

Give Yourself to Love
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay ON
SUNDAY, February 14, 2016

READING #1: “From Generation to Generation,” Antoine de St.-Exupery

[1900-1944, French aviator & writer]

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.

Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.

Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child; when we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest.

Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to them their heritage.

If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.

Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.

We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

READING #2: “Sin Brought Me Back,” Betty Bobo Seiden

Sin is what caused me to leave the church and give up religion, and sin is what brought me back.

In my grandmother’s house, sin was associated with pleasure. All those things that I thought were fun were *of the world*, and therefore sinful. Dancing, playing cards, going to the movies all condemned me to Hell – which made it sound like a pretty interesting place.

In my father’s house, sin was associated with form and ritual. [Sin was] eating meat on Friday, coming into church with the head uncovered – these were misdeeds to confess. But I couldn’t feel guilty about them.

Years later our three-year-old son came running to the house to tell me that a neighbor’s boy had just told him that God would kill him if he told a lie.

I decided that it was time we find a religious community that would sustain and encourage our beliefs:

That we are part of a universe of diversity and interdependence,

That the diversity of our world suggests that truth and beauty take many forms,

That God is concerned with the enhancement of life,

That evil is life-destroying,

That sin is associated with self-absorption, and

That salvation lies in selflessness and service.

A religious community is *in* the world and concerned with the world.

Sermon: “Give Yourself to Love” The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

*Give yourself to love if love is what you're after;
Open up your heart to the tears and laughter
And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.*

Saint Valentine's Day. A fine day to talk about love.

Almost three years ago I spoke to you about love in the context of Christianity, a sermon entitled: “Called to Love & Justice.” True Christianity – all about love and justice, selflessness and service.

A year and a half ago [12-7-'14] I addressed the question: “What's Love Got to Do with It?” – the title of a Tina Turner song. I spoke about various religious traditions and their emphasis on love.

And just last year I sang: “Love, Love, Hooray for Love! Who was ever too blasé for love? Make this the night for love. If we have to fight, let's fight for love.”

In that sermon I talked about the various kinds of love described by the ancient Greeks:

Eros – the sensual, sexual, romantic kind of love we associate with Valentine's Day.

Philia – brotherly love; best-friends-forever kind of love; love of ice cream or sports or pets; for the Greeks, the love between equals in education, class, physical strength, courage, virtue.

Storge – the kind of love that arises over time and commitment to someone or something. The kind of love between long-married couples, or a pet and their person, or even the love of Lake Superior, or a particular forest, the art that you practice.

And finally, **agape** – unconditional love. Love for another despite their flaws, their weaknesses. Despite differences.

Today, I want to talk about the history of love – encircling, embracing love – in our Universalist heritage. Our Universalist “heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.” Talking about one of the passwords we transmit, from generation to generation [along with reason and freedom and tolerance] – encircling, embracing love.

In 1770 an Englishman named John Murray [1741-1815], at the age of 29, came to America. In the previous year Murray had been excommunicated from the Methodist Church for his heretical beliefs, his wife and son had died, and he had served a term in debtor's prison.

While in England Murray had converted to Universalism. Universalism, on this continent and abroad, was a response to the idea of predestination – that it has been predetermined at the beginning of time whether each of us will go to heaven or to hell.

In 1770 John Murray's ship ran aground on a sandbar outside of Good Luck, New Jersey. Thomas Potter, a local farmer and a deeply religious man, on hearing that Murray had often preached, invited him to give the Sunday homily. Murray, after all his life disappointments, had vowed never to preach again. But, at the repeated urging of Thomas Potter, John Murray reluctantly agreed – provided the wind did not change and blow his ship off the sandbar.

Well, indeed, Murray preached that Sunday. His topic: universal grace – the grace of God's universal love.

His message was eagerly received by the neighboring farm families, and changed Murray's mind about giving up preaching. As Charles Howe writes: both "Potter and Murray regarded their chance meeting and the postponement of the wind's change as a sign of God's Providence." The historian continues: "It was perhaps the only miracle in Universalist history!" (*The Larger Faith*, 2)

You may notice that God's name, and various imagery about God, comes up often in this service. If you love *Star Trek*, I ask you to switch your "universal translators" to high. If you're a *Doctor Who* fan, access the TARDIS. If you loved *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, insert your "babel fish." If none of this makes sense, just consider this a theological history lesson.

Universalists were at the time, in the 17th & 18th centuries, grappling with the nature of God. Was he benign? Kind? Righteous? Vengeful?

People of faith were often told of a God who was a righteous God, a wrathful God, an angry God.

Consider Jonathan Edwards' sermon of 1741 entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Edwards wrote:

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder...."

This sermon goes on for a dozen pages.

[comment on kids at Mesabi UU in Virginia]

The Universalist message was vastly different.

Universalists claimed that God was a God of love, who embraced all his children and who, in the end, gathered all to eternal life with him. God was simply too good to condemn folks to eternal hellfire.

Listen to the difference in the Universalist picture of humans and of God:

John Murray preached to his followers, saying:

"Go out into the highways and the by-ways of America, your new country.

Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision.

You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men [and women].

Give them not hell, but hope and courage.
Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but
preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” [Howe, 9]

*So give yourself to love if love is what you're after;
Open up your heart to the tears and laughter
And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.*

This message was not received kindly by orthodox Christians. On one occasion, while Murray “was preaching in Boston, one of his opponents threw a large rock through the window, narrowly missing Murray’s head. Murray promptly picked up the rock and said, “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing.” [Howe, 4]

Murray was certain that his argument, for a kind and loving God who would condemn none of his children, this argument he found both rational and convincing.

Thirty-five years after Murray set foot in America, in 1805, a young, largely self-taught preacher named Hosea Ballou [1771-1852], published *A Treatise on Atonement*, arguing for universal salvation. Ballou literally counted Biblical passages and argued that a simple majority of them revealed that all humankind would be saved.

Ballou wrote that Christ, and the atonement were “the effect and not the cause of God’s love to man.... The [contrary] belief that the great Jehovah was offended by his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ, or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries.”

“The error has been fatal to the life and spirit of the religion of Christ in our world,” Ballou argues.

Charles Howe, analyzing Ballou’s theological conclusions, writes: “Rather than coming to appease God’s anger, Jesus came to the world to demonstrate the power of the law of love through which men and women can turn away from sin and be reconciled to God.” [Howe, 27] Sin – the evil that is life-destroying, that mindless self-absorption.

In 1811 Maria Cook [1779-1835] – the 1st Universalist woman preacher in America – delivered a sermon to a conference of Universalists in Bainbridge, New York. Maria Cook braved public opinion that a woman’s place was in the home and not in the pulpit. [Howe, 23]

Fifty years later, in 1863 [in the middle of the US Civil War] Olympia Brown became the first woman to be ordained and recognized by a national denominational body, the American Universalist Association. Olympia Brown later became prominent in the women’s suffrage movement, and was one of the only leaders of that movement who lived to see the US 19th amendment be enacted. [In Canada, 1916-1919. In US, Aug. 18, 1920; 1870, some western territories, then 1911-1919]

In Minnesota, the Reverend Herman Bisbee, minister at the Universalist Church in St. Anthony [now part of Minneapolis], preached in March of 1870 and Rev. Bisbee said:

“I believe that Jesus taught Natural Religion, and claimed to teach nothing more.... There is no creed from his lips; no ceremony imposed.... [H]e would not persecute; he would not ask us all to believe alike; he would say: ‘Be true to conscience; seek, trust the Father and fear not....’ Jesus taught goodness, and this is Natural Religion. It is my opinion that a man can believe one thing or another, and still be a Christian, but when a man becomes mean, he can no longer be a Christian.” [Williams, 23]

In 1890 Quillen Shinn, an itinerant Universalist minister [who had traveled to at least two Canadian provinces] stated: “Neither a single atom nor a single soul can get beyond the reach of this Almighty force of love so that it is unable to draw back.... We believe no such catastrophe [as eternal discord] can happen. Nature means victory.”

An optimistic and inclusive point of belief for Universalists:
Love makes a circle around us.

He drew a circle that shut me out --
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

Edwin Markham [American poet, 1852-1940]

Universalists extended salvation from a restricted group of the elect, extended it outward to all humankind. Salvation was not a personal and individual event. Rather salvation was a social and communal affair. God was a reasonable and benevolent ruler. God wanted all saved. And humans could, and should, start the work of that salvation, bring the message of God’s love, right here on earth by repairing and redeeming the social situation of all God’s people.

Sin, for Universalists, is self-absorption and separation from beloved community. Salvation lies in selflessness and service.

And so, Universalists worked selflessly and in the service of humanity. They worked for humane treatment of the mentally ill, like Dorothea Dix. They worked for universal schooling, like Horace Mann. They worked to end slavery in the States, like Thomas Starr King. They worked, like Olympia Brown, for suffrage for women. Lotta Hitschmanova who helped to found the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada in 1945.

God’s message was not that we were to be good only in the hope of a heavenly reward. God’s message to Universalists was that his kingdom was to be worked for right here, in this world, for his beautiful creation.

*Love is born in fire; it's planted like a seed.
Love can't give you everything, but it gives you what you need.
And love comes when you're ready, love comes when you're afraid;
It'll be your greatest teacher, the best friend you have made.*

A personal story.

A number of years ago, and a year or so after my mother’s death, a conversation with

my father turned to religion. Now this was strange, since my father believed that all religion was bogus. Religion was a scam run by charlatans. “You know,” my father said, “your mother argued with the church a lot. She didn’t go to church much, and the priest wouldn’t do her funeral. He said she was a sinner and...” Knowing the priest at the local Polish Catholic church, I suspected he had told my father that my mother was probably not heaven-bound.

“Let me tell you about my religion,” I said. My father had never been interested in talking about my new faith – a faith I’d been practicing for only about fifteen years at that point. “My religion says that God loves everybody. And, if you lived life as well as you could – and you know mom did that – if you were as good as you could be, no matter how many doubts you had about the church or God or various beliefs, God would welcome you into heaven. And I’m sure mom’s there, too.”

I could see my dad physically relax. My dad, a skeptic, non-church-going man, was relieved to hear this Universalist message of love and salvation. Mom was in heaven, and dad could relax.

Universalism has this powerful, saving message of love and hope and true, merciful justice. You are good enough.

So, when your son or daughter or grandchild, or when you, are told you are going to hell, this our Universalist heritage tells us, that – if indeed there is a God – that God is a loving entity, embracing all creation, wishing all of us well, urging us on to do all that we can with whatever gifts we are given.

*Good friends all gather round
There’s something I must say
That what brings us together here has blessed us all today.
Love has made a circle that holds us all inside.
Where strangers are as family, loneliness can’t hide.*

What of all us non-theists, we agnostics?

In the Jewish tradition, angels (*malachim*) are not considered supernatural. Angels are messengers from God, messengers from the Great Mystery that is the Cosmos, messengers from Universal Love.

Angels remind us of that Ultimate Compassion. Angels, those who give us support, encouragement, hope, good cheer – angels are all around us.

Angels are us.

We hold each other, in love.

*You are held by holy angels,
Holy angels all around you.*

*[Hush, now, sleep child, sing the holy angels.
We are holding you. You can rest.]*

*Morning will come, child,
the dawn will break thru the darkness.*

*We are holding you
thru the light of the new born day.*

A song by Duluth singer/songwriter Sara Thomsen, director of the community choir, Echoes of Peace.

We are held by holy angels. And we are those angels, those *malachim*, those messengers of Love.

Whether theist or agnostic, atheist or general skeptic, our Universalist history reminds us that we are in this world to embody love, to strive for merciful justice, to ensure that all of our sisters and brothers have a place at the table. That love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.

We transmit the passwords – love & acceptance & the embrace of all – we transmit these passwords to each other, to our children and grandchildren – to give hope and courage to each other and to a hurting, broken world. All have a place at the table. King and King. Queen and Queen. All.

My very agnostic, humanist seminary professor, David Bumbaugh, ended his sermon on love this way:

“We busily guard ourselves from the full implication of love –
That all people under the sun
Regardless of time
And death,
And the space between the stars
Are one kin,
Flesh of our flesh,
Bone of our bone, bound together in inescapable unity
Destined to the same end,
Bound together in a mystic oneness
The origin of which we may never know;
The reality of which we can never escape.”

*So give yourself to love if love is what you're after;
Open up your heart to the tears and laughter
And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.*

That song was written in 1982 by Kate Wolf, two years before she died of leukemia at the age of forty-four.

This Valentine's Day,
May we experience this Universal Care that cares for all.
May we feel held by community.
May we know we play an inextricable part in Creation's ever-changing love: the creativity and the chaos that is this cosmos.

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