

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
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Love and Justice in the Wilds of the Pennsylvania Frontier: George DeBenneville

Maybe some of you have wondered why we are spending so much time on Universalist history. There are several reasons. One is to celebrate this glorious history stained glass window, but that is a minor reason. Another reason is that it became clear to me at the board retreat in October that many folks here do not know a lot about our history and are hungry for it. Our history tells us a lot about who we are and how we got here. The most important reason of all is that there is a lot to be proud of in this congregation's history and in the history of Universalism in Philadelphia. There may be healing in learning our history. I hope you will be able to claim and be proud of this history, and I hope you will let go of any traces of low self-esteem about this congregation. I hope we will be able to see how the history speaks to us in the present. I think there's a lot that speaks directly to us in 2012. Restoration has a legacy of abundance and love to share.

I've spent a lot of time this week thinking about, reading about Dr. George DeBenneville as well as about hospitality, the abundance of Philadelphia Universalism and this congregation's legacy. DeBenneville was the subject for the adult study group on Thursday as well as this morning's worship service. We had a great time on Thursday considering DeBenneville's message for us today. If there is nothing else for you in learning this history, there is this: if someone tells you that Unitarian Universalism is a twentieth century cult (as someone once told me), you will **know** and be able to say that that's not true.

When I took Unitarian Universalist history in seminary, I took an intensive class that was held at Ferry Beach, Maine and was taught by a Boston area UU minister. I discovered what I call "Massachusetts chauvinism." For me, that is the belief that all important Universalist and Unitarian history took place in Massachusetts, mostly Boston, and a little bit in the rest of New England. There is significant Universalist and Unitarian history right here in Philadelphia.

My instructor said, "I don't know why we talk about George DeBenneville. He didn't really do anything." He preferred to call John Murray who established a Universalist church in Boston, the father of American Universalism. I already knew that I admired Dr. DeBenneville and believed him to be an important ancestor. I fumed a little but said nothing. I had the feeling that Universalism and Unitarian Universalism were somewhat different here in Pennsylvania and in Philadelphia than in Boston. My reading this week has given me the information and the intuition to answer my instructor's assertion.

As I learned more, I have come to admire George DeBenneville even more than I did. I first admired his mysticism and his courage in following his call. I admired his deeds: that he loved, healed, taught and preached to **everyone** in his own home. That he was a true friend of the Native Americans. That he preached against slavery in the 18th century. Now I have learned more about his life and more about what he preached. I read *The Life and Times of George DeBenneville*, I written by Albert Bell in 1953 with a foreword from Herman Gehr who was minister here at Restoration. Rev Gehr was the chair of the DeBenneville anniversary committee. Here is the conclusion of the book:

The Universalist Church of America acknowledges with reverence and appreciation the heroic labors of Dr. George DeBenneville in the propagation of Universalism in Europe and America on the occasion of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth on July 26, 1953.

The Rellyan Universalism of John Murray involved nothing more than an extension of Calvin's definitions of the elect and predestination to include the entire human race. Before Murray died, he complained that only one minister shared his views . . .

American Universalism, in the tradition of the great Spiritual Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continues in the spirit of Dr. George DeBenneville, Elhanan Winchester and Hosea Ballou.ⁱ

All three of these men preached in Philadelphia – and are part of our history window.

For me, DeBenneville's 18th century preaching is still fresh and relevant. He may have used some different language, but his message, his gospel seems to me to be contemporary Universalism. He really is our guy; he spent fifty years healing, teaching and preaching right here in Oak Lane, Germantown and Mount Airy. He took care of the wounded at the Battler of Germantown. He worked with the Native Americans who camped at Stenton. "He found the indigenous people to be a source of great wisdom and insight, and sought to supplement his medical knowledge by learning their techniques and wisdom."ⁱⁱ

I think his theology is basically Restoration's theology today. DeBenneville said that when he arose from his coffin in Germany, he was called to preach, "the universal and everlasting gospel of boundless, universal love for the entire human race." The Good Doctor even used the word "restoration." He was criticized for using the terms restoration and restitution. He replied, "Very well, my brother, but we do agree that this world can be better than it is and we can do that by making ourselves better than we are. Let us do that."ⁱⁱⁱ

As we just heard, DeBenneville also preached "deeds not creeds," "the interdependent unity of all things," that all religions have some truth, that one shouldn't take religious symbols literally and that the importance of religion was transformation, a

change of heart to live a truly loving life. He preached in many places, in any kind of church that invited him. He had a house built in the Oley Valley, in what is now Berks County. The house served as his medical office, a schoolhouse for all the children in the valley Native American, African American, German, French, English, Scottish, and it served as a meetinghouse for worship for as many as 100 people. He visited the Ephrata cloisters often. He disapproved of their celibate life. DeBenneville valued life and the healthy pleasures of life. He encouraged many of the married couples at Ephrata to resume married life. Still, DeBenneville did not want to establish a church or a denomination as he saw that these institutions often ended up in conflict:

What can be the reason for so many disagreements? The only reason is that the essential truth is so divided and torn into so many pieces that it is often lost in the strife. One party has a truth; another also has some truth but each thinks it has the sole truth and therefore tries to reject the other.^{iv}

DeBenneville didn't just preach the gospel of universal, boundless love. He really lived it. Elhanan Winchester wrote of him, "I bless God that I was ever acquainted with Dr. George DeBenneville, for such an humble, pious, and loving man I have scarcely ever seen in my pilgrimage through life."^v

Winchester was a Baptist minister who met DeBenneville in 1781 after he had read DeBenneville's translation of the German work *The Everlasting Gospel*. After he met DeBenneville, Winchester began preaching "universal restoration." Restoration in this sense means not only that all people are loved by God but also as DeBenneville wrote, "will be restored to their original purity and blessedness, in order that the good may abide and God be all in all." Another way of saying it would be that all will be part of God and that God is within all of us. From 1781 to 1787, DeBenneville and Winchester traveled as far as what is now Morgantown, West Virginia evangelizing – spreading the good news of universal and boundless love.^{vi}

When Winchester began preaching universalism, his church split. With many from the congregation, he formed the Universal Baptist Church. This was actually the first Universalist church in Philadelphia.

I imagine Dr. DeBenneville telling us, "You are loved and you can love – so go and love." May we come to the place where we might believe for ourselves and say to all we meet - how could anyone ever tell you that you were anything less than beautiful

Ashe. Amen. Blessed Be.

ⁱ Bell, Albert. *The Life and Times of Dr. George DeBenneville(1703-1793)*. Boston: The Universalist Church of America, 1953.

ⁱⁱ Bumbaugh, David. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000, p. 143.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bell, Albert. *The Life and Times of Dr. George DeBenneville(1703-1793)*. Boston: The Universalist Church of America, 1953.

^{iv} Bell, Albert. *The Life and Times of Dr. George DeBenneville(1703-1793)*. Boston: The Universalist Church of America, 1953.

^v Bell, Albert. *The Life and Times of Dr. George DeBenneville(1703-1793)*. Boston: The Universalist Church of America, 1953

^{vi} Buehrens, John A. *Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People's History*. Boston: Skinner House, 2011, pp.7-8.