

## **“When Unitarian Meets Universalist: An Origin Story”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

May 9, 2021

### **Reading**

“Ours is a story of faith,” Elizabeth Tarbox from *Evening Tide: Meditations*

### **Sermon**

As human beings, we are drawn to stories of our origins. We wonder, as Paul Gauguin expresses in his painting of the same title, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?”

Unitarian Universalism also has an origin story. In reality, it has multiple origin stories as no single story really ever tells the whole tale.

And so it goes with the story of how the faith movement that this congregation is a part of came into being.

It is a story of working through differences, finding common ground, and seeking union in order to build power for the common good. Some of those who were key characters are still alive today and many more have joined the ancestors.

As we mark the 60th anniversary of the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I want to share with you this morning some nuggets from the story of how the Unitarian and Universalist denominations came together.

First, let me place this congregation, the Unitarian Church of Montpelier, into context.

This church’s origin story begins in the 1860s when talk began of starting a “liberal church” in Montpelier, meaning a Christian church of “liberal” rather than “orthodox” Christian theology. The Rev. Charles Allen, with his evangelistic zeal, was key in drawing together the group of Universalists, spiritualists, and other liberals into a formalized fellowship, called the Church of the Messiah.

Although there were many Universalists amongst those who founded the church, they chose to affiliate with the American Unitarian Association.

Volume VII of the Monthly Journal of the American Unitarian Association published in 1865 mentions this congregation several times.<sup>1</sup>

The notes of the Executive Committee meeting of the AUA on December 5, 1864 state that “The President made a statement concerning the movement for the formation of a Unitarian society in Montpelier, VT; he having preached there the last Sunday in November, as requested by the New-England Committee. He considered the prospect excellent for the immediate organization of a self-supporting society.”

That year, the Church of the Messiah received financial assistance from the AUA and some of their publications were added to our library. The journal also noted that the Rev. Charles A. Allen, graduate of the Meadville Theological School had accepted a call from the new society in Montpelier, VT which had been gathered together the previous autumn and recently organized under the name of the Church of the Messiah. Three other societies in Vermont are listed in the journal, in Burlington, Stowe, and Windsor. The society in Burlington was the only other one in Vermont with a minister in 1865.

Interestingly, the minister who followed Charles Allen, Rev. J. Edward Wright, served as director of the American Unitarian Association from 1903-1909.

In this area and throughout Vermont, there were also many Universalist churches. For many years, Unitarians and Universalists were like the two kingdoms that Liza described in her time for all ages. They often met together, sang together, shared meals, exchanged pulpits. Some Unitarian ministers served Universalist churches; and some Universalist ministers served Unitarian churches

History shows that there was much interaction, even locally, amongst the two denominations and that there was talk well before the official consolidation in 1961 of the two denominations joining forces.

In fact, Volume 85 of The Christian Register published in 1906 speaks of one such event, and I want to actually read you this short entry, as I found it to be quite enlightening.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://play.google.com/store/books/details/American\\_Unitarian\\_Association\\_The\\_Monthly\\_Journal?id=DLQOAAAAYAAJ](https://play.google.com/store/books/details/American_Unitarian_Association_The_Monthly_Journal?id=DLQOAAAAYAAJ)

[Read from print out of *The Christian Register*. Copy attached.]

I am sure that there were other such occasions for clergy and lay people from these two denominations to gather. This would be a good research project for anyone interested in diving into the early history of our Church.

As Rev. E.M.H. Abbott of Stowe so eloquently put it, there were many sympathies shared across the denominations. But, there was also discord.

Commenting on the social and educational differences between the two groups, Universalist minister Hosea Ballou said that most Universalists were “little better than barbarians when compared with the graduates of Harvard College and other polished literati.”<sup>2</sup>

Besides stark distinctions in social class and education, the two denominations also organized themselves quite differently. Historian Warren R. Ross puts it this way: “The loosely federated State Conventions [of the Universalist Church of America] were somewhat like a bunch of grapes, connected but clearly distinct, while the Unitarians were more like an artichoke, a cluster of separate leaves that at least gave the appearance of a single entity.”<sup>3</sup>

In the early twentieth century, many liberal Christian denominations, not just the Unitarians and Universalists, flirted with the idea of coming together into a single denomination or entity. The Free Church of America, later called the Free Church Fellowship, was formed in 1933 and was intended to be a federation of all liberal churches that would provide an ecumenical structure for unified action.

The initiative fizzled and nothing came of the formalization of a broader, liberal religious movement, but the Unitarian and Universalist denominations did cooperate to publish a new hymnal together called *Hymns of the Spirit* in 1937.

In 1951, the two denominations took some more steps in their flirtatious dance by establishing the Council of Liberal Churches which consolidated various departments within each denomination: religious education, publications, and public relations.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *The Promise and The Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* by Warren R. Ross, 5. Skinner House Books, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Warren R. Ross, *ibid.*

As with many matters, the youth were the real trailblazers for consolidation. The youth groups in both denominations had occasionally met together for joint conferences and had participated in service together such as in the 1930s with Peace Caravans to respond to the escalating international arms race. With the formation of the Council of Liberal Churches, the youth groups decided to take things a step further, and in 1954, the youth groups of both denominations disbanded to form a common organization called “Liberal Religious Youth (LRY)” which some of our church members were a part of in their younger years.

Two years later, the Universalist Church of America (renamed from the Universalist General Convention) and the American Unitarian Association agreed to establish the Joint Merger Commission.

The commission engaged the work of professional consultants and also embarked upon a listening campaign with local congregations. The Commission produced extensive publications totaling over 400 pages in material plus a final 44-page “Plan to Consolidate,” widely known as the “Blue Book,” to be voted on by both denominations in Syracuse, NY in 1959.

This was a meeting of great consequence and was the first time the two denominations met together for a joint convention.

As these two streams of liberal religion were coming together, it was important to each that their principles and beliefs be represented in the new entity that was being created. It turned out it would not be a simple process to ensure that both identities were fully honored.

Robert N. West, who would later become UUA President, returned home to Knoxville, Tennessee two days after the meeting and described the session in Syracuse as “unbridled democracy in action...a Unitarian Council of Nicea, a parliamentary alley fight...and a heated family squabble.”<sup>4</sup>

Over 50 amendments were offered to the consolidation plan as submitted by the Commission, each of which had to be moved, seconded, debated, and voted on.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 18.

One issue that had the potential to derail the plan entirely was the wording of the statement of Principles in the soon-to-be-formed Association's bylaws.

Debate wore on for many hours. Donald S. Harrington of the Community Church of New York was an important figure in corralling delegates and moving forward with the debate and amendment process. He recounts going to bed late that night and being woken up at one o'clock and again around three o'clock by two different delegates who presented new wording and making sure he was still on board.

The final version of the bylaws that did end up passing stated that the Unitarian Universalist Association united "to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorally summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man."

With the bylaws, including the Association's Principles, now set, the two denominations were ready to formally vote to establish the new, joint association. They did this in May of 1960 with overwhelming votes in favor amongst both the Unitarian and Universalist delegates.

Donald Harrington preached the sermon at the closing worship service and spoke of the "tremendous potential" of the new denomination in light of the the need for "a religion which is dynamic instead of static, unitive instead of divisive, universalistic instead of particularistic, history-making rather than history-bound."<sup>5</sup>

The official date celebrated for the completion of the consolidation of these two denominations is May 12, 1961, when the first General Assembly of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association took place and voted on its first President.

UCM member Norma Raymond was a delegate on behalf of this Church, then still Church of the Messiah, for that first General Assembly of the new association.

Consolidating into one religious entity was just the beginning of our ever evolving living tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted in *The Premise and The Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* by Warren R. Ross, 23. Skinner House Books, 2001.

Today, we carry forward the legacy of that union and are turning it into something of our own making, while building on the past. We join our religious forbears as authors of the evolving story from its origin to the present and into the future.

What is interesting to me in reading more about the history of the two denominations coming together is the motivations for consolidating. People in both denominations felt invested in ensuring some kind of future for their religious entities. They both wanted what they believed and stood for and the ways they were enacting those belief in the world to have a chance of continuing. They believed that their place in the world mattered and that their story should be given a chance of continuing.

A denominational consolidation is the pragmatic side of the theology and values at the root of the institutional union.

The story of working through differences, finding common ground, and building something that can serve the common good is a story that continues today in the ways we engage and participate in this church community, in our UU community, and in the broader world.

I love how Elizabeth Tarbox summarizes it: “Ours is a story of faith and hope and love...it is our need for one another that binds us together, that brings us limping and laughing into relationships and keeps us at it when we otherwise might despair at the fix we are in...it is the holy we need, the eternal beyond our comprehension, and one place we can find it is here, working and worshipping together...there is a transcendent value worthy of our loyalty, upon which we may set our hearts, and its divine manifestation is love.”

Let us continue this story of faith and hope and love, limping and laughing, finding the holy, manifesting love in all we do.

So may it be.

Youngstown, and the balance for current expenses of the various movements and the travelling expenses of workers. In addition to the foregoing points where it is hoped churches may be planted the students at Meadville have begun services at two of the school-houses in the vicinity. Mr. Otto E. Schneider of the Senior class has held four services at one school-house, and the audiences have grown from 17 to 35. Mr. Arthur H. Sargent has opened services at another, with an average attendance of 12 for the two Sundays. I believe this work will prove a most valuable experience for the men who take it up, and a real boon to the country sides where no services are held.

LEON A. HARVEY, Secretary.

### The Richmond (Va.) Chapel.

The dedicatory services of our chapel February 18 were all that the most devout Unitarian could wish. The day was perfect, the chapel was crowded at both services, and Dr. Ames's sermon was most interesting and uplifting. The people listened with the most eager attention to every word that

fell from his lips. Some of the students from the Baptist College were present, and tried to arrange with Dr. Ames for a chapel service at the College; but, as the doctor's stay with us was very short, it could not be done. Our visiting friends got decidedly a good impression of our faith, purposes, and spirit from Dr. Ames's sermon in the morning and his address in the evening. The evening service was given up to historical sketches of the Richmond and Highland Springs work and to reports from our Women's Alliance, all of which were good, showing the earnest labors of the men and women into whose hands have been committed the work of the church. Dr. Ames closed the services with appropriate remarks, bringing the greetings of the American Unitarian Association and of the National Alliance. When he stated that he brought the greetings of "fifteen thousand members of the National Alliance," it made us feel good; for some of the people did not know there were that many Unitarians in the country. The doctor reminded us that we were making history, and that the history must be good.

We feel very happy in our new home and new surroundings. Several families have in-

### Fraternizing.

Apropos to the fraternity impulses spoken of in *Register* of March 1 this smaller incident may add an encouraging thought. The Universalist Ministerial Association of Vermont and Quebec held its second annual meeting, February 13 and 14, in Bellows Falls, inviting Rev. E. M. H. Abbott, pastor of Unity Church, Stowe, to give an address on "Agencies for the Development of the Spiritual Life." At this session the Universalist ministers present expressed an earnest wish to have more Unitarians present at the next, and unanimously voted to change their name to "Universalist and Unitarian," etc. They then elected Dr. J. Edward Wright of Montpelier, president, who came in for a few hours only, but cheered and encouraged us all by his kind, genial spirit and the fine spirituality of his well-chosen words. It was a pleasant, profitable occasion to Vermont's scattered liberal preachers; and, while opinions were freely expressed, the delightful spirit of harmony was undisturbed. Some interest was mani-

1. Our bond of union consists in that inward and personal faith in Jesus Christ as our divine Saviour and Lord on which all our churches are founded; also in our acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as the inspired source of our faith and the supreme standard of Christian truth; and, further, in our consent to the teaching of the ancient symbols of the undivided Church, and to that substance of Christian doctrine which is common to the creeds and confessions which we have inherited from the past. But we humbly depend, as did our fathers, on the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all the truth.

2. We believe that God, the Father and Lord of all, did send his son Jesus Christ to redeem us from sin and death by the perfect obedience of his holy will in life, by the sacrifice of himself on the cross, and by his glorious resurrection from the dead.

3. We believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God and of Christ, moves in the hearts of men, calling them through the gospel to repentance and faith, awakening in them spiritual sorrow for past sin and confidence in the mercy of God, to-



THE RICHMOND (VA.) CHAPEL.

gested in the compound church at Stowe called "Unity," and the suggestion has been made (more than once of course) that the two liberal denominations might thus unite and stand as one, while other churches are thus seeking to conserve their forces. But not as yet, I think. Names are still treasured things, and names which stand for something are not to be readily cast aside. But the spirit is greater and more important than all these. Let this "run from heart to heart and be glorified." E. M. H. A.

gether with new desires and a new power to obey his will.

4. We believe that those of the sons of men who, hearing God's call of divine love, do heartily put their trust in the Saviour whom his love provided, are assured by his word of his most fatherly forgiveness, of his free and perfect favor, of the presence of his spirit in their hearts, and of a blessed immortality.

5. We believe that all who are through faith the children of God constitute the Church of Christ, the spiritual body of which he is the head; that he has appointed them to proclaim his gospel to all mankind, to manifest in their character and conduct the fruit of his spirit; that he has

granted them freedom to create such offices and institutions as may in each generation serve unto those ends; and that for the comfort of our faith he has given to his Church the sacred ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

6. We believe that, according to Christ's law, men of the Christian faith exist for the service of man, not only in holding forth the word of life, but in the support of works and institutions of pity and charity, in the maintenance of human freedom, in the de-