

UNIVERSALISM AT THE CONFLUENCE by Rev. Justin Lapoint

Marietta, Ohio, the site of this year's Universalist Convocation, was established in 1788 at the confluence of the Ohio and Muskingum Rivers. It was the first permanent settlement in the Northwest Territory.

Universalists founded a society in the town in 1817 and later, in the 1840s, built a wooden church on the flood plain. The Native Americans had warned the pioneers that "Where water has been, water will come again." Indeed, water came again and ruined the wooden church by the early 1850s.

Nahum Ward, community leader and birth rite Unitarian, established a Unitarian Society in 1855. Two years later a beautiful brick Gothic style Church was completed to house the 5 Unitarian families which made up the Society. This Gothic wonder featured hollow walls to allow the flood waters to drain.

So, the Universalists had a sizable congregation and a flood-ruined building, and the Unitarians had 5 families and a Gothic cathedral. In 1869, the two societies joined to form the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Marietta, Ohio.

In January 1978, I began my duties as Minister of FUUSM. Rachel and our then three year old son, John began our lives in Marietta house sitting for a friend of one of the church "pillars" before we moved into our own house which the church helped us purchase. The next year, our daughter Alice was born in nearby Beverly, Ohio. We stayed in Marietta 12 years, leaving in 1990 for Murray Grove, New Jersey where I took on the role of Executive Director.

Not long after our arrival in Marietta, I renamed the church newsletter, "The Confluence" not only to recognize the two great rivers but also to honor the Unitarians and Universalists who came together nearly 100 years before consolidation at the national level. Contemplating this year's Convocation, I decided to reuse the name. My thought for this sermon was to focus on **Universalism's role within the Unitarian Universalist Association.**

This introduction of church and personal history notwithstanding, my sermon isn't about the past, but about the present and the future. **What should Universalism's mission be within the UUA today?** This question could also be phrased "*What is the role of Universalist Convocations in the UUA Today?*" My answer is made up of three words...**Educate, Exemplify, and Evangelize.**

II. A. EDUCATE

Universalist Convocations have been held every year since 1990 (with the exception of 2001.) During those years we have done a good job of education. We have educated ourselves about our Universalist heritage and beliefs, and often we have met at significant sites in Universalist history such as Murray Grove, NJ, Shelter Neck, NC, North Oxford, MA, Outlaw's Bridge Universalist Church, and FUUSM.

Convocations has expanded the circle of education when we have met at churches which were not originally Universalist before merger, or did not even exist before 1961. A good example was Buckman Bridge UU Church in Jacksonville, FL, a congregation organized in 1990.

I would like to see more effort made to educate new comers to Unitarian Universalism, so they can understand and appreciate the complexity of our dual heritage. More often than not, programs have stressed Universalist history. By all means, we should share our history, but if that is all we do, we run the risk of being perceived as a "has been," our history being a series of liberal heroes and derring-do instead of derring-do. *Universalism is a living faith!* It isn't just the second part of a corporate name which too many would just as soon drop for brevity's sake.

B. EXEMPLIFY

The hardest part of any living faith is to *live it!* Yet nothing gets the message across so well as to practice what we preach! And what is our message?

My friend Rich Koester has expressed it this way: "Everyone included; no one left out or behind!" That is the essence of the Universalist message in every age.

It is a message that needs to be heard both inside and outside the UUA. Over the years, I have witnessed behavior in society at large and also among some UUs which I call the "caucus mentality". It too often degenerates into an us (the good guys) versus them (the bad guys). It divides races, ethnic groups, religions, peoples of different sexual preference and orientation. Whole categories of people get labelled "sinners by definition." Religious liberals can see it clearly when exclusivism is practiced by right wing individuals, but tend to ignore it when it is practiced by those we consider "allies." This year's Presidential campaign has

brought out just how ugly exclusivism can get. There are many words to describe the caucus mentality, but *Universalism is not one of them!*

Like the teachings of Jesus, Universalism is simple to express but hard to live! Exclusivism is so much easier. It doesn't require us to challenge ourselves. It doesn't require us to think. Rather it releases some of our darkest energy. Donald Trump knows how to inspire that dark energy. This year especially we are challenged to live Universalism in a time of strong political passions.

I will never be able to understand how people who claim to be followers of Jesus can speak so hatefully of immigrants, and LGBT individuals. For Jesus socialized with people at the margins of his society. He even told his disciples to love their enemies. In the First letter of John it reads....

“God is Love...” 1 John 4:16B

“Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen.” 1 John 4:20

“Everyone included; no one left out or behind.”

C. EVANGELIZE

Now before you reject this word because it reminds you of proselytizing Christianity at its worst, let's take a look at the Greek roots of “evangelize.”

The Greek “Euangellion” simply means “Good News.” It was around before the advent of Christianity, and related to announcements about the Roman Emperor. To evangelize is to spread “The Good News.” And nobody has better news than Universalists.

From the specifically Christian “no eternal hell” to the vaguer but more inclusive, “Everyone included; no one left out or behind”, Universalists have had the real good news, a gospel based on love not fear.

As far as sharing the good news in the UUA, we have already made some head way. The very first affirmation to be promoted by the UUA is :

The inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is taken from the 1935 Avowal of Faith of the Universalist Church of America with some alterations.

“The supreme worth of every human personality”

The late Regina Burton, a beloved friend of North Carolina Universalists, argued that the word “supreme” should have been retained instead of “inherent.” While there is nothing wrong with the word “inherent” when speaking of worth and dignity, it simply isn’t as strong a word as “supreme.” Why do we need so strong a word.

The 20th Century was the bloodiest in recorded history and in the 21st century, life is still cheap. It seems that the theme of the new millennium is “No lives matter.” Our country has been at war in the Middle East for most of the 2000s. At home we have become accustomed to the slaughter of innocents in schools, churches, movie theaters, and other public venues

If we truly believe that every person, every life has supreme worth and dignity, how can we allow the blood bath to go on?

III. CONCLUSION

So Universalism’s role, Universalist Convocations’ Mission of educating, exemplifying, and evangelizing must reach beyond our denominational borders. If we are to survive, Universalism is a faith the world needs...now!