over his life.

Need to include Universalist contributions to abolitionism.

Add Ferry Beach’s founding by Quillen Shinn in 1901.

We spoke of the dilemma of Universalist history after merger. Some conventions withheld their money and continued to meet independently. Perhaps anxiety around merger prevented a full theological consideration of the differences in the two movements, which still needs engagement. Concern that difficulty with Jesus reflects this continuing need for engagement.

Currently an Evangelical Christian claims Universalist heritage.

Having reviewed major dates, figures and dynamics in our Universalist history, we turned our attention to a figure in depth. Rosemarie Smurzynski presented “Phoebe Hanaford: an independent woman from Nantucket.” Rosemarie felt very excited to discover this nearly forgotten Universalist minister, and was delighted to remind us of her life and ministry. Her paper began with bullet points giving an overview of the highlights of her life. She then expanded on these points, elaborating Olympia Brown’s support for her becoming a minister, her taking Universalism to the world, and her successes and

challenges as a woman in ministry, especially given her relationship with Ellen Miles. Rosemarie reviewed Hanaford's role in the suffrage movement, her theological views, and her defiance of the criticism she received as woman minister.

Hanaford papers are in 17 or so boxes at the Nantucket Historical Society. There is no known biography.

Thanking Rosemarie for bringing Phoebe back into our consciousness, discussion then centered on speculation about why Hanaford has been forgotten... was it because she may have been a lesbian? Was it celebrity culture that focuses on Stanton and Anthony? Was it that she was more pastoral? Not so, since she was active on the public stage.

Rosemarie noted that Universalist women ministered all over the U.S., whereas Unitarian women ministered mostly in the west.

A book perhaps....

Many of us walked the "Festival of Light" display before it turned out at 9:00 PM. Frank Hall, leading Monday evening chapel, shared poems that stir him, and invited us to remember those who had given us gifts for our ministry.

At Tuesday morning chapel, Susan Suchocki, having told the story of neighbors being quickly uprooted, invited us to share a memory of Our Lady of Peace in Narragansett that we left without having had an opportunity of saying goodbye.

After breakfast, Anita Farber-Robertson presented her major paper, "Universalism-The Devotional Life"

Universalism holds water, but there are acids that corrode the pipes. She suggested four remedies (liberating ways of thought) that counter the acid – that help us live our Universalism – and continue to be a conduit for life-sustaining water. She illustrated this from her own struggle with an early belief that she had to earn love (she labeled this mind-set "Calvinism.") She continues to deepen her acceptance of being loved, her faith in Universalism "because... what the world needs is people who have come alive."

In Joel Miller's response, he posed the dilemma of non-repentant pedophile seeking the "right" of return to church community. Universalism invites the man back, but other values protect the well-being of the church and the families harmed. Joel decided not to welcome the man back on his release. Anita agreed with Joel's decision, acknowledging that held the complexities of the situation.

Both papers reflected the emotional warmth that characterized classical Universalism

Two threads ran through the questions and comments that followed: concern with God's role in Universalism, and reactions to Joel's dilemma. Is it necessary to be a theist to be a universalist? God can be understood in other than anthropomorphic, personal terms. As an example, a "mystical humanist" can have a long term view of beneficence in the world. Others find more traditional concepts of God helpful: God's love wants moral development of human. We love our children both because they are, and because we spend our time washing and cleaning them. In other words, Ballou's either/or is a both/and. Universalism is all about God, for it is God who accepts people and makes people acceptable.

Some of the conversation reacted to Joel's test case. For one it helped to think of the pedophile as being under the control of forces out of his control. In case of contagious disease, we quarantine the ill person. This is really about illness, not competing values within the individual. Yet another shared how difficult it is to "know" when a person is authentically remorseful.

Discussion ended with the image of Jacob wrestling with the "angel," which evoked a variety of reactions, including whether his consequent limp was a blessing or a curse.

Brian Kopke was able to join us during the morning.

Following a short break Jim Sherblom presented the second major paper, "Reincarnating Universalism: Why diversity and pluralism are essential to relevance within 21<sup>st</sup> century American religion"

Reviewing Universalism's adaptability and defining "modern" and "postmodern," Jim challenged us to reinvigorate a Universalism for the postmodern age in which we live. Using the congregation with which he co-ministers as a case, he urged us to provide meaning and transformation for the live questions faced by our congregants. They reflect the growing pluralism in our communities.

Nina Grey's response graced us with particularities of First Church Chicago and a process for deepening four spiritual paths within the community as a way of truly living unity in diversity.

The discussion that followed focused in two areas: understandings of "post-modernism," and actually living as pluralistic communities.

One quipped that "post-modernism" is the modernist term for a movement, but actually we are now beyond "post-modernism." Modernism and post-modernism are intertwined and inter-dependent. From a process point of view, one must integrate one's past in order to move forward. (A flaw of the Charles Street Meeting House is that it expected people to leave their religious past, without confronting it.) Another protested that "post-modernism" begs the question of language. What it describes is a shattered world. How do we address this experience of shattering that people bring to our congregations?

A second theme was the viability and growth of diverse and pluralistic congregations, given that many growing congregations define themselves narrowly. One suggested, "If we want congregations to be large, the shift isn't from post-modernism, but from traditional to modernism." Learning from the rapid growth of evangelicals, we should note that they address alienation, and they minimize narrow theological doctrine. Brockton illustrates pluralism, but struggles with growth in numbers. In another congregation Sunday worship life remains primarily humanist with small groups providing a full sense of "at-homeness" for those who identify differently.

We were reminded that growth is not only about numbers, but also about depth of spiritual experience.

We broke for lunch and an afternoon break.

In the afternoon small groups discussed each members' one page "Envisioning a Future for Universalism," Nina suggested that we consider Universalism as a devotional practice, which may be explored in a variety of denominations, and Universalism within our UU movement.

When we gathered as a whole group, Rosemarie circulated a pamphlet on Universalism from the 60's, noting the differences in the bibliography.

Much of the conversation revolved around connecting with others who share a universalist theology. We were reminded of evangelical Christians who have recently proclaimed universalism. Perhaps we should create a network of universalists across different denominations, but how? Observing Andover Newton negotiate pluralism provides hope for an interfaith network around universalism. But this is difficult for UUs, especially when for some UUs "Christian Universalism" is as foreign as "Christian fundamentalism." Also there is the difficulty that we UUs lack a shared content and understanding of who we are.

Perhaps the way forward is through working together on common work, without a focus on common language. But our Protestant roots, which focus on beliefs, trip us. In contrast Jews and Orthodox Christians emphasize orthopractice, which may be the way. Beware ritual that does not affect the heart!

Perhaps what limits us is the assumption that we have the franchise on inclusivity. Instead we ought to be building coalitions. We UUs need to live our Universalism. We need to practice generosity of spirit, and can be instructed by Radical Hospitality.

One testified to the Methodist hospitality that welcomed UUs to work in New Orleans, without regard to theology. Another shared the hospitality of a Benedictine monastery after a snowfall. "Christ stayed here last night, so we cleared the snow off all the cars."

We adjourned for "attitude adjustment."

For change of pace Tracy Sprowls Jencks introduced non-knitters to the sensual pleasure of yarns and entrancing motion – and the frustration of dropped and added stitches – in order to make a Greenfield afghan.

At Tuesday evening chapel Brian Kopke invited us to experience a candle-lit Christmas Eve as participants, not celebrants. Hearts were moved as he, newly single parent and impoverished, told of receiving unexpected Christmas generosity.

"Good morning Sun; good morning sky!" At chapel Wednesday morning Nannene Gowdy invited us to celebrate the aspects of our new site that we are enjoying.

Nina started our Wednesday morning discussion by telling of a dying parishioner's taking in that she was loved "I believe that...my spirit will remember." Nina then asked "How do we, and how might we, practice Universalism in our ministries?" Moments of silence... small *u* universalism is part of my being, e.g. clergy collective in Bridgeport working on social change, especially one-to-one meetings with other clergy. Most are universalists with a small *u*. This began a thread of conversation about interfaith activities, particularly community based organizations that build bridges between conservative and liberal faiths. Organizations like IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation based on Saul Alinsky's community organizing) do that.

But IAF has a confrontational mode versus entrenched power. Where does universalism fit in with confrontation? IAF is compatible because it presumes every person has value and that their needs have merit. Confrontation serves the common good.

This led to thread around Universalism and boundaries on behavior. Universalism does not mean anything goes; boundaries are needed. When we fully understand God's love of us, we are able to love others. A temptation of Universalism is to be nice to everyone when right relationships are required. Truly loving relationship requires the accountability of acceptable behavior.

Another theme was the natural tendency of groups to become homogeneous. Churches divide by ethnic and class lines, which gives people haven with "their kind." However, one pays a price to practice universalism within such a culture. How do we practice hospitality with those of different social economic class?

This question led to several responses, both within a UU context, and in broader settings. The Ottawa congregation partners with different ethnic groups in the city. At dinners they mix up the seating. Sometimes it is so hard.

In a rally at start of war in the midst of much anger, the assembled were reminded that God loves President Bush, too, which changed the whole dynamic of the protest.

Our first UU principle expresses Universalist ideal, but it is hard to practice. Note that our first principle works only in combination with seventh, awareness of inter-connection. Each principle can become demonic; they can be used only in combination. The principles have to be tied to the sources, which makes them uniquely ours. E.g. search for truth and meaning tied to humanistic source. Focus on individuals and movements that modeled that search.

Bob Kegan (?) affirms that inherent worth and dignity is deep inside, and may be different from surface presentation. One should not use the first principle to excuse hurtful behavior. It is an act of loving to call people back to right behavior.

We need to be humble as Universalists. We can learn from others. For example, a Thanksgiving prayer by a Southern Baptist was so inclusive, universalistic that a Universalist felt shame in comparison..

It was noted that a Universalist prayer allows others to relax.

Another felt shame in the experience of hospitality in a Pentecostal Caribbean church. They made sure she was fed; and invited her into the pulpit.

Someone observed that compassionate work established commonality, a feeling of universalism. E.g., the situation in the Gulf is so stark that it moves everyone to feel that "it's not about us." It was noted that discernment needed to be used among volunteers. An application process determined which people had which skills and limitations.

Conversation returned to the issue of helpful boundaries within congregations. Same issue applies within congregation in dealing with people where boundaries are needed. Acknowledging that someone doesn't have skills or capacity is not about their inherent worth and dignity. A trained and wise Committee on Ministry can be forceful, democratic. There is always the danger of others misinterpreting when minister sets boundaries.

The conversation turned to considering Universalism's growth. Systemically, do we face special challenges? The word *Universalism* suggests largeness, but size may not be as important and "how we are." We respond to the call to serve others who need our liberal faith. On the other hand, we may find ourselves absorbed with the people who are there; not the ones who could be there.

It was suggested that growth requires personal testimony. Growth requires vulnerability and sharing, not billboards. Perhaps we are limited by our self-selection. We make the mistake of “growing our church” instead of “growing our message.”

Self-selection and like-mindedness is a blessing and curse – homogeneity provides sanctuary, and voluntary associations lives out the democratic side of universalism, but curse can be seen in the factions at GA. Decision to welcome some, alienates others. No way to avoid it.

As the congregation drew to a close, we focused on the tension in boundaries. Someone suggested that we could start a dozen congregations in town, if we didn't have turf issues. Why not interlocking circles? Circles have boundaries, how do we increase the permeability of our boundaries. The underbelly of universalism is that while claiming to be without boundaries, the group develops covert, unspoken boundaries, which become even more difficult to engage.

Right relations may be the way to go for how to be inclusive and protective.

In conclusion, Nina, Program Chair, thanked us all for our participation in this convocation.