

A Renewable Universalism for the 21st Century

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One day three clergymen were having a talk down in hell. The Priest explained, “We have strict rules about lusting after women, but I just couldn’t resist a good body. I guess that’s why I’m down here.” The Rabbi then spoke: “As you know we have many explicit laws governing diet, but I just loved a ham sandwich. I guess that’s why I’m down here.” After a silence, the Priest and the Rabbi turned to the third member of their group. “So, we confessed. What are you doing in this terrible, hot place?”

The third man glared at the others for a moment, and said, “Hey, I am a Universalist. This place is not hot, and I am not here.” Well, I’m here and we’ll know how hot this place is when I finish.

I am honored to be the preacher at the Pennsylvania Universalist Convention this year. This gathering is the 175th annual meeting of the trustees and delegates of our historically Universalist churches. The meeting yesterday was full of stimulating thought from Rosemary McNatt and lots of conversation among the various people present. It was probably this way back in 1831 at that first gathering. About the only difference will be that I don’t plan to preach for two hours like some of them did back then.

I chose as my subject to explore the theme of linking our historical Universalist faith with the modern work of saving the world including us. I researched everything in my library and on line that might give me some inkling of what Universalists thought about the world and our place within it. The two readings that were offered earlier referred to our connection to the rest of creation. It seems that nature wasn't a big topic within Universalism. They were more interested in saving souls than saving trees.

You are familiar with The Washington Declaration of 1935 which reads: "The bond of fellowship in this Convention (church) shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to cooperate in establishing the kingdom for which he lived and died.

To that end, we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of good-will and sacrificial spirit to overcome evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God. Neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a creedal test, provided that the faith thus indicated be professed."

It is in the progressive establishment of the kingdom of God that I find the need for a modern Universalist faith. Rosemary talked about the need for us to have a new missionary zeal to show the world what we believe by our actions in helping with the disasters such as Katrina. She

said we need to be witnesses and companions to others in such a way that our faith comes shining through.

Our Universalist history is replete with examples of brave men and women who were there working for a more just society. You are well aware of Clara Barton, the angel of the battlefield and creator of the American Red Cross. She helped Americans know that they could collectively assist their neighbors in time of need. Adin Ballou worked to create the Hopedale community where common ownership of the land and communal support of one another were the norm. His pacifism influenced Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King. Abner Kneeland was jailed for heresy as a Universalist minister because he preached a radical understanding of God too liberal for even other Universalists. He also established a community that worked for equality and justice.

In the last century the name of Clarence Skinner is lifted up as the foremost Universalist leader working for social justice. In the foreword to his 1915 book, *The Social Implications of Universalism*, Skinner wrote, “How to transform this old earth into the Kingdom of Heaven—that’s the primal question. For thousands of years *sad*-eyed men [and women] have looked upon this war-wracked and greed-broken world, yearning to gather it into their great healing love. Many have gazed with amazement at the sorrow and misery of humanity and have wondered. Some have climbed into the high places, searching the heavens for an answer; others have gone down into the deep places for the secret.

Prophets have caught a various vision, their eyes have been lighted by many and devious enthusiasms which have sent them into the world to labor and to serve.”

He finished with, “May the humblest of these seekers after truth set forth the talismanic word which fires him [or her] with hope and urges him [or her] to whatever service he [or she] can render. It is Universalism—the universal faith and hope in the universal love. When [people] have tried all lesser faiths, when all fragmentary trusts have failed, may the world come to see this vast vision of a cosmic religion, As lofty as the love of God, As ample as the needs of [humanity].”

Skinner taught that Universalism wasn’t an escape from reality, but a harmonious and spiritual development of all the elements of real life. He called this social salvation. He wrote, “Those who have faith in the world are the ones upon whom rests the tremendous responsibility of redeeming the world.”

He put his energy into not just teaching at Tufts Divinity School, but helped found and lead the Community Church of Boston in 1920. This congregation started with 300 people at their first service. By 1926 between 1500 and 1800 people attended services on Sundays. We have yet to have a modern Unitarian Universalist church match such attendance.

The church was active in many social justice areas including defending Sacco and Vanzetti who were falsely arrested and ultimately

executed by the state. John Haynes Holmes wrote of Community Church in 1939, the Community Church “fought poverty. . . It has assailed militarism, political corruption, economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and religious bigotry. . . It has only sought to save the people through the application of social justice to the common life.”

This is what we need for the 21st Century Universalism. Think how much worse off our country is now. Back then, they didn't know about atomic weapons, biological warfare on civilians, environmental degradation of the ozone layer, toxic pollution, or any of the modern maladies that we confront today. We still are dealing with corrupt politicians. Just read the headlines about the latest Republican scandal whether it be former congressman Foley or convicted felon Jack Abramoff. The minimum wage is below the federal poverty level so people who are working still can't provide for their families without government assistance. We still have religious bigotry against Muslims and don't get me started on the state of racial discrimination.

Seeing so little change from sixty years ago makes me think of that famous theologian Woody Allen. He said that humanity faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray, he said, that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.

He also said that if Jesus Christ came back today and saw what was being done in his name, he'd never stop throwing up.

A modern Universalism will take our salvific message of a loving God and infuse us with the spirit of working with one another to solve the human ills that confront us today. A renewable Universalism takes the best of the past in Universalist faith and couples it with a modern sense of the societal needs that compel us to seek new ways we can make heaven on earth for today and into the future. We are renewed by knowing that love is there anytime we want like a perpetual fountain.

So how do we transform this old earth into the kingdom of heaven? What can we do as modern Universalists to show the world that our faith is more than great sounding phrases? We can begin with expanding John Murray's exhortation to preach the kindness and everlasting love of God to practicing kindness to all we encounter and demonstrating the love of God through our own actions in community.

Justin Lapoint gave a sermon honoring the Bicentennial of Universalism at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in 1993 which he titled "Universalism for Such a Time as This." In this sermon he articulated the three principles of Universalism for today's world. The relatedness of all being, the universality of grace, and the necessity of living the faith were Justin's call to a new Universalism. The first principle reminds us that we are an integral part of the universe. We are connected to everything and everything is connected to us. What we do to the system affects more than just us as individuals. He said, "Universalism from the very beginning has

affirmed a belief in a benign rather than hostile universe. Learning our place in this interdependent web of life, acknowledging our kinship to all people and with all life, seeking to live in harmony rather than to dominate the environment – these things Universalism asks of us.”

The abundance of grace coming into our lives is a central tenet of the Universalist faith. All are included in God’s love. A young person once asked about the nature of God. The Universalist preacher told about when he was young he had stayed out too late with a friend and was coming home at night. On the frontier in the nineteenth century the cabins that people built had to be sturdy. There were wild animals that might come foraging for food or native peoples seeking supplies or revenge for what was done them by the white settlers. Once the door was barred from the inside, there was no way to open it from outside. The exception was if a small rope was left dangling outside the door that would lift the bar from inside, a person on the outside could get in. This was called the latchkey. The Universalist minister said that God was like his parent who left the latchkey out so he could get home safely. God left the latchkey out for all people to enter heaven. It was God’s abundant grace. We need to tell people of God’s love. We need to evangelize for Universalism through both word and deed.

If we are to practice a modern Universalism, we need to live it out in our everyday lives. A Universalist pamphlet of the 1950’s found in Lapoint’s father’s papers said, “Our faith is a power we work with, not

just a set of ideas to accept. To do a thing, not to argue about it, or merely teach the theory of it, is the primary task. Universalism is not merely a set of doctrines but a way of life.”

We need to address the needs of this community and the people who surround it. What do they need the most? What can you do to meet it? Who can you partner with to bring more resources to that need? What do you need to change in your life to better see and hear the supplications in this community? It will be by our works that people will know that Universalism is alive and thriving in the Church of the Restoration.

Hosea Ballou wrote in 1849 three years before his death, “Owing to the age and infirmities of the writer of this article, he cannot expect to be able, much longer, to render any considerable service to the infinitely glorious cause to whose interest he has had the happy privilege of devoting his humble talents for nearly sixty years. But while holding himself ready to resign his armor, at the word of command, he cannot fully express his gratitude for what he sees of the wonderful spread of truth, and for the numerous army which he will leave in its future defense.”

I think that Ballou would be proud of what we have done with Universalism in the more than 150 years since he died. But there is much more to be done. We need to leave a numerous church that is working for alleviating society’s ills. A renewable Universalism can

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revitalize our liberal faith and rekindle the flame of our spirit in bringing the kingdom into reality. May we embrace such a faith, become emboldened to share it with others, and work together for a brighter tomorrow. Amen.