

We Would Be One: A History of the Merged Movement

sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered May 15, 2016

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A few weeks ago, I shared with you an image of what it's like to stand in the middle of Boston Common in close proximity to three exemplary Unitarian Universalist Churches – King's Chapel, Boston's First, and Arlington Street Church, the Christian, Humanist, and Activist threads, generally. What I neglected to mention is that if you stand on the hill and face south, your back would be toward Beacon Street, the Massachusetts State House, and, right next door, the stately brownstone that was, for many years, the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

This former headquarters building at 25 Beacon Street has an interesting story. Constructed in 1886 as the first-ever headquarters for the newly developing American Unitarian Association, this denominational building represented something new for Unitarians: the establishment of a denominational body, a new territory for this congregationally-oriented movement. Unitarians, as we've discussed, tended to be a haughty bunch – well-heeled and influential. And in the culture of the elite in cities in the Eastern United States, to have an address such as “25 Beacon Street” was a sign of prestige. So when, a half-century later, these offices were moved across the street and down a couple of long blocks, the movers and shakers in Boston insisted that the old address be kept in spite of the move. They moved the building but not the address. So for many years, until the UUA moved from this location only two years ago, as one walked down Beacon Street paying attention to the addresses on the buildings, one would have noticed that the headquarters of the UUA is slightly out of

order. 25 should have been down a couple of blocks, and we were the only odd building on the even side of the street.

There's an important metaphor in that story, but I'll leave it to you to figure out what it is.

This headquarters of the American Unitarian Association became, in 1961, the headquarters of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association, formed as a result of the merger of the Unitarians with the Universalist Church of America. Technically it wasn't a merger, it was a consolidation. Like a pooling together of resources of two then-struggling religious organizations to try to make a single stronger one. Or, as I've suggested, perhaps a bit like the blind man and the lame man teaming up to make each of stronger.

I think it was interesting that this notable building served, for several decades, as not only a physical location of our headquarters staff, but also a symbolic "mecca," if you will, of our religious movement. This symbolism became especially apparent in the years leading up to the sale of that building and our move a few blocks away to a more contemporary office structure. It points to one of the key questions that I'll highlight as I tell this story: what is our institutional identity? When we talk of a headquarters building, we think of hierarchy or bureaucracy; when we think of hierarchy or bureaucracy, we think of a denomination and an institution. But what about the congregation? Once the sole authority in both parent movements, what has happened to the independent congregation as the Unitarian Universalist Association has grown over the last fifty-five years? We are technically not at denomination at all, but an association of congregations – this congregation, like our sister congregations, is

independently governed and freely chooses to belong to our national association. Yet many seem to talk, think, and act as if we are a denomination, as if there are people over there in Boston telling us what to do. How did this happen? That may seem, to some, like a rather mundane question, but I don't think it is. It has far-reaching consequences not only for the association and our congregation, but it touches on some very basic questions of religious identity, purpose, authority, and theology.

But first, a review as to how we got here. I've been offering a series of sermons this spring on our religious heritage. Many of you heard my sermon about the history of Universalism back in February, and in March I explored the Unitarian story. We heard in these sermons about heresy and prophesy, about sin and salvation, and about two liberal Christian congregations that began in early America and evolved into the parent movements of our Association today. We heard how each of these movements were, in their own way, highly democratic and tied largely to the worth and dignity of all people; how each movement became more and more liberal to the point of abandoning the identity of "Christian" churches; and how each of these liberal movements took on greater roles in advocating for progressive policies in this country over the years.

Our tour took us down the road of Universalism, which emerged as an upbeat, evangelistic, salvation-centered liberal Christian sect in the frontier towns of an expanding America. As we saw, Universalism's promise for us today is in its spirit – a religion of the heart that can inspire us to see what is good and worthy in the world and what is good and worthy to strive for. But the great challenge of Universalism, aside from the vanishing demographic amongst which it once thrived, is in perspective. Its

legacy leaves us with the question of how we can be all things for all people, or how we find the limits to our inclusiveness and tolerance. In trying to synthesize a religion out of all the great traditions of the world as well as our own rich and varied experiences, are we left not with a religion for everybody but a religion so broad that it winds up being for nobody? Does it have anything distinctive left to offer us?

Our Unitarian story, too, gives us both promise and challenge. We saw how important it was, in an age in which blind allegiance to inherited dogma was the order of the day, that people were encouraged to use their minds to discern what is true religiously – true in that it makes sense in our minds but also that it is consistent with the life that we experience. Our transcendentalist and humanist traditions have taken this latter criterion and empowered us to form and reform our religious convictions to fit with life as we know it. And this freeing of minds, hearts, and habits allowed the pioneers of our tradition to be also pioneers in the world in the name of service and compassion. But there is a challenge in there, too, that our Unitarian tradition passes on to us. That challenge is in the complex relationship between the individual and the community. Religion is by its root definition about binding together – but when people are set free to “build their own theology” (as one of our popular curriculums encourages us) what is left to bind us together? Amidst all of our diversity and freedom, what do we stand for? For that matter, who are we? Not who am I, but who are we?

So I want these questions to hover about us as we look at the story of our merged movement. For they are challenges that I believe we inherited. I offered the metaphor before that our merged movement, the Unitarian

Universalist Association of Congregations, is not so much a direct linear descendant of either of the two parent movements, but more like a child born from the union of two parents who share a passion. And like most children born of two parents, we inherit certain pervasive questions and challenges – questions and challenges that many of us don't realize are there until well into our adult years.

As I mentioned, our consolidation was in 1961. Fifty-five years ago -- which, in the spectrum of institutional life, or especially in the spectrum of religious institutional development, is a very brief time. But these five and a half decades seem much longer when we look at all the changes our world has gone through over the same period. In the United States, where our movement is rooted, we have seen hot wars and cold wars, racial strife and women's liberation, the sexual revolution and the post-modern, deconstructionist, post-imperialist integration of a multi-cultural, multi-racial, non-hierarchical and all-too-often baffled population. Yes, it's been over five decades, and the Unitarian Universalist Association has adapted well. There is great promise in that.

The way I see it, the recent passing of our golden anniversary might be the time that future historians will recognize as the time we came of age. I think it says something about where we are on our path to spiritual maturity – a place of reckoning, like a twenty-something young adult facing her Saturn Rising and doing the work of critical self-reflection and realizing, for the first time in her life, that her parents did not give her all the answers but left her with more perplexing questions.

I'll remind us all at this point that our consolidation did not begin with the formal agreement in 1961. Unitarians and Universalists had by then

long been close companions, with several ministers crossing over from one fold to the other, such as Thomas Starr King and Olympia Brown did in the late nineteenth century. Both the Unitarian Service Committee and its counterpart in the Universalist Church had collaborated on many international relief and service projects in the wake of World War Two. But most importantly, in the nineteen fifties both the Unitarian and the Universalist youth organizations dissolved and together formed the energetic and even notorious Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) that provided a profound grounding of community for youth for over twenty years. In our merger, many have said, we followed the lead of our youth.

As I said, we've come of age in a tumultuous time, and I don't think our history can be separated from what has been going on in our world. So I want to offer a few images that come to mind as parallels between the Unitarian Universalist story and the history of the last five decades in the United States. This is merely an impressionistic exercise, not anything close to a comprehensive history. So here goes:

1961: The cold war at its peak, Americans fearful of the communist menace out there but enjoying sustained prosperity and an explosion of youthful optimism. Unitarians and Universalists, both struggling denominations who are defined primarily in the way they differ from all the rest, come together in a spirit of optimism, believing, as did Rev. Donald Harrington, that the world would respond to "our new relevance."

1963: Rev. Martin Luther King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, DC, convincing liberals of all colors that there is hope for unity in America in our lifetimes. The UUA, under the leadership of Dana

McLean Greeley, ambitiously charges into the civil rights movement and winds up with one of its own, Rev. James Reeb, martyred in Selma.

1969: The once-euphoric dream of Dr. King has turned into a confusing nightmare as the black power movement challenges the integrationist movement for the hearts and minds of those seeking justice. And, at the UU General Assembly that year, delegates walk out after learning that money promised for racial justice work at the previous GA had to be rescinded since there was no money there. The UUA was split in the same way as America, and thousands of African-American members left the fold. Also, as opposition to the Vietnam War grows, many UU congregations, particularly on the west coast, are beset by conflict stemming from how and if congregations should publicly oppose the war.

1974: President Nixon resigns, confirming the mistrust that many in America have developed toward the traditional institutions of leadership, and mainline church membership across the country begins a decades-long decline that's still underway. The UUA is facing its own steep decline in membership financial reserves, seeming to put the death knell on the once-euphoric optimism of a decade earlier.

Nineteen seventies: As the second-wave feminist movement sweeps the country and the gay liberation movement initiated at the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 gathers momentum, UUists become intentionally welcoming to both women in leadership and to gays and lesbians both in the pews and in the pulpits. A separate history can be told about the long and surprisingly difficult transition we went through in learning to be fully supportive of women in leadership, and the many challenges that remain for us there. But we did pass a watershed year in 1999 when we became

the first major religious denomination to have more ordained women than men in ministry.

Early nineteen eighties: The country discovers a new optimism by initiating an economic expansion through a combination of tax cuts, deficit spending, and cutbacks in social responsibility. In short, the country thrives by borrowing from the future. The Unitarian Universalist Association thrives by inheriting from the past, as a bequest of oil and natural gas properties made by the family of Caroline Veatch to the UU Congregation in Shelter Rock, New York, reaps millions. The Veatch foundation is formed, and to this day funds many of the UUA's expansion and social outreach efforts. Many people believe that if it were not for this windfall, the UUA might have gone bankrupt. Our current "seven principles" were adopted by General Assemblies in 1983 and 1984, with the addition of our "sixth source" in 1995.

1992: Bill Clinton is elected President of what by now no one can deny is an increasingly multi-cultural America. The UUA publishes its current hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, an eclectic, multi-cultural mix of hymns and readings drawn not just from UU sources, but also from all across the religious spectrum and from cultures around the world. UUism is hence in a position to be a religion for the multi-cultural as more of our membership draws from multi-racial families.

2001: Terrorist attacks rekindle various forms of patriotism across America, including both militaristic patriotism and commitments to peaceful non-violence. The UUA elects Rev. Bill Sinkford as its new president, the first African-American leader of a historically "white" religious movement, seven years before our nation elects its first person of color as our

President. Rev. Sinkford is followed by Rev. Peter Morales, a Latino, yet the UUA continues to struggle with its traditionally white identity, and remains, in spite of many years of effort at multi-cultural inclusion, a primarily white, middle-class religion.

I offer these reflections and these specific historical references to suggest something to you about our history. It's a question I posed in telling the Unitarian story, but that I'll pose again, this time more in the form of an answer. This answer came to me from the Rev. Clark Olsen, one of my teachers in seminary, who marched alongside Revs. Reeb and King in Selma in 1965. Rev. Olsen pointed out that even though we Unitarian Universalists often think of ourselves as left-wing radicals, either religiously or politically or both, that we actually sit, in an important way, right at the center of American religious and political life. Between the far extremes of conservative fundamentalism and absolute secularism, we sit trying to integrate a vision of a diverse and multi-cultural society that is not held together by one authoritative mandate, but is also not an anarchic free-for-all with no binding values. Instead we are held together by our agreement to be together – our covenants. As my telling of our history is intended to show, the trends and movements of Unitarian Universalism are in almost perfect lock step with what our world is going through. We are not crazy radicals bent on tearing our world asunder – as tempting as that may be sometimes – rather, we are people who faithfully seek a reasonable path of unity in a fractured world. Yes, sometimes we may feel as though our ideas are seen as crazy, but that says more about the extent of the fracturing of our world than it does about our ideas. We are really quite reasonable people, if you ask me. While many of us have rejected

particular traditions in which we grew up, and even more of us these days are coming from the vast indifference of a completely secular background, we don't reject religion as irrelevant. In fact, we are here. And that, I believe, is one of our greatest promises.

Now if Unitarian Universalism is the center of contemporary world, we still have the question of what is center of Unitarian Universalism? Who are we? To use one popular metaphor, out of the many individual flames that we bring to the chalice of our community, what is our common fire? What are the limits to our Universalist inclusivity and to our Unitarian individualism?

One very good answer to that question is provided by one of my predecessors in this pulpit, Rev. John Alexie Crane. "In a UU church people exceedingly diverse in their beliefs," Lex wrote in 1995, "come together around a shared search for truth. They share a quest for continuous growth and renewal of their understanding of themselves and their world. A UU church is a community of seekers." Seeking, in other words, is our common ground. Our eternal truth lies in the fact that The Eternal Truth is forever being revealed. While on the one hand we don't reach for an easy answer to this perennial question, we also don't despair that the search is futile. Here we stand, at the hopeful, faithful center of our world, seeking a religious truth that can offer hope and promise to our fractured world and our questioning minds.

It is for this reason that I've offered this historical overview, not only of our merged movement, but of covenanted liberal religion, as a series of unanswered questions. And that is how I intend to leave it with you: who are we? Where are we going? What is our mission in the world? What is

the core around which we gather? What is the covenant of our community and our faith? These are questions that we, as a community, will forever hold before us.

I've also offered this historical overview in the context of our congregation's visioning process in which we're exploring what our future as a congregation looks like. I think especially when we look at the newness of our merged "UU" movement, and the potential we as a denomination have for re-visioning our collective future, we can see that we could be in a time of profound change (indeed, one thing we've seen from our history in all its components is we are almost *always* in a time of profound change.) If I were to get my crystal ball and consider the ways the merged Unitarian Universalist movement might be changing, I see some exciting, or at least interesting, possibilities. I see change coming, and happening, whether we want it or not. Most specifically, I think as people in our world seek out new institutions relevant to their lives rather than simply running away from old, oppressive churches, that our central tenet of a "community of seekers" won't be enough. I think we'll have to – or could, if you prefer – offer something more tangible, a core belief that provides some kind of anchor in their otherwise fractured lives. I've said before that our seventh principle, in which we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, might be the basis for such a core vision in the future.

I've made reference, in this history sermon, to the curious fact that we have this rather long name consisting of two rather large and somewhat obscure theological concepts, even though we don't even base our covenants on a shared theology. In our age of branding and messaging

and hashtags, I wouldn't be surprised if we'll consider changing our name to something not only with fewer syllables, but that better reflects the core of who we are. Some congregations are already doing that – dropping the name “Unitarian Universalist” or at least making it less prominent and using other adjectives such as the Florida congregation known as “Spirit of Life UUs.” And of course, as our UUA President Rev. Peter Morales has often spoken about, we may be in the era in which the congregation itself, as an independent body anchored in one local geographic entity, may no longer be the only kinds of “cells” in the UU body. New networks and virtual congregations are emerging all the time, and nobody knows, at this point, where it will lead.

But it will be an exciting ride – if not for me and you but for our children and grandchildren. For as the hymn we sung says, we “revere the past, but trust the dawning future more.”



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