

The Awkward Beauty of Unitarian Universalist History

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Sunday, May 15, 2022 ~ UU Society of Sacramento

Solo piano music: Excerpts from *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky; two pieces by Bela Bartok.

Hymns: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth; #123 Spirit of Life / Fuente de Amor; #121 We'll Build a Land.

Readings: "To Be of Use," by Marge Piercy (full poem, not from SLT);
Prayer #10, Hymns of the Spirit, printed below, after the sermon.

Chalice Lighting Words: (From Deuteronomy 6, adapt. Rev. Peter Raible, Rev. Scott Tayler)

Leader

We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves by fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.

Congregation

We drink from wells we did not dig.
We profit from persons we did not know.
We are ever bound in community.
May it always be so.

Leader

This is as it should be.
Together we are more
than any one person could be.

Congregation

Together we can build across the generations.
Together we can renew our hope and faith in the life
that is yet to unfold.

Sermon (after some jarring piano excerpts from *The Rite of Spring*)

The music we just heard was from a ballet which had its premiere performance in Paris, France, 109 years ago this month. It caused a riot. One music critic calls it "perhaps the most famous scandal in the history of the performing arts." The audience jeered, not only afterwards, but during the performance of *The Rite of Spring*. The composer Stravinsky was "so angry that he stormed out and went backstage to help the dancers keep time." According to music writer Ivan Hewitt, the score for this ballet contradicted every rule about what music should be. The sounds were often deliberately harsh; ... the music was cacophonously loud, ... with thunderous percussion and shrieking brass." Its rhythms were complex "in a completely unprecedented way." The choreography was condemned as much as the music was—when it was new. By now, of course, *The Rite of Spring* is "recognized as one the most significant musical masterpieces of the 20th century."ⁱ

I thought of this when I thought about this sermon. When I asked Irina (our pianist) about it, she wrote me that playing this music in church might get her shown the door, as it did Igor Stravinsky. I said, *don't worry, just blame it on me*. "Okay," she said, "we'll go out together." But as I thought about the original reception for his music, I thought about the history of our faith tradition—Unitarian Universalism.

I can appreciate the brilliance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; even so, there are parts of it I don't like—such as the parts we just heard. Likewise, I can appreciate the beauty of my religious movement, even though parts of its history are not so pretty.

The history of both Unitarianism and Universalism includes many episodes of stress and upheaval. Familiar expectations were jarred by the shock of the new. Yet out of the jarring moments we have shaped a movement which has enough beauty to keep us faithful to it. Indeed, it is often by trying to be faithful to our values that our ancestors caused controversies and scandalized their neighbors (and sometimes one another).

Unitarian and Universalist movements have emerged over the centuries in different countries. Today I want to talk about our movement in the United States. We have a long name, as you can tell from our sign outside. This is the result of a merger of two denominations 61 years ago. In 1961, the Unitarians and the Universalists came together. Each one brought its unique origin story, which I'll summarize for you now.

In Massachusetts, starting in the 1600s, Calvinist Christianity was the dominant culture, or at least it was among the white people who colonized that area. The message of Calvinism was that people are inherently depraved. All of us are born bad, because we've inherited the sinful disobedience of Adam and Eve. We can't be saved from the fires of hell by our actions, our faith, or even by going to church. You could never be sure of the fate of your soul, or that of a dearly departed loved one. Calvinism taught that God sacrificed Jesus Christ, his son, in order to save some of us, but not all of us. Calvinist churches were independent congregations, with no central authority or hierarchy above them. So, by the late 1700s, many of them had drifted into heresy. They said that Jesus was not part of the Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Those who promoted this liberal belief were called Unitarians. Unitarian, not Trinitarian.

The Unitarians argued that Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet of God, not his only son. God sent Jesus *not to die*, but to show us how to live, how to give, how to share life with others, whoever they may be. Jesus demonstrated that all humans are not hopeless or depraved; each one of us has free will. We have a choice to be honest or false, to be generous or selfish, to be kind or cruel. Because we have choices, we can improve; we can grow in character. We are worthy to grow, worthy to choose how to live. From this heretical idea springs our contemporary principle of the dignity and worth of every person. I think it's beautiful. But it's only our stating point, not our conclusion.

The American Universalists rose up also in the late 1700s, and also in New England. Their movement also confronted the dominance of Calvinism, but in a different way. The idea that God, the Father of humanity, would fill the world with his children only to send most of us into hell—that was an irrational belief, and a repugnant one. What loving parent would do that? Universalists went up and down the roads of New England to spread their gospel that God was love, and *that* love is unconditional and boundless. Because they proclaimed universal salvation, they were called Universalists.

With such commitments, our ancestors put their faith into action not merely in church life, but also in efforts at social reform. Dr. Benjamin Rush, for example, worked for compassionate mental health treatment and opposed capital punishment. Elizabeth Peabody founded the first English-speaking Kindergarten in the country, and she trained teachers near and far.

Our UU heritage is filled with stories of members and ministers who embodied the words of the poem “To Be of Use,” by Marge Piercy. She writes:

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart/ who pull like water buffalo,/ with massive patience,/ who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,/ who do what has to be done, again and again.

With the spirit of massive patience and endurance, Universalist and Unitarian women worked, for three quarters of a century, for women’s right to vote.

One of these women was Mary Ashton Rice Livermore. I’d like to tell you about Mary. She was born in 1820 in Boston, to a Calvinist family. As a girl, Mary lost her sister, and became tormented by the question of salvation and the fate of her sister’s soul. Mary attended a private girls’ academy and graduated at 16. Afterward, she taught school for a year. Then, against her parents’ wishes, Mary took a job in Virginia as the governess for a white family’s children. This brought her face to face with slavery for three years. It turned her into a committed abolitionist.

While there in her employer’s library she found heretical books by the Deist philosophers Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen. Deists argued that God had created the world but no longer had any involvement in what happens in the world, or any involvement in our lives (let alone an afterlife). Given Mary’s orthodox religious background, these ideas scared her. Her family’s congregation was so strict it didn’t even sing hymns.

Mary went back to Massachusetts to teach school. One Christmas Eve, she walked by a church building and heard a congregation singing Christmas carols. This drew her inside, where she discovered a Universalist congregation. She liked their good news of the boundless love of God, and the unconditional kinship of all human beings.

Mary threw herself into the new faith. At age 25, she married a Universalist minister, Daniel Livermore. In his career he would serve two churches in Massachusetts and one in Connecticut. In addition to their church ministry and having three kids, this progressive couple advocated for women’s rights, the abolition of slavery, and alcohol temperance. Alcohol abuse was widespread in those years. Many men became violent because of it, and their wives and children had no legal rights and no legal protection. In each town where Daniel and Mary lived and served, their activism generated controversy. Because of the pressure aimed at them, they had to keep moving.

In 1858, they moved out to Chicago, where Daniel purchased and ran a Universalist newspaper. This new faith was spreading as the nation’s population spread west. Mary wrote for the newspaper and got active in causes near and far. She was involved in founding Chicago’s Hospital for Women and Children and its Home for Aged Women. After the Civil War broke out, a Unitarian minister on the East Coast recruited Mary to serve on the board of the new United States Sanitary Commission. The Reverend Henry Whitney Bellows founded this commission to provide medical care to soldiers on or near the battlefields, where soldiers were more likely to die from infection than from gunshot wounds themselves. The Sanitary Commission would later become the American Red Cross.

After the war, Mary Ashton Rice Livermore became a leader for Women’s Rights. She started a newspaper and called it *The Agitator*. She went on the lecture circuit both to earn income and promote women’s issues. Her booking agents weren’t able to talk her out of being

controversial. Addressing the oppression of the culture and system of male supremacy in America, one of her popular talks was entitled “What Shall We Do with Our Daughters?” Another talk had the title, “Concerning Husbands.” Later, she led a women suffrage organization, and was celebrated internationally for her service. She wrote books, including her memoirs, written at age 80.

Mary died at age 85, in 1905. That was 16 years before the achievement of a Women’s Voting Rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Given that some states had already achieved suffrage, I hope that Mary could see it coming on the horizon for the whole country.

Of course, there are many fascinating stories of other forbears in our faith tradition. I haven’t even gotten to the 20th century examples yet! I won’t take more time to do that, but I will say that in every story, creative and courageous leaders were doing their work as an expression of their liberal faith. Mary Livermore is quoted saying: “This faith in Universalism, during the years that I have believed it, has *grown* upon me, until it is the central thing *in me*. I do not engage in anything that is not...the outcome of this faith.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary and other ancestors of ours believed in the worth and goodness of every person, no matter the person’s struggles or status in this unequal society. They celebrated their faith in human kinship. They put their values into action, even if it caused friction. In the wake of loss or failure, they started over, sometimes moving across the country. Of course, when I think about some of these examples, I can feel as if I am a really sad excuse for a faithful Unitarian Universalist. Maybe their example is daunting to you as well. But we must remember that every successful movement has been a mass movement. It calls for all of us—people who give and serve at every level. Everybody has a role to play. When our values and faith bring us together, we make change possible.

As you may know, many people in this congregation will be here after the service to be trained on effective advocacy for the needs of thousands of our unhoused neighbors—our unhoused kindred. Let me do a quick review of our movement’s theological origins. See if it fits this day.

From the beginning, the Unitarians emphasized the goodness of human nature. From the beginning, the Universalists emphasized the goodness of God. If we tie them together, we can say that everyone is made in the divine image, and that image is one of love. It is an image of compassion, care, and kinship. It’s beautiful. But this is not our conclusion; it’s the place where we begin. So may it be.

Prayer (read by Roger)

I have a prayer to read to you which I find beautiful in its language and its sense of longing. It comes from the book of hymns and readings called *Hymns of the Spirit*, which was published cooperative by the separate denominations of the Unitarians and the Universalists, in 1937. It's nearly a century old, so while we are accustomed to metaphors like the spirit of life and the web of creation, it uses more traditional terms for the divine. I am leaving in the original words and hope you will join me in the spirit of openness to the expressions of our ancestors. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we bless and praise thee that we have wakened to the light of another earthly day; and now we will think of what a day should be. Our days are thine, let them be spent for thee. Our days are few, let them be spent with care.

There are dark days behind us, forgive their sinfulness; there [are] dark days before us, strengthen us for their trials.

We pray thee to shine on this day — the day which we may call our own. Lord, [when] we go to our daily work, help us to take pleasure therein. Show us clearly what our duty is; help us to be faithful in doing it. Let all we do be well done, fit for thine eye to see.

Give us strength to do, patience to bear; let our courage never fail. When we cannot love our work, let us think of it as thy task; and, by our true love to thee, make unlovely things shine in the light of thy great love. *Amen.*

Personal Reflection by Theo

I'm sitting at my kitchen table, my preferred location for therapy which -- like pretty much everything else these days -- happens over zoom. We're fifteen minutes into the session when my therapist makes an off-handed reference to my belief in a higher power. Wait, my what?

"Back up," I say, "I don't believe in a higher power. Where on earth did you get that?" "Well, you talk about going to church," he says, a little bashful. "and I know you're a Unitarian. Didn't that start during, like, the Protestant Reformation in Eastern Europe? Aren't you kind of... Christian?"

I can't help but laugh. Hardly! "No, no," I tell him. "No, not at all. The UU's were heretics, and there's no requirement to believe in God. I mean, I guess Jesus had some cool stuff to say and my mom thinks Mary is pretty cool too, but I'm not a *Christian*. Though there are Unitarian Universalists who might consider themselves Christian, and UU's who might consider themselves Pagan and Buddhist and Jewish and--" by this point I can tell I'm just confusing the poor man.

"Okay," he says, "so what *do you* believe in?" Not a higher power, that's for sure! Beyond that, I'm not sure, it's hard to put into words, quite.

I grew up in a UU church, went through religious education and Coming of Age, and I'm pretty sure I wrote my credo statement about the goddess, but I didn't know what I believed at age thirteen. I try to take an agnostic approach to it these days: there is much of the world that is far beyond my human capacity for understanding, and I know I can't be certain one way or another about the answers to most theological questions. And you know, it doesn't matter very much to me anyways. I'm not concerned with the after, or the above, or the eternal. I am deeply concerned with the material present, and with questions of freedom and liberation, how to live in

right relation with the world around me. Being a Unitarian Universalist, to me, is less about what I theoretically believe and much more about how I act, and whether these actions are in line with my values.

You know, there's a feeling I get, sometimes, when I am in community with people who share values. I felt it for the first time, and powerfully, in YRUU, the network of youth-led UU communities that meet for weekend or week-long cons. The nightly worships at cons taught me what prayer looked like as a Unitarian Universalist, but it was the YRUU consensus-based processes of community organization and accountability that showed me *faith*. This faith is a bright-burning thing that lights me up, lifts me, brings me together with others in common purpose. My faith is the belief that a better world is possible, and that it can start right here on the smallest scale if we just build it ourselves and tend to each other.

ⁱ Ivan Hewitt, "The Riot at the Rite," British Library online, posted May 25, 2016, accessed May 13, 2022: <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-riot-at-the-rite-the-premiere-of-the-rite-of-spring#:~:text=The%20premiere%20of%20Igor%20Stravinsky,front%20of%20a%20glittering%20audienc>
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ⁱⁱ "Mary Ashton Rice Livermore," Harvard Square Library online, accessed May 15, 2022. www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/mary-ashton-rice-livermore/