

The Potters of Unitarian Universalism
A sermon delivered at Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, ON
Sunday, January 4, 2015

Reading #1: “This Clay Jug” by Kabir

[#608 – 1440-1518, Indian mystic, poet & weaver]

Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of
canyons and pine mountains!

All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars.

The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.

And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water.

If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:

Friend, listen:

the God whom I love is inside.

Reading #2: “Impassioned Clay” by Ralph Helverson

[#654 – UU minister for 50 years; written as a part of the UUA Lenten Manual of 1964]

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.

Out of the passions of our clay it rises.

We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-
sustaining, or self-derived.

*We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present, some self-
respect beyond our failures.*

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty, when our nerves
are edged by some dream in the heart.

*We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude for all that we have
received.*

We have religion when we look upon people with all their failings and still find in them

good, when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature and to the purpose in our own heart.

We have religion when we have done all that we can, and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves.

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.

Out of the passions of our clay the religious impulse rises.

Sermon: “The Potters of Unitarian Universalism” by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

Today I’m talking about the Potters. The Potters of Unitarian Universalism. I’ll talk primarily of Thomas Potter, a simple farmer; of Beatrix Potter, known primarily to us as a writer and artist; and Harry Potter, the boy wizard of kid’s fantasy books.

Along the way I discovered there are a couple, three other Potters, both inside and outside UU history, and I’ll mention them briefly, and their roles in fashioning the expansive container that is our faith community.

My first Potter – Thomas Potter – was a New Jersey farmer in the mid to late 1700s. Thomas came from a Quaker family, but had become a Baptist, but a particular kind of Baptist – one who believed that Christ had died to save everybody, not just believers. We were all saved; we all had the potential to go to heaven when we died.

Being a devout man, Thomas Potter built a chapel on his land and hosted any itinerant preacher who would venture into rural New Jersey.

At the same time, in England, a man named John Murray became a devoted follower of a London universalist preacher – another person who believed “that all humanity actually achieved union with Christ in his death” and, therefore, no one was born with sin on their soul. God’s universal love saved everyone. [revolutionary, heretical words for folks who believed in original sin, and predestination]

After Murray’s child and wife died, he gave up on religion and the world, and decided to hide away in the New World, in America. His ship, the *Hand in Hand*, was diverted from its original destination in New York, and landed in Good Luck, New Jersey. Thomas Potter met John Murray, learned of his universalist beliefs, and pressed him to preach. It took awhile, and much urging – Murray really wanted to retire into oblivion – but finally Murray agreed to preach. On September 20th, 1770, in the little meeting-house built by Thomas Potter, John Murray preached what is considered to be the first universalist sermon in America.

John Murray's and Thomas Potter's universalism argued that the Christ, Jesus' death on the cross saved all peoples. This at a time when most universalists also believed in the divinity of Jesus – that he was God and man.

Universalism changed and grew and Universalists questioned that divinity. They began to see Jesus not as the literal son of God, but as an especially blessed man. These later Universalists, like Hosea Ballou, believed that God was too loving a being to condemn any of God's children to eternal hellfire and damnation; that, somehow, all would be saved.

Today our Universalism – in the most expansive sense – tells us that all have a place at the table of creation, that each of us is a beloved child – of God, of the universe, of the community.

Thank you, Thomas Potter, for opening your home and hearth and heart to the idea of a Great Love after which we might model ourselves.

William James Potter [1829-1893] was the driving force behind the Free Religious Association, a group that promoted complete spiritual freedom from irrational doctrines and traditional church authority. What William James Potter wanted was a “spiritual anti-slavery society” in which there would be “no test of speculative opinion or belief” – that is, no doctrines that one absolutely had to believe in.

The Free Religious Association had a profound influence on the opening up of Unitarianism to other world religions, to science, and to a non-theistic humanism.

Thank you, William James Potter, for cracking open our set beliefs, for expanding our notions of what it meant to be religious.

Beatrix Potter was born in 1866 in England, to a wealthy Unitarian family. As a child she demonstrated skill in both story-telling and in art, particularly watercolors and pen and ink drawings. Her family would vacation in the English Lake District, in the far northwestern corner of England. There she and her younger brother would keep many pets – hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, frogs and ducks who would provide the models for her sketches.

Many of us are familiar with Peter Rabbit, and maybe Squirrel Nutkin, or Jemima Puddle-Duck. But we're less likely to know that Beatrix Potter was also interested in mycology, the study of fungi – mushrooms, molds, rusts and mildews. Potter drew mycological illustrations and did research on their process of reproduction while in her 20s. She submitted a paper to an English scientific society, but the paper was rejected, partly because she was an amateur, but primarily because she was a woman.

Potter also owned a farm in the Lake District, bred indigenous sheep, and became an advocate for land conservation and preservation. When she died, Beatrix Potter donated over 4,000 acres of land, sixteen farms, cottages and her sheep and cattle herds to the British National Trust. Her lands are now included in the Lake District National Park. [Died in 1943, age 77]

Beatrix Potter was a lively, creative spirit. An artist and a scientist. A farmer and a free spirit in a time of Victorian constraints against women. Potter cared for the earth, and preserved her corner of it for posterity.

Thank you, Beatrix Potter, for your whimsical stories, and your gift of natural beauty. May our lives, like yours, be filled with fancy and facts, care and cultivation, appreciation for our natural world.

Charles Francis Potter [1885-1962] was an important early humanist leader. Charles Potter's first assignment [1914] was "in the remote field of Edmonton, Alberta." His congregation there grew, and built a church. One of Potter's parishioners had heard the Rev. John Dietrich preaching in Spokane, Washington on the topic of humanism, and thought it sounded much like Charles Francis Potter's sermons on personalism.

A couple years later Potter was back in Massachusetts [the state of his birth], serving in congregations on the East Coast of the U.S. A highlight of his ministry was a series of four debates with a fundamentalist Baptist minister, John Roach Straton. Debate topics included the virgin birth, the infallibility of the Bible, and evolution. Potter won three out of four [losing only on the subject of Jesus' divinity.] In 1925 Potter was a witness at the Scopes trial, the Clarence Darrow/William Jennings Bryan debate on the teaching of evolution. Potter believed there was a greater stage of human development he called "cosmic consciousness."

And, in 1938, he was a founder of the Euthanasia Society of America.

Humanism, liberal theology, evolution, cosmic consciousness, death with dignity. Thank you, Charles Francis Potter, for showing us some of the many ways we could be Unitarian.

I recently received this email:

“Not that long ago, our ancestors held their breath as the days grew shorter and the darkness surrounded them. Would the children and elders make it through the long winter?”

Would there be enough – enough food, enough firewood, enough medicine to last until the plants returned?”

The email continues:

“Today our changing climate may raise similar fears.

Will our children survive? Will there be enough?”

“Our ancestors knew that hope does not lie in each individual storing up treasures in the darkness. Hope lies in the abundance of community. Our strength is in our compassion for one another and our willingness to work together on issues that challenge our existence.”

One such community, working together, is a group called Interfaith Power & Light.

And one of the staunch supporters of Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light is Dr. Teddie Potter.

Teddie Potter [PhD, MS, RN] was one of the first home care nurses in Minnesota, specializing in caring for folks living with HIV/AIDS, and helping start one of the first palliative care programs in the nation.

Dr. Potter has been a nurse educator, with a long-term commitment to diversity and inclusivity. [Her dissertation *Reconstructing a New Story of Nursing: Critical Analysis of Nursing Textbooks Using Riane Eisler’s Partnership Paradigm*, 2010]

She recently released a book about transforming interprofessional partnerships in health care, co-authored with Riane Eisler [she of *The Chalice and the Blade* fame, an internationally recognized social theorist, attorney, and macro-historian.]

Dr. Potter’s commitment to whole systems healing led her to an early involvement

in climate change activism. Through the United Church of Christ [in the U.S.] she serves as a board member of Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light, believing that climate change is the most urgent global public health issue of our time.

Thank you, Dr. Teddie Potter, for reminding us of the importance of community in facing the challenges of our day. Thank you for reminding us of the importance of Mother Earth to our continued well-being.

<https://col131.mail.live.com/default.aspx#tid=cmzYaXd4KJ5BG3SAAjfeSmYA2&fid=flinbox>; accessed 21 December 2014.

<http://futurefirst.us/speakers/teddie-m-potter-ph-d-m-s-r-n/>; accessed 21 December 2014.

Finally, Harry Potter. Harry isn't Unitarian; or Universalist. But Harry's life does demonstrate some of our UU values.

Harry Potter is the orphaned boy wizard who attends a magical magic School – Hogwarts. Harry fights trolls and dragons, plays ball while perched on a super-charged broomstick [Quidditch], and triumphs over the most feared dark wizard of all time – He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Voldemort.

Now Harry Potter doesn't do this all by himself. One of the prominent threads in all seven books is the enduring friendship between Harry and Ron Weasley, youngest son of a purebred wizard family, and Hermione Granger, destined to become “the greatest witch of her age” but from a Muggle – a non-wizard [the derogatory term is “mudblood”] family. Together these three young people battle against Voldemort and his forces who are attempting to keep the magical world pure, and to have the ownership and running of it.

Harry and his friends do use magic. But, as philosopher Tom Morris writes, the problems of Harry, Ron and Hermione “are rarely solved merely by the use of magic, but rather by intelligence, planning, courage, determination, persistence, resourcefulness, fidelity [faithfulness to friends]... and many other qualities traditionally known by the great philosophers as virtues.” [*Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, Baggett & Klein, 10]

When these great values – and the values of family, friendship, fairness – are challenged – Harry, Ron and Hermione not only think about how to face the challenges; they act, often at great risk to themselves.

It takes a great deal of courage to battle against the various forces of evil in the world of Harry Potter, but other kinds of courage are also recognized. The three friends make each other better people. As Hogwart's headmaster tells them: "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends." Good friendship strengthens moral character.

Harry and his friends fight for fairness, individual dignity, and a welcoming, peaceful community – UU values all.

Thank you, Harry Potter and friends, for showing us what deep friendship might look like, for stretching our moral imaginations, for entertaining ourselves and our children and grandchildren for years, for teaching us that evil must be named and confronted, together .

So, there you have 'em: Thomas opens his door; William James provides a free religious home, even for atheists; Beatrix preserves her beloved animals and countryside; Charles Frances cherishes science and intuition and a cosmic consciousness; Teddie reminds us of the importance of a healthy planet; and Harry fights for friendship and against evil in all its forms.

Today our Unitarianism reminds us that we are each of us connected – in the air we breathe, the earth we walk upon, the water that is our blood, our sweat, our tears. We are made of the original stardust from the first microseconds of creation. We are inextricably interconnected. So, what we do affects these connections. Who we are, what we do, matters. Unitarianism.

Today our Universalism tells us that each of us has a place at the table of creation, that each of us is a beloved child – of God, of the universe, of the community.

The religious impulse fills our impassioned clay vessel with strivings, for love and for justice.

And we confront our own evils, our own Voldemorts.

Racism, bullying.

GLBTTQQ phobias.

Modern-day slavery and sex-trafficking.

Ecological devastation.

Unmindful violence.

As a people committed to fairness, peace, compassion, dignity, respect for our interdependent web, we are asked to stretch our hearts and minds and imaginations to find ways new ways to bring healing and health to our world.

A potter works in clay, and all the elements present in a clay pot – canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!

The seven oceans and the hundred million stars.

The music from strings no one touches
The source of all water.

Earth and air, fire and water. From the clay vessel of our existence the religious impulse arises.

To believe in a heretical, all-embracing love.

Despite our failures, to have hope for the future.

To recognize the many ways we are inextricably interconnected.

To revel in, to preserve and protect, the grandeur that is nature

To imagine new possibilities, new ways of being.

May we be faithful potters – of our individual lives and our lives together.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.

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May the longtime sun shine upon you,
All love surround you,
And the pure, pure light that's within you
Guide your way home.

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