

“Roots of Unitarian Universalism”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading “Roots (from Having Known Max Sokol)” by Charles Ballantyne

A forest is a home of many trees
Of varied lineage and varied age,
With each one seeming to stand alone,
Taking sunlight, sending forth its seed,
Drinking of the mists and falling rain,
While sharing with its neighbors of its strength
To help forge resilient sturdiness
Against the stormy buffets of the winds.
This speaks only of what we can see.
The true life of the forest lies beneath,
Where vital energies gleaned from above
Are turned to ever-growing strength of root
That reaches out with tendrils that entwine
With tendrils of the roots of other trees
And form a vast mosaic of a world,
Where old and young so interweave their lives
That agelessness becomes the way of things—
Each giving to the other of itself
Until the old, full melded with the young,
Can shed the husk that rose above the soil
And rest throughout the roots as part of life.

Sermon

In our Unitarian Universalist congregations today, we are a mixed up bunch, a conglomeration of people with diverse religious roots and traditions who have come together within the walls of this sanctuary. We are people of Jewish ancestry. We are ex-Catholics. We are former Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists. We are people with no previous religious background or neither Jewish nor Christian background, and for a small segment of us, our

religious roots are Unitarian or Universalist, or Unitarian Universalist. How we have arrived here as a pluralistic, religiously and culturally inclusive congregation begins many, many years ago, years even before our church founders came together to formally establish this congregation.

In our New UU classes, I usually begin presenting the history of Unitarian Universalism by showing everyone an image of a big tree with a sturdy trunk and many branches. At the base of the trunk is Judaism and Jesus of Nazareth, that Palestinian Jew, whose teachings spurred a new religion. As you go up the trunk, you find the Roman Catholic Church, and then diverging limbs start appearing at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Then things start getting very interesting, with branches shooting off into even more branches, and off one of those branches, you will find Unitarianism and Universalism not too far from Congregationalists and Baptists who share a limb to the trunk.

This year 2025 has been a significant one for the Unitarian branch of our religious tradition. It was May 25th in the year 1825, 200 years ago, that the American Unitarian association was chartered in Boston, Massachusetts. The founding of the AUA was not without controversy.

For decades prior to that, a conflict had been brewing between the Orthodox Congregationalists and the Liberals. The Liberals challenged core Calvinist doctrines of original sin and the nature of salvation. Their numbers grew, and soon they had taken over almost all of the faculty positions of Harvard College. They hadn't set out with their challenging of traditional doctrine to start any new religious bodies or to separate themselves from the Christian fold, but their theologically conservative counterparts took great offense at their new ideas. In a pamphlet by Jedidiah Morse entitled "American Unitarianism," they were branded Unitarians as an insult to repudiate their beliefs.

In 1868 at the third meeting of the National Conference of Unitarian and other Christian churches held at the Church of the Messiah in New York City, now Community Church of New York, the Rev. Henry W. Bellows preached to the assembled body. This church's minister of the time Rev. Charles Allen was in attendance at that meeting. Bellows preached the following in regard to the founding of the AUA.

"When, a half century ago, the cultivated intelligence of Massachusetts had inwardly broken with the popular Christian creed of New England, and a considerable portion of the best educated ministers could no longer teach Trinitarian or Calvinistic theology, there grew up a small body of churches, which, at first ignoring the authority of what was known as Orthodoxy, but struggling to maintain without rupture their old ecclesiastical fellowship, were at last reluctantly forced by the decision of courts and the opposition of the adherents of the old theology, to assume a separate existence, and to recognize themselves as a distinct and new Christian body. After struggling long against any theological description or name, and against all proselytizing or denominational ambitions or methods — with the strongest antipathy to anything in the shape of a creed

— they gradually and of necessity drifted into a loose organization, accepted a name, and began to recognize the duty and value of mild missionary measures. Their original aim had been only to secure freedom for their own consciences, and allowance for their congregational independence in matters of faith as well as discipline. It was the necessary consequence of their silent defection to arouse controversial discussion, to compel Orthodoxy to draw its own lines more distinctly and to define them out of its communion. Thus, their position was cleared and bounded for them rather by the exclusion of their Orthodox opponents, than by any limitations or definitions of their own. The continued action of the causes that produced them slowly increased their adherents, and justified their more positive and active methods, until in 1825 the American Unitarian Association was established, which may be regarded as the first distinct, practical evidence the liberal Congregationalists of New England gave of their consciousness of a denominational existence; at any rate their first open appeal to the public in that character.”¹

Our religious roots include this act of defiance and freedom. We come from people pushed out of their religious community who made a new way for their truth to be shared and lived. Their courage to live their truth is in our religious roots and DNA.

It is evident in the leadership of people like Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who preached to crowds of thousands in the melodeon in Boston in the mid 19th century. His radical abolitionist stances got him barred from preaching at even other Unitarian pulpits. Parker declared slavery “the great national sin” and called for non-compliance with the Fugitive Slave Law. Parker walked the talk befriending and helping William and Ellen Craft who had escaped from bondage in Georgia and arrived in Boston in 1848. William Craft sought refuge with a friend, another black activist, and Ellen went into hiding in the home of Theodore Parker. It is said that for the next two weeks, Parker wrote his sermons “with a sword in the open drawer under [his inkstand], and a pistol in the flap of the desk.” Abolitionists were able to keep the Crafts safe long enough for them to flee to Nova Scotia and then board a ship to England where they stayed for seventeen years before returning to Georgia with their children after the Civil War. There, they founded a school for freed slaves.

Our religious roots of courageously living our truth are evident in the conviction of Fannie Barrier Williams, an African American woman and member of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Chicago who delivered a speech to the World’s Parliament of Religions at the Columbia Exposition in 1893. In her speech entitled, “Religious Duty to the Negro,” she said: “What can religion further do to advance the condition of the colored people? More religion and less church....Less theology and more of human brotherhood, less declamation and more common sense and love for truth, must be the qualifications of the new ministry that shall yet

¹ Official report of the proceedings of the third meeting of the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches held in New York, N.Y., October 7-9, 1868, <https://archive.org/details/officialreportp10unkngoog>.

save the race from the evils of false teachings... The tendency of creeds and doctrine to obscure religion, to make complex that which is elemental and simple, to suggest partisanship and doubt in that which is universal and certain, has seriously hindered the moral progress of the colored people of this country.”² Williams also brought her Unitarian values into community reform efforts and her work building the Black women’s club movement in Chicago and across the country.

Our religious roots of courageously living our truth are evident in the ministry of John Haynes Holmes, who in 1917 delivered to the General Conference of Unitarian and other Christian churches at their annual meeting, a report on the differing and varying attitudes maintained by Unitarians towards the war, that is World War I. Holmes identified himself as part of a small minority of pacifists who were opposed not just to that current war, but to war in general. The report outraged the president of the conference, former US president, William Howard Taft. Taft made a motion of resolution stating that the Conference believed that the war “must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world,” and that the Conference approved of the measures of President Wilson and Congress to carry on the war. That resolution passed with a vote of 236 in favor and only nine opposed. Over the next few months after that meeting, the Board of the AUA voted to deny aid to congregations with ministers that did not support the war. Many of those Unitarian ministers who had taken pacifist positions to the war lost their pulpits. And in protest, John Haynes Holmes resigned his fellowship with the American Unitarian Association and persuaded his congregation to rename itself the Community Church of New York. Twenty years later the AUA recanted its denial of aid to congregations with ministers who did not support the war, and it would take many more decades after that for Holmes to return to the AUA.

Our religious roots of courageously living our truth are evident in the actions of Martha and Waitstill Sharp to save hundreds of lives during the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Waitstill Sharp was a Unitarian minister in Massachusetts and Martha was a social worker. They were asked to go to Europe to aid the Unitarian Church in Prague, which had become a stronghold of dissent and resistance. Once there, the Sharps quickly realized they had to do more than provide material aid. They were called to help people escape. Using their connections in London, Paris, and the United States, they secured visas and arranged housing and jobs for refugees. Martha personally escorted groups across the border, using her American passport as cover, while Rev. Sharp devised financial networks—some might call it ethical money laundering—to ensure refugees had access to funds once they fled. When the Gestapo closed in, the Sharps narrowly escaped and returned to the United States just as World War II broke out. But their work was not finished. Less than a year later, the president of the American Unitarian Association asked them to establish a mission in Europe under the newly formed Unitarian Service Committee, continuing their life-saving efforts.

² <https://speakingwhilefemale.co/religion-williams/>

It is hard for me to imagine answering the call the Sharps did in 1939 or taking the risks that Theodore Parker did to hide people sought out by the law enforcement agents of his day. Our religious ancestors were extraordinary in many ways. Yet, I know that the same impulse to recognize the world beyond themselves and to respond with humility and conviction to those needs resides in each of us. It is the impulse to respond to the humanity of another with gentleness and welcome and with fierce protection and love.

On one rescue mission, Waitstill Sharp was asked why he was doing what he was doing, and he replied: "I'm not a saint. I'm capable of any of the many sins of human nature. But I believe the will of God is to be interpreted by the liberty of the human spirit."

The liberty of the human spirit has nurtured the roots of our religious movement and has grown up through many generations and is still alive in each of us and in this gathered community today.

Preaching before the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly this past June, the Rev. Dr. Nicole Kirk said:

"Looking back at what happened 200 years ago when Jedediah Morse tried to brand the Liberals as heretics and isolate them, something remarkable happened. Instead of scattering in fear like leaves before the storm, they planted seeds that would grow into strong sequoias. They did not retreat. They advanced and they consolidated their resistance. They organized... They created periodicals to carry their new theology across the land. They established clubs where like minded individuals could meet and create caring communities. They sent ministers at large into the city streets to serve the forgotten and the forsaken... They did not wait for permission. They decided they could not wait any longer, and they took it upon themselves to create the American Unitarian Association. And when they accomplished this, they went from defense to offense, reaction to creation. This pattern is written in our spiritual DNA... The same fire that burned in their hearts burns in ours today, they are all around us... the same courage that moved them to action calls to us now. We are not here by accident. We are the living legacy of those who refused to be silent, refused to be diminished, refused to surrender their liberation and the liberation of others. The future is calling us now."³

This legacy is ours to live.

Our roots are strong.

May we continue growing from them giving one another strength and courage in the work that is now ours to do.

³ GA 2025 Sunday Service <https://www.youtube.com/live/kIzcKbW0GT4?si=Yq5k0SfeNX-LRq9i&t=3893>.