

Peace, War, and Two Hundred Years of Adventure

First Universalist Church of Wakefield

The Rev. Andrea Greenwood

October 21, 2012

Opening Words from Clinton Lee Scott (1887-1985)

"From the east comes the sun, bringing a new and unspoiled day. It has already circled the earth and looked upon distant lands and far-away peoples. It has passed over mountain ranges and the waters of the seven seas. It has shone upon laborers in the fields, into the windows of homes, and shops and factories. It has beheld proud cities with gleaming towers, and also the hovels of the poor. It has been witness to good and evil; to the works of honest souls and the conspiracy of knaves. It has seen marching armies, bomb-blasted villages and sad destruction. Now, it comes to us, the messenger of the morning; harbinger of a new day."

Reading from *The Lost Art of Gratitude*, by Alexander McCall Smith¹

In this reading Isabel, a woman who might be described as "thinking too much" has been talking to her house cleaner, who believes deeply in the spirit world, and trying to not make snide comments, because she really cares about her housekeeper. She also prides herself on being unbiased.

I've never asked you this, Jamie had once said as they sat together one summer evening on the lawn. "Do you believe in..." he looked at her and spread his hands to create a space.

And that space, she thought, might be God. "In God? Is that what you are asking?" ...

He picked a tiny blade of grass and idly began to strip it down; how complex, and perfect, the construction of even this little piece of vegetation. "Yes. I suppose that's what I want to know."

"And you?" she asked.

"You first. I asked you." Children dared one another in this way...

She lay back on the grass. The night was warm as the lawn itself, warm, breathing out into the darkening air. The earth breathes, she thought.

"I don't know," she said. "Not in the white bearded sense. But I SENSE something that is beyond me. I'm not sure I would give it the name God. But one could, if one wanted to."

¹ Spiritualism, which Isabel's housekeeper practices, was a divisive issue for Universalists. Very popular for a time among both parishioners and Universalist clergy, it became a bit of an embarrassment as Universalists were generally trying to win public acceptance. Some of the issues were not unlike the ones Isabel has -- having conflicts in her own value for both reason and open-mindedness. But Spiritualism was first seen as scientific proof of the existence of the soul outside the body, and then regarded as the work of charlatans.

He listened carefully, and she realized, turning her head slightly so she could see him, that this was one of the most intimate conversations they had ever had. To talk about sex was nothing to talking about God; the body stripped bare was never as bare as the soul so stripped. "And what about you?" she asked gently.

"I don't think about it very much. It's not really the sort of thing I think much about."

The answer pleased her. She would not have wanted him to reveal a certainty concealed up to this point. And there was something unattractive about a belief that excluded all doubt.

"But you're not an out and out atheist? You don't deride people who do believe in God?"

Again his answer pleased her. "No, not at all. People need some idea... some idea of where they are." He had been lying down, and now he propped himself up on an elbow and faced her. "And there's Mozart. If there can be music like that, it must be tied in some way to something outside us - it has to be. Some combination of harmony and shape that has nothing to do with us - it's just there. Maybe God's something to do with that. Something to do with beauty."

Something to do with beauty. Yes. Moral beauty existed as clearly as any other form of beauty and perhaps that was where we would find the God who was so vividly described in our noisy religious explanations. It was an intriguing thought, as it meant that a concert could be a spiritual experience, a secular painting, a religious icon, a beguiling face a passing angel.

Something to do with beauty.

SERMON

Perhaps you have heard the old quote, "we have met the enemy, and it is us." I always associated this with Walt Kelly, and one of the first Earth Day posters, featuring Pogo standing in some wetlands, filled with the debris of fast food packaging and Styrofoam coffee cups. But Kelly's phrase is just a little twist on the original, which dates to 1813. "We have met the enemy and they are ours," was a message sent by a relieved Oliver Hazard Perry, who captured British Royal Navy ships out on Lake Erie. It was a decisive moment in the War of 1812. America was able to reclaim Detroit and the rest of the Great Lakes region. It just so happens that the history of this church, and the founding of this town, is tangled up with the war of 1812. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, most of the world was at war. Napoleon had invaded Russia, and was getting demolished. The French and the British were fighting, and Great Britain was trying to muscle its way into Spain. And they were busy dragging the United States into it -- they took New York, blockaded South Carolina, and used Canada as a launching pad. They allied with Native Americans and attacked settlements in the Midwest. Here in the east, the major issue with the British was their appropriation of our sailors. Ships leaving our ports were captured, and the men forced into service for the Royal Navy.

In an effort to end this practice, and to avoid war, Thomas Jefferson decided that the United States would cease all foreign trade. It was his form of neutrality; to

choose neither the British nor the French, or any of their allies. In the South and the West, the effects of this were manageable. But in New England, it was devastating. Ending foreign trade essentially killed all activity on the oceans. In coastal towns, half the people were unemployed – and since what is now Maine was then part of Massachusetts, a very large percent of the state’s population was coastal. Almshouses and poor farms began overflowing. In some places, it took two generations for the soil to recover from the burden.

This is the context for Wakefield separating from Reading, which was geographically much larger than it is today. Here, the pro-war sentiment was so strong that the residents demanded separation from the pockets of town where the people held very different views of the war. Wakefield actually voted to move ahead with war several months before the federal government did. The very first budget reflected this. It was largely towards war preparations.

Soon thereafter, Universalists started gathering irregularly in one another’s homes, and then occasionally in a public hall, with a supply preacher. This was very early for a Universalist congregation. I would guess it was somewhere around the fifteenth Universalist body in Massachusetts.² It is impossible to have any real statistics, because, to quote the denomination’s historian, Russell Miller, “collecting reasonably accurate numbers was a problem for Universalists that was never solved in the nineteenth century.... Systematic record keeping never existed... and even when efforts were made, they were never complete and not always accurate.” Miller went on to say “It was not very revealing to be informed, as the delegates to the General Convention were in 1835, that in some areas of the state there were “more or less Universalists.”³ I love this quote! Most UUs smile in recognition at this, as we do the description of being like Quakers, but with ADD. I knew Russell Miller when I was a child. He wore heavy-framed glasses way before it was hip to do so, and he had a love of details that could obscure his main point. But here, he shows that our failure to keep records is really more that we don’t believe in them. Organization is not what matters, and we resist it. Nevertheless, we proudly claim that this congregation was first organized in April of 1813. In a town that overwhelmingly supported war, this fledgling church was a home for people who disagreed. They did not want to rush to combat.

This position was actually the norm in New England. Wakefield’s pro-war stance was unusual,⁴ but soon enough war was declared. New England refused to send troops, and as a result received no federal protection. Maine ended up occupied by the British for almost a year. And then a funny thing happened. People

² The *Inventory of Universalist Archives in Massachusetts*. Contains a chronological list of Universalist churches, but it is misleading because it lists churches by their founding dates, not by when they became Universalist. So, for example, the North Reading Universalist church, which was the Congregational church, is dated at 1712, even though it did not become Universalist until 1833.

³ Russell Miller, *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870* (Boston, MA: UUA, 1979) p. 159

⁴ Although Gov. Elbridge Gerry was pro-war, and manipulated the voting districts to give pro-war towns more weight in 1812, giving us the term “gerrymandering.”

who had been against the war decided they were for it. Americans united in the desire to defeat the British. And with that, the strongest reason for the Universalist Church in Wakefield disappeared. They had a faith in a loving God and a kind of communal salvation that made them reject the idea of war as an answer. But once we were at war, that theology evolved, to let the Universalists ally with the larger culture and defend their country. They still had a different religion from most of their neighbors, but those differences did not matter quite so much politically. The Universal salvation they believed in became nationalized – an American Universalism, as opposed to a global one. We emerged from the War of 1812 a unified country, at peace, with a national anthem, and a stronger sense of American identity.

The Wakefield Universalists did not disband, but they did not organize either. They continued to meet irregularly, and twenty years passed before they ever had a minister. It was not until 1843⁵ that the group legally became a congregation. This can be told as a story about numbers – that there were not quite enough people, or enough money to support a minister. It could be viewed as part of our inclination to be deeply ambivalent about institutions. That is a full thirty years of getting around to charters and by-laws and legal status. But I think it makes more sense to look at the history of Universalism in Wakefield in a bigger context; to try to understand what the people needed, and why. Most peoples' primary reason for helping to build up a church is not going to be about the church. It is far more personal than that. We need something - a way of looking at the world that helps us make sense of things; that lets us see continuity even as things change. We need affirmation, and help. When we look at it this way, questions of growth become relational rather than statistical. Why, in the 1850s, after a long period of being lay led or having very short term ministries, did this group suddenly start supporting longer settlements?⁶ The traditional statistical answer would be about the railroad arriving in 1845, driving up the population, and thus giving us more potential people. In this answer,

⁵ Frederic W. Cook, Sponsor, *Inventory of Universalist Archives in Massachusetts*. (Boston, MA: Historical Records Survey, Division of Community Service Programs, Works Progress Administration, 1942) p 194. Interestingly, 1843 is also the year that Reading Seminary opened. It was the only Universalist-operated school in the state, and it admitted both male and female students. For Wakefield, this meant that there were more Universalists in the area. North Reading's congregational church had become Universalist in 1833, the year Wakefield called its first minister; and in 1838, Reading organized a Second Universalist Society (which did not last, but Wakefield entered its building phase believing it would). The Reading Seminary grew so much that it moved to Greenwood in 1848, and was administered by the first Universalist minister in Melrose. In 1853, the name changed to Greenwood Seminary, and functioned as a Universalist school until the end of the Civil War.

⁶ William Eaton, *Handbook of Wakefield*, (Wakefield, MA, 1885) lists the ministers and their dates of settlement through 1885. Newell, 1833-35; HW Morse, 1836; Jewell, 1837-40; Stillman Barden, 1841-42; John Willis, 1842-45; Alexander Hichborn, 1846-48; John Moore, 1849-53; Benton Smith 1854-58; Edwin Eaton 1865-70; William Potter, 1871-79; William Morrison 1880-83; vacant from 1883.

the Universalist Church is passive. It doesn't have to stand for anything particular. It is just here, growing because the area grew.

A relational answer has to do with war. The unity achieved by the end of the war of 1812 masked the division between those who championed state's rights and continued expansion into the west, and those who wanted a strong federal government with diplomatic relationships around the globe. American unity felt so good that we did not necessarily see the implications: defeating the British meant that we forced the removal of the Native Americans from tribal lands across Ohio and Michigan, and that the slave economy expanded. Then suddenly, with the Civil War on the horizon, the divisions were clear again. And really, even the changes that seem inevitable, part of the simple march of time and progress – industrialization, the changing of the rivers from transportation to production – were actually the results of the War of 1812. The destroyed maritime economy is what forced New Englanders to look inward, to develop railroads and mills. Soon after the railroad came to town, the Great Pond was renamed Quannapowitt.⁷ It was now safe to romanticize the vanquished Indians.

When we look at statistics, the history of this church may look contradictory: the congregation originally assembled as a small anti-war group in a hawkish environment, but then never really grew until it became a center of abolitionist activity. These were people who were ready to fight, when forty years earlier they were not. But these different stances on war were actually held together by stronger values that we have a hard time articulating. It is layered, like the story of Elbert and his bad word. He found the word in fancy, polite society. That's where he learned it. And those are the people who are shocked beyond belief to hear such a thing. The elegant folks are also the ones who scrub Elbert's mouth out with soap, while proclaiming to be above bad behavior. He's been hit with a croquet mallet, but is punished instead of comforted. Elbert seeks out the wizard gardener, who feeds him cake and honey and teaches him dazzling words to express himself.

For us, the layers aren't about polite society, even if historically Universalists have longed for acceptance a little more than was healthy. The layers of meaning that we have to wade through are about trust and leadership. "We have met the enemy, and it is us," said Walt Kelly. I don't think it is an indictment so much as an invitation to explore the costs when we think we are gaining; to maybe think again. We have a genuine belief in universalism -- all souls matter; all have the same rights, and no one should be able to own another – but this belief has kept us from supporting leadership. We have been hampered by our tendency to distrust authority, and to argue most intensely with those whom we have the most in common. This seems to be an inevitable result of our individualism; frustrating but unavoidable. But your history shows it is not. Our faith has long supported a strong, centralized federal government. That was the reason to feel reluctant to engage in battle 200 years ago, and it was the reason to support the Union fifty years later. It was not pro-war or anti-war, it was a denomination that believed in strong, national leadership. It is ironic that part of our religious legacy is a reluctance to organize

⁷ What is now Crystal Lake but was then the Small Pond was called Wappahtuck beginning in 1847, too.

and record for posterity and lay strong foundations. Why do we believe that structure can unify out there, in politics, but not in here, in our faith?

In Wakefield, almost 200 years ago, a group of people came together as Universalists because it was then and remains today comforting to find a place where one is accepted, and where deeply held values are shared and affirmed. And though we treasure that sense of belonging, and of unity, we really can't let our faith be a total haven from the outside world. It needs to be a platform, too – a place from which we can act. I struggled a little bit with the reading this morning – with Isabel and Jamie's discussion about God – because I both like it and am troubled by it at the same time. I think it is weird for an established couple to not have talked about beliefs, and to be so tentative. And while I love the idea that whatever God is has something to do with beauty; with a harmony and shape that would be there whether we are or not – I also think it is not true. We are agents of that beauty. We have to create space for it, notice it, reward it. Otherwise, it will perish. Being too open-minded can prevent us from preserving something lasting.

A church is a place where we intentionally preserve beliefs and values. This is not something that happens on its own, naturally. We have to work at it, the way the wizard gardener took milk and honey and baked a sweet cake to let the words come. And so when we think about how and why this church was born, it makes sense not to think simplistically about protesting the war, or finding fellowship. We want to think about how we lead, and how we nurture authority that enables strength. To that end, I want to tell you the story of Wakefield's very first minister, John Newell, who had studied with the famous Universalist preacher and theologian, Hosea Ballou. Newell was originally from Concord, his wife Mary Richardson from Westford, but they had moved to a church in upstate New York. The year Massachusetts disestablished the state church, which meant that Universalists could begin organizing without a legal battle, Newell left New York and came to Wakefield, or South Reading as it was then called. A young man, he and Mary had three small children; ages two, five and eight when they arrived in town. There was no church building yet, and no Sunday school. After two years, they moved to Wrentham, where they seemed ready to settle permanently. But suddenly, in 1838, Newell died. The family was left with no way to support itself, and the oldest child, Charles, decided to lighten his mother's burden by running away from home so she wouldn't have to support him – and perhaps so he wouldn't have to support her. He was fifteen. Charles went down to New Bedford, and joined the crew of a whaler. But he was not driven to catch the big whale, or to make a lot of money. He was on fire with the spirit of adventure. He traveled around the Cape of Good Hope, and the Horn of Africa. He went to Hong Kong and the far east. And by the time he was 22, Charles Newell had crafted his experiences at sea into published stories. He called himself Captain Barnacle and he specialized in voyages and romances. Later he became a real captain, famous for two things: the lending library he kept on board, which he made available to all the crew,⁸ and for providing good medical care to all

⁸ Helen Hoyt, "Captain Robert Barnacle" in *Fifty-ninth Annual Report of the Hawaiian Historical Society*. (Honolulu, Hawaii. 1950) p.13

on board. The worst complaint anyone ever made about him was that if you returned a book dirty or torn, he would refuse to lend you more.

Charles Newell married a woman from Wrentham, and at the time of the Civil War gave up sea faring. He studied medicine, and had a practice in Boston. What does this have to do with church? Well, Newell said that he wrote stories as a way to honor his father. But the way I read it, it wasn't just "honor" – it was more like breathing his father back to life, through stories. Newell said that his father had read novels aloud, and told him adventure stories and romances. Charles' own tales were a way to give himself back the time he had shared with his father – the first minister here – and as a way to pass that legacy on. A father – a clergyman! – who encouraged the reading of novels – romances, even! was far from typical. Fiction was perceived as lies. It was full of falsehoods, and therefore morally dangerous. Yet this is the person this congregation chose as its first minister. He wanted people to be happy. He wasn't worried about eroding standards of public decency. He associated Godliness with joy, with being alive, and open.

And there are specific, real world implications to these beliefs. Not just excitement or freedom or personal fulfillment, but information that changes the world. Your first minister's son, writing as Captain Barnacle, introduced readers to Hawaiian lore. His stories were peopled with sea queens and magical nymphs, the pantheon of local gods and goddesses. The natives of the Polynesian islands were featured, and their myths explored. Mainland Americans and Europeans had no knowledge of this culture before Newell. Educated Americans ridiculed these stories, because Newell's depiction of the native peoples made them seem noble, and honorable, which obviously could not be true, since those people were, by definition, savages. How could naked people with brown skin and the wrong belief system be naturally endowed with chivalry?

This is a great legacy, to have as your first minister a man who did not fear judgment, but embraced joy, and passed that sense of exhilarating adventure on to his son. And that son was able to use that spirit to make the world bigger, more inclusive. Let us assume that Newell imbued the congregation with that faith in life as well. What will you do with that beautiful and contagious sense of wonder? How will you pass it on?

Closing Words adapted from Ida Hultin, 1858-1938

Churches as a whole do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick, turn prisons into reformatories, and unite to stay the atrocities of legalized cruelty.... Men and women in the churches and out of them do this work...; these men and women belonging to all countries and all races, who perhaps have not had time to formulate their beliefs about humanity, because they are busy working for it; who have never known how to define God, but are finding something God-like in their daily lives. And they are bringing that God to the world.