

**"Alone Together: The Fall and Rise of Universalism" by Mark W. Harris**

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It was 200 years ago today, sounds like an exponential version of, “it was 20 years ago today, when Sgt Pepper taught the band to play,” but in our case, here in Wakefield, it would be when the great preacher Hosea Ballou taught everyone to sing and shout who had ears to hear and voices to proclaim the sweet sounds of universal salvation. In truth it was 200 years ago tomorrow, April 29, which marks the anniversary of a meeting that took place in the home of Colonel Amos Boardman, when the Universal Society of South Reading, now Wakefield, was established. Among the founders was one Charles Emerson known as the inventor of Emerson’s Patent Elastic Razor Straps. Apparently those early Universalists knew some close shaves. Then this hearty little group heard twenty years of supply preachers before John Newell, a disciple of elder Ballou, came as the first settled minister in 1833.

It seems so far away that itinerant Universalist preachers were galloping through every Middlesex village and farm on horseback to spread this new message of God’s love for all - an ex slave heard this message in Gloucester and signed on as a charter member of the first Universalist church in the world knowing the divine embrace was meant for him, too, not just white folks. Women, too felt empowered by this message that they were equal to men and thus just as worthy, not only to gain access to heavenly bliss, but had equal abilities long before they reached the pearly gates, and soon Universalists were the first to ordain women to the ministry. Universalists proclaimed that all people were embraced by divine love whether you were black or white, male or female, rich or poor, gay or straight, immigrant or native, Christian or even, Muslim and Jew. As George

Rogers, a great itinerant Universalist preacher wrote of a Universalist gathering. “All were on a parity, all distinctions of caste were lost sight of; all individualities were merged in the mass; and as one family all rejoiced together in a common and glorious hope.”

My sermon title today comes not from our Universalist heritage but from a rock and roll performer who followed in the footsteps of those Sgt. Pepper Beatles. *Alone Together* is the title of an album by an obscure singer guitarist named Dave Mason. Mason had been a member of one my favorite bands, an equally obscure group called Traffic, whose members included a less obscure fellow by the name of Steve Winwood. If you don't know who Steve Winwood is, then you can go “back in the high life” again, and seek a “higher love.” For Mason, *Alone Together* probably epitomized the pain of the breakup of Traffic, as Mason was then alone, and drifted into real obscurity, after the togetherness of being part of that larger creative whole. Today I want to use that metaphor of early Universalist congregations and preachers who were together imparting an inclusive and radical message of salvation, but then lost their way, and felt alone and bereft of a larger mission to the world. At the time of their consolidation with the Unitarians in 1961 they had been in decline for nearly a century. The ultimate test is whether that original togetherness is alive in our 21<sup>st</sup> century message of Unitarian Universalism. What I loved about that album, *Alone Together* is that it was pressed in rainbow colors, not the usual black, the only such record I have ever seen. My three sons tell me that people are collecting what they call vinyls again. As this congregation celebrates what a dedicated group of people can do, may we renew our dedication to spin our rainbow faith, and raise its healing message with more power and strength. Raising

is an historical theme I noticed here. The first church building was constructed in 1839, and was said to look like a Greek Temple. Twenty years later in 1859 it was moved back fifty feet and raised. Then in 1877, the whole building was raised again six feet. Even later the fire in 1939 did not stop the Universalists here from raising a new structure. They kept coming back, raising the message and creating new dreams for this congregation. And so it is my dream that our faith that went from being together to being alone will rise from obscurity and be a significant contributor on the religious scene, and that the liberal message will continue to be raised in Wakefield for 200 more years to come.

More than a century ago Universalists began to feel isolated as they expanded their faith. For a time Universalism was the fastest growing faith in America. It was an amazing inclusive message that offered hope to thousands in a time when Calvinism and its fear of God's eternal retribution still ruled the world. In 1803, the Universalists passed a profession of faith in Winchester, NH, and it became the basis for all subsequent proclamations of what their religious beliefs were. The importance of scripture led the way to an understanding, first, that God's nature is love. Second, this revelation means the entire human family will be restored to happiness. This is in sharp contrast to the cultural underpinnings then and now that associate salvation with individual merit. Most of us understand the relationship between how good or successful you are as a person determines whether you will be saved or not, whether you are worthy or not. While salvation is not a part of the religious equation as much as it once was, we are left with that legacy that underscores the prime importance of individual achievement and success as signs of earthly salvation. Alone not together.

Ballou came to believe that an emphasis on individual virtue detracted from the truth that all people are embraced by a loving God. Yet the Universalists began to be more and more sensitive to criticism from outsiders. Their orthodox opponents said that Universalism was an invitation to immorality. People needed the threat of hell in order to be good, most Christians said. I still hear this from some Catholics who go to church out of fear of the remote possibility that they might literally get burned, or “just in case.” they say. Universalists began to worry that others did not accept them. While many Unitarians, were the powerful and the elite who could espouse a liberal faith without caring if the masses criticized them, the Universalists were often, in the beginning, poor ex-Baptists who wanted to be accepted by their neighbors, and began to worry that they were too weird.

Ballou believed that humans could act out of a higher notion of virtue than the purely selfish motivation of avoiding threats of damnation hanging over their heads. There was a kind of egalitarian, classless idea of salvation in this Universalist gospel. It is not our individual acts that will save us but our connecting with that larger moral force which unites the universe. Harmony with the whole is more important than individual excellence. Universalists had a communitarian vision of humankind, God and the means of salvation. No one is saved unless everyone is saved. This is the kind of message a disciple of Ballou would have preached here in the early days of Universalism, but this changed with this pressure to be accepted by their neighbors and by society. Because Universalism was called an invitation to cultivate murderers, thieves and scoundrels, some of them wavered and began to change their theology. They said everyone will eventually be saved, but there are bad guys who need a period of cleansing before we can

let them into the heavenly club. After Hosea Ballou died in 1852, what is called Restorationism came into its ascendancy, and Universalists, like other Protestants, added an individual moral judgment on people. God no longer loved all people just as they are. Some of them had to earn God's love. This led to a split in their ranks. The Restorationists specifically said that some people had to suffer first before they were saved. With this, the vision of an interconnected family was lost.

After this time, the Universalists made a series of institutional mistakes. They proclaimed something called "gospel liberty," which they felt brought them freedom of belief and independence, but they also applied this to their unwillingness to develop well-organized institutions. Their independence and freedom as individuals and congregations meant they feared strong institutional commitments. Were they a collection of isolated churches or a cohesive movement? They continuously resisted efforts to create a strong national organization, which could develop strong leaders, too.

The Universalists also lost their unique message. As other denominations began to moderate on hell, and the flames became less intense, the Universalists lost their reason for being. The obvious message to embrace might have been similar to what the Unitarians began to do, which was move away from being so specifically Christian, and embrace a more universal, natural religion. This would have fit beautifully with their initial vision of an interconnected humanity. But they didn't do it, partly because they wanted to be acceptable to others. Because of their love of gospel liberty, Universalist leader Thomas Whittemore said the Universalists were "susceptible to the claim that they were the receptacle of every strange thing under heaven." In response to this fear of appearing to others as a faith that included the bizarre and the ridiculous, they made the

Winchester profession a required statement of belief, which made them a confessing church rather than a free church. This led to the Bisbee Heresy Trial, where a poor minister from Minnesota was hounded out of the denomination because he denied the Biblical miracles.

While the required statement was removed after 1900 the trend toward fearing the shift away from Christianity gripped the Universalists. Later they tried to join the precursor to the National Council of Churches, but were rejected because they did not believe in Christ. They were so concerned about how they were perceived, and whether they were Christian or not, they abandoned their religious vision in favor of retrenchment. Their paranoia that they were not normal Christians or about being too radical prevented them from preaching a dynamic message of inclusiveness. This coupled with their suspicion of a strong national organization was too much to overcome.

In recent years it has been popular to hold up Universalism as a warm religion of the heart, and Unitarianism as an overly rational religion of the head. While it is good to affirm our desire for the spiritual foundations to our faith, I am not one who subscribes to this trend. I think the great power in the Universalist message was present in the initial vision. Out of fear of being accepted and acceptable in the sight of other religious groups, most especially mainline Protestants, the Universalists failed to evolve and embrace the giant word they were sitting on, UNIVERSALISM. When I was researching this sermon at the UUA a couple of weeks ago I ran across an essay by the early twentieth century Universalist leader Frank O. Hall. Hall wrote in April, 1913 about what he expected of twentieth century Universalism. He said, "Has the Universalist church accomplished all it aimed to accomplish? He spoke of the great accomplishment

of acting as a leaven to mainstream faiths,” but still, he said, but still we “must do some” more “kneading,” and “act on the principles we profess to believe.”

Now 200 years from the founding of this congregation, and 100 years out from the era when decline seemed inevitable, is more kneading still possible? It seems to me that one thing that distinguished the early Universalists from the later generations is that they were not tentative about their faith. The later generations gave in to public opinion and criticism too often, and were afraid to shout out about the beauty of their faith to all who would hear. They did not want to look, appear or act different from everyone else. While everyone wants to be accepted, you might think that this is no longer an issue. It sometimes seems that today we even embrace that we are different too much, and cultivate the marginal for the sake of justice, while ignoring the mainstream. While we may act on our principles to fight for equal marriage or eat ethically, or be active in our local communities, I think there is still a big part of us that is tentative about our faith. We worry that it is not a real religion, because anything goes, and we don't tell anyone about it.

Much of that Universalist tentativeness came out of the fact that they were not a confessing church, and the rest of the culture seemed to pressure them into wishing they were. They were a free church, but the ramifications of that freedom were never fully embraced. In terms of congregational polity, I hope we have learned that free and democratic have their limits, and churches that are completely disorganized and fail to let leaders lead will not allow much of a vision to be enacted. May these 200 years remind us that we need organizational strength and strong leadership going forward. But a strong free church is more than organizational direction and planning. It is also a church with a

vital faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The hunger for a defined faith is found with the embrace of the principles and purposes over the last generation. Yet part of that embrace has been confusion over identity. I think we still suffer from a perceived inability to explain who we are, and so we end up concocting elevator speeches to explain ourselves. Yet what other religious faith spends so much time trying to explain itself? None. We expend far too much energy trying to tell people what UUism is. I think under girding this endless discussion of who we are is a belief that we are not a real religion. We don't want that Catholic or Christian stuff, but somehow we think we would be more legitimate if we had some imitation of it. I think we need to end that embarrassment by embracing how real we are. We are among the most real because nothing is more important than living our faith.

There are two simple things about our faith. We believe in deeds not creeds. We are not a confessing church, and all the principles and purposes wall plaques are never going to make us one. In my church we say, "Love is the spirit of this church," in our covenant. Our faith is how we live in the world. We don't care if someone follows Jesus, Buddha or Muhammad. We want to know not if they have the right belief, but do they take the right actions – do they love their neighbors, do they practice forgiveness? Our faith is a faith in action, in deeds. Now what will make that faith rise again? Not being embarrassed by it, we will shout it from the rooftops. Our friends will say to their friends, "Hey I go to a great church. You should try it." Do you know how many UUs fail to make it known in their communities what church they go to, and how wonderful it is, and how meaningful it is to them in their lives? Why not? Those early Universalists went everywhere on horseback saying we have a new vision for humanity.



That vision for humanity is still out there to be claimed. The Universalists have known it for 200 years, but they stopped proclaiming its power and beauty. It is individual, because it must be based on experience, but that experience is realized in community, in relationship through the covenants we make with each other. The individualism of alone is now together in community. When we develop those relationships we see in the other something of ourselves. We are made known to each other, by telling our stories, and feeling each other's pain. And we proclaim this is a free church where love matters, not belief, where understanding matters, not being right. The old Universalists said there is a common interconnectedness that supersedes all individual faiths. Getting beyond the fears that divide us is crucial, especially in a time where many live in fear, and respond to that fear by lashing out. Unitarian Universalists came together to proclaim that there is one source of abiding love that gives us hope for the future of humanity and the world. In the wake of last week's tragedy and pain, we see that one love is the only hope to bring all faiths together in a bond of the unity of our spirits. May we proclaim it a little louder, and a little more publicly, so that the tears in the fabric of humanity have a chance to be healed.

