

ON WHAT DO WE STAND? AND HOW DID WE GET HERE?

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I find it difficult to appreciate liturgical dance. Do you know what I mean by that? It's a worship form that has gained popularity in progressive Christianity, (and perhaps elsewhere) where barefoot dancers in flowing costumes and scarves, ala Martha Graham, sweep through the sanctuary, doing visual interpretations of scripture and story and religious emotion. Don't get me wrong...I love dance, especially modern dance, but I have just not been able to get comfortable with it in church. Yet, I support the right and privilege of those who like liturgical dance to be able to experience worship through it.

So, committed to tolerance and openness, I took a liturgical dance class in seminary from a beautiful, wise and creative, if slightly wacky, spirit. The class was called "Dances of Social Action" and had as its premise that through the practice of communal dance, one can experience justice and relationship in ways impossible to experience in normal movement. I tried, really I did, but I have to say that I gleaned very little from this class. I do, however, often remember and refer to a bit of wisdom imparted during a circle dance. My wacky professor said, "If you're ever wondering where you are, look down at your feet. Chances are, where they are is where you are."

'On What Do We Stand' will be a recurring theme in our Sunday services this year. Today I'd like for us to take a hard look at our feet. When asked what Unitarians stand upon, it is easy, perhaps even right, to respond with a recitation of our principles and to talk about our action in the world. But I think it is important for us to know more. It is important to understand how we got here. Now, this would be a whole lot easier if we had all come here at the same time on the same road, but Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist history is more like popcorn randomly exploding in different places at different times than it is like a steady or traceable stream. Like the mega-narrative of creation, from tiny seeds come a large variety of manifestations of thought and religious expression. We have not only the two large feet of unitarian and universalist thought, but we have about a zillion toes.

So where shall we begin? I'm afraid that what Philip Hewitt so clearly stated in his book *Unitarians in Canada* is true: "Since Unitarianism (and I would add Universalism) has so

frequently emerged through an evolutionary process within existing religious movements, it would be quite arbitrary to set a date for its beginning in a particular place.¹ We can find nary a definitive beginning date or a beginning place. This makes the question of “how did we get here?” difficult to answer. But I’m going to try. And let me say that for historical data, I am drawing heavily on the work of David Bumbaugh, Earl Morse Wilbur, David Robinson and Phillip Hewett.

Our current movement is the result of the merger of two distinct denominations in 1961; in order to trace how we got here, it is important to look down at both feet. We need both of them to really experience the fullness of the dance. However, I found it impossible to trace the history of both Unitarianism and Universalism in one sermon, and so I am going to focus on the Unitarian foot today, and hope that this one-legged hopping won’t handicap your understanding. I’m sorry to do this, in part because I consider my own thought to be more universalist than unitarian (small u’s.) So for now, let me just remind you that an easy way to mark the difference between our two feet can be found in the words of Thomas Starr King (whose statue, btw, is unfortunately being replaced in the US Capitol rotunda with one of Ronald Reagan.) King said of Universalists and Unitarians... "The one thinks God is too good to damn them forever; the other thinks they are too good to be damned by God forever."

Of course, one might argue that Universalism is less important here in Canada than it is on the rest of the continent, because at the time of the merger, there was but a small remnant of Universalists in Canada (hence the name Canadian Unitarian Council, rather than Canadian UU Council.)² On the other hand, it is commonly felt that while our current polity and structure took its lead from the Unitarian thread, the ‘theology’ that results from our current principles is weighted toward Universalism. So, if there is interest from you and support from the Sunday Services committee, I would like to take another Sunday to dance with the Universalist foot.

While I like to think that Universalist and Unitarian-type thinking is age-old...that Origen (in the 2nd century) and Arius (in the 3rd century) and even Socrates (as quoted on the front of your order of service) were early expressions of what was to become Unitarian Universalism... and while we are descendants of a rich and heretical history in Europe that really blossomed in

¹ Hewett, Phillip, *Unitarians in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Unitarian Council, 1995), 36

² Hewett, 258

the Protestant Reformation...I am going to arbitrarily choose to begin, for today's purposes, at the arrival and evolution of Unitarianism on this continent. And again, what I have to leave out provides a ripe opportunity for another Sunday service or for a lifespan learning class.

My particular interest is in the shift from 'professions' which use theological language to 'principles' which are value-based. It is not my intention today to pass judgment on this evolution, to name it as good or bad, inspired or misguided, positive or negative, but simply to give a recounting of it.

It has been said that the Unitarian trinity is that of freedom, reason and tolerance, a far cry from the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. So, how did we get here? Admittedly, 'professions' were more common to the Universalists than the Unitarians. But Unitarians also have repeatedly struggled to name what truths they hold in common. So, when and how did traditional and/or theistic language disappear from our principles? I have put together a compilation of historical statements, affirmations and professions of our movement, and if you're interested in that kind of documentation, you may pick up a copy at the welcome table as you leave. (They're copied on yellow, and let me know if we need more copies.) If you look at these, it will be readily apparent to you that our feet were, and by some definition continue to be, Christian denominations. That's a given, one that we can't refute, and one that is frequently overlooked or ignored.

I must acknowledge up front that I will talk more about the US than Canada, but the fact of the matter is that much of the Canadian movement (with the exception of some English, Irish and Icelandic early settlers) came across the border from the US. Again, in the interest of time, and with your forgiveness for slighting Canadian Unitarian history, I have to ignore many of the details and just paint the development of our current principles and values in very broad strokes.

Unitarianism in America developed simultaneously with, but largely independent from, the Unitarian Church in England. As religion is a contextual and cultural expression, we have to look at Unitarianism in the context of religion in the early colonies. The Pilgrims who settled in Plymouth had refused to be subjects of the Church of England, had escaped the Church's authority by fleeing first to Holland, and by nature of that experience, were a community opposed to a strong political structure in their congregations.³ And because they had mostly

³ Bumbaugh, David E., *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000) 96

come directly from that 'exile' in Holland, they tended to be more tolerant than the Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay. Here we see the beginning of an insistence on complete mental freedom, primarily from their experience of intolerance in England.

And so in this early period, as settlers gathered into congregations, there were no creeds required of members, but rather they pledged, or covenanted, to live a Christian life.⁴ These covenants focused on how people would live, and were a precursor to our emphasis today on human responsibility. In 1648, under growing fear that England would impose a presbyterian polity upon their congregations, they met and adopted the Cambridge Platform, which affirmed congregational polity, another expression of freedom, as the permanent structure under which their churches would be governed,⁵ and this remains a foundational piece of our current polity.

In due time, Enlightenment thinking spread across Europe and seeped across to this continent. The prevalent Calvinism in the Colonies began to be undermined by the liberal thought of Locke and Milton and others, along with the rise of Arianism (that is, those who believed that Jesus, while divine, was not a part of the Godhead) and Socinianism (those who believed Jesus to be wholly human and who insisted on the use of reason in interpreting scripture.) In reaction to that kind of thinking, the Great Awakening, a sweeping revival movement led by Jonathan Edwards in the mid 18th century, called for dogmatism as the standard for religious truth. This was an important time in the history of Unitarianism, because the Great Awakening created a permanent division between those who saw the hand of God in the fervor of the revival, and those who saw it as raw madness and who preferred a religion of reason.⁶ You can guess what side our forebearers came down on! Liberal clergy, responding to religious emotionalism, increasingly united in defining reason, tolerance and ethical living as the bases of religion.

Two distinct camps were formed, and within the framework of congregational polity, churches had the freedom to choose between a liberal position and a Calvinist position. In 1805, William Ellery Channing's famous Baltimore Sermon entitled *Unitarian Christianity*, provided the impetus for liberal Christians to claim the Unitarian title, and in 1825, the American Unitarian Association was formed. At that time, Unitarianism, while embracing reason as the primary tool

⁴ Bumbaugh, 97.

⁵ Bumbaugh, 98.

⁶ Bumbaugh, 100.

for interpreting scripture, still rested firmly on scripture's authority.⁷ Creeds may have been abandoned, but scripture maintained a place of power.⁸

Higher Criticism of the Bible dislodged scripture from that place. For years a succession of scholars, mostly German, had been piling up a mass of evidence to show that the Bible, far from being an infallible document dictated in every detail by God, was in fact the product of a great many fallible human beings all of whom showed the influence of their own time and place.⁹ The authority of scripture was beginning to crumble, and the use of reason as authority became central.

Enter, or better evolve, the Transcendentalists, who, building on Locke's notion that all knowledge must have an experiential base, came to believe that human beings have direct access to the truth, which was a radical new paradigm for authority and knowledge. They claimed that the word of God is expressed in each human heart, not only in scriptures.¹⁰ Within such a paradigm, Christianity had to be seen as but one expression of eternal truth, and that other religions expressed this same truth in different ways. And so, it became more important that tolerance for differences in belief be a guiding principle for religion.

By the mid 19th century, the great western migration had begun, and many New England Unitarians made this journey (and by the way, the first Unitarian church service in Canada was held in Montreal in 1832.) These pioneering spirits were expansive and free-thinking, and eventually tensions developed between them (The Western Unitarian Conference) and the more conservative east-coast churches. When the preamble to the constitution of the new National Conference of Unitarian Churches in 1865 was adopted with decidedly Christian language, the more radical thinkers were rankled. In response they formed the Free Religious Association to "promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of religion and to increase fellowship in the spirit."¹¹ As I said, our foot has about a zillion toes...and you can really see them sprouting in this era. After a long and heated debate with both the conservatives in the east and the religious radicals, the Western Conference adopted a statement that it "conditions its fellowship on no dogmatic tests, but welcomes all who wish to join to help

⁷ Bumbaugh, 119

⁸ Wilbur, Earl Morse, *A History of Unitarianism*, chapter 23 www.pacificuu.org/wilbur/ahu/book/

⁹ Hewett, 108

¹⁰ Bumbaugh, 123 (Divinity School Address and Parker's sermon)

¹¹ Bumbaugh, 132

establish Truth, Righteousness and Love in the World.”¹² Clearly, in this work of the Western Unitarian Conference, particularly in its quest to find common ground in a very diverse religious environment, theistic language was disappearing in favor of value-laden words such as Truth and Love.

All of this occurred in a spirit of great expansiveness and idealism, with a belief in the imperative of progress ever upward. But World War I crushed this idealism, its aftermath brought humanitarian concerns to the fore, and ushered in the Humanist controversy, which took Unitarianism one really big step further from theistic language. For example, in an address to the Harvard School of Theology in 1920, Unitarian minister Curtis Reese said, “The method of religious liberalism has always been that of reflection, not that of authority. Liberalism has insisted on the essentially natural character of religion...[and] is building a religion that would not be shaken even if the thought of God were outgrown.”¹³

It’s sort of a wonder that Unitarianism, as a movement, held together at all. Perhaps it is thanks to the leadership of Frederick May Eliot in the mid-1930’s and a report by the Commission of Appraisal entitled “Unitarians Face a New Age.” In it, while the Commission disagreed as to how Unitarians should make use of religious language and how closely they should be aligned with the Christian tradition, it affirmed the primacy of the free exercise of intelligence in religion and stressed the need for individual responsibility. All in all, “Unitarians Face a New Age” was a stirring call to action, extension work, and theological education. And the result was a period of new growth and dynamism for Unitarianism.¹⁴

Eliot might also be credited with (or accused of, depending on your perspective!) the acceptance of a humanist position within the denomination. Although he himself was a theist, he saw religion as a process of constructing symbols and then acting under them, and he saw Humanism as holding great potential for a life of action. It should not go unnoticed that humanism was of a piece with both Transcendentalism and Free Religion as a gesture of the liberal affirmation of human nature.¹⁵

It is no surprise then, that the greatest change in the 1940’s so far as Unitarians were concerned was in theological orientation. The Canadian movement, stood where it had always

¹² Bumbaugh, 135

¹³ Bumbaugh, 138

¹⁴ Bumbaugh, 139

¹⁵ Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1985) 152

stood, at the conservative end of the Unitarian spectrum. Most Canadian Unitarians regarded themselves as liberal Christians. By the end of the decade...and perhaps because there were no adherents to liberal Christianity capable of challenging the ministers who were leading the new trend...Canadian Unitarians had made a decided shift toward humanism...the old service books were taken out of the pews in the Montreal church and in 1953, the Ottawa congregation voted to take down the 19th century Five Points of Unitarianism which had been inscribed on the front wall of the church.¹⁶ (Which were, btw: 1. The Fatherhood of God; 2. The Brotherhood of Man; 3. The Leadership of Jesus; 4. Salvation by Character; and 5. The Continuity of Human Development)

Faith in liberalism really took a hit from the effects and experiences of WWII, and in 1943, a group calling itself the United Unitarian Advance put forward a document that attempted to address this loss of faith. At its center was an affirmation that “freedom grows from free religion, that only a free religion can be universal, and that every other freedom is based on freedom of the mind.” It linked the military struggle against Fascism to a more universal struggle of all liberal religion against mental restraints, and promised to reconnect the splintered individualism of the 20th century to a larger quest for universal unity. It also contained a growing imperative to social reform and a commitment to social justice.¹⁷

Hewett writes that for many Unitarians of this period, Canadian and otherwise, the question of theism versus humanism was an either/or proposition. Either you believed in God and were a theist, or you did not, and you were a humanist, and there was little exploration of exactly what ‘believing in God’ meant. And as ‘theism’ seemed to demand more by way of unproved suppositions, humanist, that is to say non-theistic, language provided the common denominator on which all Unitarians could agree.¹⁸ And that brings us pretty close to our contemporary principles, which when first drafted at the time of the merger in 1961, had to find wording acceptable to all...Unitarian and Universalist, Humanist and Theist.¹⁹ The process must have been something like dancing with two multi-toed left feet!

Those principles have, of course, been reworked since then, but the original version should have a familiar ring to you. They were, to...

¹⁶ Hewett, 221

¹⁷ Robinson, 155.

¹⁸ Hewett, 233

¹⁹ Sinkford, Bill, “The Language of Faith” www.uua.org/president/03112.html

- Support the free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of religious fellowship;
- Cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to humankind;
- Affirm, defend, and promote the supreme worth and dignity of every human personality, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
- Implement the vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on the ideals of brotherhood [sic], justice, and peace.

As I said when I began today, it is perhaps impossible to pin down, innumerate, or claim as definitive all of the factors that contributed to where we are today. That list would certainly include higher criticism of the Bible, the Enlightenment, the introduction of science and the work of Darwin which called into question a supernatural cosmology, congregational polity, wars and the experience of human tragedy, a free and democratic environment, and a whole host of other factors. But foremost on the list must be the presence of free minds and prophets who were and are committed both to a search for truth and the individual's right to conduct that search. Within that resolve, those before us have recognized that an effort to think alike is futile and instead agreed to work for the ends they have in common.²⁰ This is the way of tolerance.

I will tolerate, and maybe someday come to value, liturgical dance. I know that it allows those who appreciate it to access truth and to freely express their beliefs, and so I will choose to experience it as something uncomfortable that opens my mind and stretches my boundaries. We Unitarians have been doing a dance of inquiry and exploration for centuries, and every day something new is born. We can look at our feet and know where we are, but that's no reason to think our story ends here. As with *The Everything Seed*²¹, new dances will be created, and our story will continue to unfold. Know that the sparks of our past are alive and burning inside of us, waiting to shine in ways that are yet to be known.

Amen.

²⁰ Wilbur, Chapter 23

²¹ Martignacco, Carole, *The Everything Seed: A Story of Beginnings* (Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 2003)