

## THAT OTHER 'U' IN 'UU': UNIVERSALISM FOR A NEW GENERATION

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson

February 12, 2012

Thank you again for being here this morning. I'd like to thank one of your many unsung heroes before I continue. Actually I am going to cheat a bit because it's two of them. They're a pair, you see, and I see them faithfully here in the front row most every Sunday. Albert and Berniece Holt do happen to share my last name but we're not related except perhaps 10 generations ago back in whatever Old Country was home. I like to think of them as kin. They have been passionate speakers for justice and equality here. They have been a blessing to you of UUFC for these many years and they are among those who have given their sweat, passion, courage and faith to this community. I think all such folks ought to be thanked as many times as we can. So let me start by saying 'thank you' to you both this morning.

Their work reminds me just a bit of Universalism we should own.

Here's a definition of Universalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was one of the largest denominations in the United States. Its theology was radical in one respect that set Universalism apart from other evangelical churches. This is from Aaron Grosh, the editor of the Universalist Register in 1842: **"All Universalists believed in the existence of God; acknowledged Jesus as his Son, and of the Scriptures as divine revelation; recognized limited rewards and punishments under the moral government of God and Jesus; and the final salvation of all intelligences from sin and suffering to a state of...holiness and happiness."** That one last phrase was the difference.

At that time, Universalism was the fifth largest denomination in the United States. Its robust challenge of Calvinist theology of a pre-select going to Heaven and everyone else going to Hell resonated with farmers, merchants, and working classes alike. Its theology was in the end very simple: **neither the Hebrew testament nor the teachings of Jesus spoke of hell for unbelievers and so the premise of a loving God condemning most to hell and damnation was simply wrong.**

Much of that Universalism of 170 years ago wouldn't translate too well in our Unitarian Universalist movement of today. Contemporary Unitarian Universalists may or may not believe in God, might not believe in Jesus as God's Son, and certainly not the Bible as divine revelation. We'd have lots of argument about what was meant by 'the moral government of God and Jesus' and probably start asking if any government was moral.

We might be able to agree in general terms about **“The final salvation of all intelligences from sin and suffering to a state of holiness and happiness”** though we might quibble with some of the words like ‘sin’.

Last week I talked about how we human beings and perhaps all sentient beings might have an evolutionary imperative to awakening.

Those of you who were here will recall I suggested that Judaism, Christianity and Islam only got the idea of “God” partly correct.

I mentioned Pierre Teilhard de Jardin who was a Jesuit priest, French geologist, paleontologist and thinker. He came up with the term “The Omega Point” to explain an evolution of consciousness to a point of absolute shared self-awareness.

I took his theory another step to suggest that we humans and all sentient beings are spiritually evolving toward a collective awareness at the end of our evolution. That united awareness would be what we call God but nothing superstitious or miraculous – simply the end product of our spiritual evolution. We therefore would be the parents of God and not the children. We would have the responsibility to show the generations to come how to live wisely on the Earth, with one another, and with ourselves.

I then proposed at the end of my comments that such an idea of spiritual evolution is appealing because no one is left out. As I said in Amanda Fairbank’s memorial service last week, all it would take is one good deed in your life. Just one – and we might call such a deed a thought, word or action of compassion. Such a good deed would be a doorway opened to universal salvation.

How can we change the Universalist theology of 1840 to now?

How might we translate Grosh’s words into a new Universalism that was not exclusive to any one faith, didn’t require belief in a creator God, and could include anyone who was on a spiritual path?

Here’s my wording – see what you think:

**“Universalists believe in the evolution of God as loving consciousness; acknowledge all who are compassionate as the forebears of God, and of all art and creative insight as revelation; recognize the rewards and insights from our mistakes turned into wisdom; and the final salvation of all intelligences from brokenness and suffering to a state of...holiness and happiness with no one left out.”**

Line by line, let me explain why this neo-Universalism might be useful to us as we live through life and prepare for death.

**“Universalists believe in the evolution of God as loving consciousness”** – I explained this last week and also earlier a few minutes ago. God is our creation and not the other way around. We and all sentient

beings will evolve into an ultimate awareness that pulls itself to become whole and complete. That's spiritual evolution into loving consciousness.

**"...acknowledge all who are compassionate as the forebears of God."** This statement says that all those who seek ways to become more compassionate for themselves and their world – they become the mothers and fathers of the God that arise out of our spiritual evolution.

**"and of all art and creative insight as revelation..."** means that Scripture (with a Capital S) is really all art and creative insight translated into words, sounds, or sights. Now, you could say quite rightfully that hate literature or violent words or art aren't very good ways to show compassion and creative insight. They do, however, show us what is appalling or cruel and then we learn to turn away from such negative scriptures. But imagine every book, art work, music, and picture in the world being a source of learning and discernment? Might not all these be revelations to help us learn compassion and wisdom? It means that no religion would have a monopoly on truth but as I said last spring – all truth is partial truth and our task is to weave it all together.

**"...recognize the rewards and insights from our mistakes turned into wisdom."** This wording of Universalist faith would tell us that we all make mistakes. However, if we learn from our mistakes and become more aware, awakened and compassionate, then we are rewarded with insight and wisdom.

Finally, **"...the final salvation of all intelligences from brokenness and suffering to a state of...holiness and happiness with no one left out."**

I was actually delighted when Grosh wrote of 'all intelligences' rather than white Protestants or New Englanders or just human beings. All intelligences can be all those who carry the potential for intelligence and to me that means all sentient beings.

We are saved (or translate as 'made whole') from brokenness and suffering to a state of holiness and happiness with no one left out. There's no Rapture for Christians or Hindu's or Unitarian Universalists. Everyone is freed from isolation and the brokenness that comes with life.

I propose this: hell does exist but it's not after we die. It comes with the territory called life. I heard it a few times in the UU and You Lunch and Learn event last week. New and veteran folks alike spoke of the religions they loved as children and young adults becoming too confining. Questions about doctrine weren't acceptable. Going with the program was the only way to heaven.

The only way out was to become a religious seeker in a strange land.

Hell is being gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual in a culture that fears sexuality and believes it evil.

Hell is being told that you're either 'us' or 'them' and your answer will determine your future in a community.

Hell is addiction or loneliness or being 80 or 20 with no safe place to live your religious values.

In the opening words today, Gordon McKeeman says it much better. He says, **"Hell is, in fact, a burning issue for it is the issue of separation, whether we can, with safety and impunity, set up little islands in the human experience and therefore protect ourselves against any relationship with the mainland. And Universalism says unequivocally, it cannot be done."**

So, you might say – 'so what?'" What does this talk of universal salvation and hell have to do with us? We're educated and don't believe that stuff.

I disagree. I think you do believe in redemption and salvation but in a different way than other religious communities do.

Just imagine how less pleasurable and challenging your life would be had this fellowship not been here?

Imagine all the people you know now who you would never have met or the children you wouldn't have the option to teach?

Yes, of course there's the joy of going out on the lake on Sunday morning or hiking or just curled up with a good e-book. That's great but think of the community you would be missing and never know.

Imagine how much you learn moving outside your circles of comfort when you meet people who don't listen to NPR or who are moderate Republicans or who love Jesus with all their hearts? They're here with you every Sunday.

To me, a new Universalism speaks to both our First Principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every being, and also to the Seventh Principle of the interconnected web of all existence.

No one is left out and each of us is on the evolutionary spiritual path to wholeness that is part of the web of all existence.

Let me conclude by going back to our unsung heroes here – Berniece and Albert.

Imagine if they'd not been on that path to go outside the cultural comfort zone and do the work of justice?

I cannot imagine them agreeing with me that they were missionaries but I think it's a good word. They are missionaries for justice and

compassion in the world. They aren't content to sit over coffee or nice meals and complain about the unjust ways of people.

They did something about it as did so many others who have founded and nurtured this congregation.

Yes, I know – you like to call yourselves “Unitarian” because it's a nice short name and it isn't hard to explain.

But whether you like it or not, you're all Universalists here first and foremost because it is your duty, your calling, and your mission in this area to bring people out of the hells of isolation and despair.

If you do that, you will be on an undertaking that has spanned millennia of determined seekers and malcontents.

Your mission as Unitarian Universalists is to bring God to life.

Bringing God to life means giving everyone the tools they need

- to deepen their compassion,
- to hold true to the sure knowledge that
- at the end all will come to a state of holiness and happiness
- with no one left behind.

That is your mission should you choose it?

What do you think?