

The Story of Us

Given 7/21/24 by Robin Mitchell and Rich Macdonald

Part 1 – Robin Mitchell

The topic that Rich and I have chosen this morning is the story of American UU-ism, the story of us. And Rich is the real star of the show – he's the one with the actual facts; the names and the dates and the stories. I'm just the warm-up act setting the stage for him and his story.

And there is a stage to be set – our UU forefathers (and they were mostly *fathers*) were trying to bring their religion into a new age, to make its stories worthy of the age of reason and enlightenment, and I think it's helpful to see just how big a task that was.

Most of the world's great religions, and certainly the Christian religion they were working within, were steeped in the classical worldview – that things were better in the past, that the oldest truths were the deepest, and that those truths come down to us through tradition and authority. Christians recall God's perfect creation before the Fall; everything has gone downhill since the Garden of Eden. Scripture was sealed when the Apostle Paul died; the further we get from Jesus's time the further we get from his truth.

But our UU predecessors were living in a new age, at least culturally – the modern worldview had taken over, the idea that we could gain new knowledge by inquiry, by testing and examining the world. This is the opposite of the classical worldview – instead of declining every day, we are improving. We know more today than we knew yesterday, and we will know even more tomorrow.

The transition from the classical to the modern worldview was profound, and on the surface at least it undermined the need for religion. I don't need to cling to old, revealed truths if I'm capable of looking at the world and finding my own. I don't need Genesis to tell me why the sun moves through the sky if Galileo and Copernicus and Newton have explained the mechanics to me.

And I think our UU predecessors saw that, and they were trying to change religion from an unquestionable source of authority to a human response to the wonder and the terrors of existence. Here is one of them, William Ellery Channing:

“We cannot bow before a being, however great, who rules tyrannically. We respect nothing but excellence, whether on earth or in heaven. We venerate not the loftiness of God’s throne, but the equity and goodness on which it is established.”

He is a Unitarian Christian, so he’s still using the metaphor of gods and thrones, but his ultimate standard here is equity and goodness as perceived by human beings through our reason, our inquiry, and our innate sense of justice.

He’s bringing an old story into the modern age, but the old story still matters - religion does more than just explain the facts of the world, things that are better explained by science. It calls us to awe and wonder at those facts, and that matters as much in the new world as it did in the old. I think part of what motivated the old creation stories wasn’t just the question of why the sun moved through the sky from east to west, but the wonder of the sun’s abundant, life-giving warmth and light shed so profligately on fields and forests, warming the grass and trees that nourished the vast family of animals living in them and the people who live among them all. How wonderfully made we are, we and everything else in the exuberant dance of life – the only right response to that is lavish praise, and so the creation stories raise a pean to creation by praising a Creator. That awe and wonder in the face of creation should still be part of our lives today, and if we have lost the need for a creator then we need new stories that are worthy of the almost inexpressible wonder of it all.

This is the direction our UU faith has taken - when I came to this Fellowship 34 years ago, my first impression was that we were people who believed the universe was worthy of reverence without imposing creeds on it. I have clearly softened on the idea of creeds in the decades since then, but the experience of freely-inspired reverence still lifts my heart.

And the precise nature of the stories we tell matters – the Jewish and Christian stories have creation being done for the benefit of humans; God gives us dominion over the plants and animals and says they have been created for our use. This has led to certain results, as you can see in any factory farm or clear-cut forest or IPCC climate report. Some Native American creation stories tell of a collaborative effort, of humans working with other creatures as a team, as a family, to become established on earth. I know it’s easy to exoticize other traditions, but I can’t help but wonder how much more lightly we would live on the earth today if our dominant creation story had been different. Stories matter, even stories about imaginary

things, when they are about our deep values, and so it's no wonder that our UU ancestors cared about the quality of the stories they were working towards.

And above all, religion gives meaning to the facts of life, and we definitely need meaning as much today as we ever have. Maybe more so; our modern quest for rationalism and individuality has liberated us but has also stripped away some of the traditional identities and stories that gave our ancestors meaning. Healthy religious communities and stories can help repair that if we can bring them forward into the new age in a way that retains both their beauty and their compelling call. They can speak to our deepest questions and longings, and present them in a way that invites us to take action in our lives to move closer to the answers.

But again, the nature of the story matters, especially when it moves us to action in our lives and in the world. Our commitment to our liberal religious story has led us in this Fellowship to actively engage in anti-racism work, to work against the oppression of women and LGBTQ people. But the Christian nationalists in our country today are using their religious story to actively engage in pro-racism work, to work for the oppression of women and LGBTQ people. Abolitionists and Conquistadors, Quakers and 9/11 hijackers, have all been moved to action by their religious stories. The quality of our stories matters, urgently.

And I think we understand that, just as our UU predecessors did. We saw this a few months ago in the spirited debate we had about the changes to Article II, here in this Fellowship and in the UUA at large. Some people were passionate about defending the story we have been telling for decades, others were eager to carry what they saw as a new, better story into the future, and I think a lot of the intensity on both sides came from understanding that the stories we tell ourselves and the world really matter. I have said before that the stories we tell are not so much summations of our past, but are what will actively create our future. May we all dedicate ourselves to stories worthy of the future we want for ourselves and the generations to come, because we have as much responsibility for carrying our UU story forward as anyone who came before us.

Part 2 – Rich Macdonald

I came to UUFSD 15 years ago on a whim. My daughter was going to Sandy Hill, and I was looking for a community.

I knew nothing about Unitarian Universalism; I had never heard those words before. I assumed this fellowship was either Christian, or a cult. I wasn't sure which.

Before we started the Sacred Text discussion group, my elevator speech to describe UUism sounded something like this: "We don't believe in the Trinity and we don't believe that anyone is going to hell. And we have 7 principles to follow, but we can believe anything we want."

It turns out that our religious story is much more complex than my elevator speech. The theological concepts of the Trinity and Hell have only provided us with a name for our faith. They explain little about what our ancestors believed or practiced, which I hope to correct today.

All churches in New England were Calvinist at first, but they were covenantal, not creedal, so there was no creed that kept people held to the old beliefs, which were the belief in a wrathful God, and predestination, not free will. Slowly, ministers, members, and churches began to revolt from Calvinism. This was the first American Revolution starting in the early 1700s, throwing off the yoke of the Church of England and Calvinism in favor of our own home-grown religion. And it set the stage for the historic American Revolution in 1776.

Two religions evolved out of this revolution – the Unitarians and the Universalists. By 1845, they both could rightly claim that many people were "under the influence" of their theology.

The founding idea for Universalists, that everyone was welcome in heaven, understates their true vision. They were universalists not just in heaven but on earth too. They believed that opening heaven to everyone would create a universal religion that everyone would flock to join. They imagined a congregation of Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, Hindus and Muslims singing and worshipping together under one umbrella. IMAGINE THAT!

The key fact about early Unitarians was that they considered themselves the only pure and true Christians. They strongly believed what was written in the bible, and ONLY what was written in the bible; they rejected all other orthodox teachings that were invented later, like those at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. They still believed in the virgin birth and the resurrection, at least until the mid-1800s, because those stories were in the bible. Because Jesus did not spend much time teaching the Trinity

or original sin or the incarnation, neither should they. Jesus went around doing good and being compassionate; that's the life Unitarians wanted to emulate. They called themselves Restorationists, because they were restoring the bible to its rightful place; today we might call them Originalists. They also advocated the use of reason to interpret the bible, because somewhere in the bible it says, "...prove all things, and hold fast [to] that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Unitarians and Universalists have co-existed and overlapped for 200 years in America, starting with New England in the 1700s. The early churches in New England were congregationalist, meaning they had no umbrella organization. Their ministers were chosen by a democratic vote, reflecting the interest of the congregation at the time. One year it might be a minister who was Unitarian, another year a Universalist. In addition, Unitarians and Universalists often shared the pulpit with each other, as most other Christian denominations shunned them both.

Starr King, who was a Universalist minister early in his career, but then became a Unitarian minister later, was once asked: what's the difference between Unitarians and Universalists? He answered, "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn anyone, and Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned". He also said that the only reason that Unitarians and Universalists had not already merged was that they were "too near of kin to be married". They did marry, of course, 100 years later in 1961.

Harvard College was the academic home of Unitarians, and Tufts University fulfilled the same role for Universalists. Both Divinity schools were non-sectarian but they mainly attracted students of like mind. This like mind had a name – "liberal religion". Early on, it meant congregations were voting for their ministers, had free will, freedom of belief, individual liberty, and most importantly, they practiced humanitarianism.

It is a little-known fact that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written by Unitarians. OK, that's not exactly true. But the truth is that the freedom values espoused by Unitarians - free inquiry, individual liberty, and freedom of conscience - were incorporated into those documents. Many of the framers of the constitution were under the influence of the Unitarian religion, and at least 3 of them attended Unitarian church services at one time or another (Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams). Thomas Jefferson had this to say about his Unitarian influence,

"I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creeds and conscience neither to kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of only one God is reviving; and I trust there is not a young man now living who will not die a Unitarian".

Both Unitarians and Universalists had their radical fringe elements in the mid 1800s, which could easily be the subject of another sermon. Universalist minister Ralph Waldo Emerson tried to base religion on something other than the bible, in a movement called Transcendentalism. For their part, radical Universalists discovered spiritualism and began to communicate with the dead.

The most important inheritance from early Unitarians and Universalists, beyond a doubt, is our embrace of a liberal religion involving humanitarianism, or as we say today, social justice. There is a book called "The Prophets of Religious Liberalism", and all three prophets discussed are Unitarians: William Ellery Channing, a moderate Unitarian, known as "the apostle of Unitarianism", and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, both Unitarian Transcendentalists who moved Unitarianism away from total reliance on the bible and into man's experience of nature and insight into his own mind.

Here are some of the social justice issues of the past 100 years, along with the name of UUs that spearheaded the change. Some of the gains we made are under threat as I speak:

Horace Mann, for universal free public education

Joseph Tuckerman, for American social work

Dorothy Dix, for decent care for the mentally ill

Margaret Fuller, for equal rights for women

Olympia Brown, for women's suffrage

And other causes with various champions:

Separation of church and state during the writing of the Constitution

Anti-slavery

Capital punishment

Prison reform

Birth control

Divorce

Interracial marriage

Temperance

Labor rights

Abolition of hereditary property

Anti-war resistance

Indian affairs

Healthcare

Blood banking

Public libraries

And the list goes on...

Knowing what I know now, my elevator speech goes something like this:

We are a post-Christian religion that incorporates the Universalist ideal of having people of all faiths singing and worshiping together under one roof, coupled with the Unitarian and Transcendentalist idea that all religious texts are sacred and have something to teach us. Most importantly, we are the strongest, truest liberal religion in America, both past and present, that seeks to do good in the world and to correct historic injustices.

Thank you, and blessed be.