A Contemporary Evaluation of Universalism

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I first encountered Universalism in Ohio, in April of 1957, when, in my junior year in college, I was invited to serve a small, struggling Universalist Church in a nearby town. I had never heard of Universalism; I had heard of Unitarianism, but thought it had died out with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nonetheless, I accepted the invitation and in that way entered upon my lifelong engagement with liberal religion. I found myself immediately plunged into the conversations and debates surrounding the immanent prospect of merger with the Unitarians.

Within a few months I had received a license to preach from the Universalist Church of Ohio, had become editor of the Ohio Universalist, and soon after was elected president of the Ohio Universalist Ministers Association. In what I would discover was something of a pattern, my newness to the movement was never considered a handicap to my entering into the on-going conversation, ultimately becoming a vocal advocate for the consolidation of the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association. In 1959, I was called to the Universalist church in Lyons, Ohio, and as delegate from that church, attended the Syracuse meetings during which the terms of the Consolidation were hammered out. I campaigned for the merger during the plebiscite of the churches that followed. In 1960, I enrolled at Meadville Theological School--I believe the last student to enter the school with the explicit intention of becoming a Universalist minister. I continued to serve the Lyons church during my first three years in seminary. In May 1961, I found myself weeping on the floor of the General Assembly in Boston as the final action was taken which ended the separate existence of the Universalist Church of America--the only religious home I had known since I was a young child, and in some ways the last religious community in which I would ever feel truly at home. When I was ordained in 1964, Philip Randall Giles, the last General Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America preached my ordination sermon. Throughout my career in the Unitarian

Universalist ministry, I have thought of myself as a Universalist who became a Unitarian by merger.

However, the Universalism that claimed my loyalty all those years ago, and the Universalism to which I still feel a deep and abiding loyalty was not the romantic understanding of Universalism that seems to be much in vogue at the present moment. Contemporary advocates of increased spirituality in our churches and a renewed interest in our Christian roots often of late have defined that project in terms of a return to the Universalist portion of our heritage. Implicit in that claim is an assumption that Universalists were less concerned with reason, closer to their Christian roots, more comfortable with a religion defined by personal piety, more open to diverse points of view than their Unitarian cousins, and that the unfinished business of Unitarian Universalism is to reclaim that religious stance. In truth, however, that was not the Universalism that captured me in the penultimate years of the Universalist Church of America; nor do I believe it reflects the work that Universalists were engaged in during those final years. Consequently, this assumption misunderstands the agenda which was left unfinished at the time of Consolidation and the work which calls for completion by this generation.

To understand the legacy of Universalism and its continuing impact on the Unitarian Universalist Association, it is necessary to review briefly some of the history of the movement, to examine what Universalism had become and the issues with which it was struggling on the eve of Consolidation.

As Universalism prepared to enter the twentieth century it was facing chronic problems, the scope and seriousness of which would only become fully evident over time. Universalism had expanded out of its fortress base in New England and New York state with such momentum that it seemed to many observers that it must carry all before it. However, by 1860 the movement had ceased growing at a rate faster than the rate of growth of the population of the

country. To be sure, Universalism was still growing, it was still vital, but--to use the jargon of a different time and a different discipline--Universalism after 1860 was slowly loosing market share.

More than this, Universalism was loosing its monopoly on its central message. As the nineteenth century came to a close, mainstream Protestant churches in this country were dominated by a liberal theology which had abandoned traditional teachings about the innate depravity of human beings, and which had replaced them with faith in a God bound not by his own unbreachable moral rectitude but rather by his infinite loving nature. Traditional teachings that had warned that all but an elect few were destined to eternal punishment were quietly abandoned when not outright repudiated. The Universalists' gospel of the greater love and larger hope now seemed not very different from the message of mainline Protestantism. Universalism was confronted by a quiet, growing identity crisis: What happens to religious radicals when the world in general embraces, or at least stops repudiating their central message?

The question of the relation to Christianity was made sharper and more clear for some Universalists in the 1890's when, following the pattern of other Protestant bodies, including the Unitarians, they sent missionaries to Japan. Here, Universalists, who were accustomed to proclaiming a gospel centered upon correcting the teachings of the Christian church regarding eternal punishment, found themselves dealing with a population not tainted by that particular doctrine. The Japanese had no attachment to the doctrine of hellfire and damnation. While the Japan mission had minimal impact upon Japanese society as a whole, it did impact Universalism in the United States. It forced Universalists to confront the question of whether Universalism had any mission beyond that of correcting the false teachings of other Christians. And if so, what might be the distinct content of that mission, the peculiar message of Universalism? Was Universalism to be defined as a Christian denomination that advocated a purer understanding of

the central message of the founder, or did it have implications and meaning beyond the Christian community--implications which would allow it to speak with power in a non-Christian context?

At home, that question became more and more important as Universalists sought to understand their position within the religious community, their position on the religious spectrum, their relationship to larger denominations which had implicitly, if not explicitly embraced the Universalist gospel--larger denominations which had shifted focus from faith to works and were embarked upon the venture which would be known as the social gospel. Increasingly, the Universalists chose to define themselves as a branch of the great Protestant church, working side by side with others to establish the Kingdom of God on earth--ameliorating the suffering of others and calling institutions and governments to enact the churches' moral vision in a reformed, renewed and just economic and social order. When the Universalists adopted their social justice statements in the early years of the twentieth century, they consciously and deliberately modeled them on the similar statements of the Methodist Church and explicitly referenced those statements. The Universalists defined themselves as part of the great army of "Christian soldiers, marching as to war" in a campaign to bring into being the Kingdom of God on earth. The focus was no longer upon a unique Universalist gospel; it was upon discovering ways in which Universalism might engage the great social mission of the day as a full partner in the liberal Protestant enterprise.

The dream that defined the social gospel movement, and the liberal theology from which it had emerged, was mortally wounded by the vicious, brutal, inhumane trench warfare of the First World War. The war left the liberal assumptions of a rational humanity progressing onward and upward toward a more perfect state in tatters. The deathblow was delivered by the global catastrophe of the Great Depression and the rise of Fascism. Neo-orthodoxy replaced liberalism as the dominant theology of American Protestantism, and Universalists found themselves abandoned by those they had considered religious allies. When push came to shove,

Universalists discovered that, in the eyes of others, they had never been fully part of the larger Protestant movement. Twice in the 1940's their application for membership in the Federal Council of Churches was rejected because they were not Christian enough. Universalists found that according to general consensus they were something else, though by this time they were not sure what that something else was.

Social changes over which they had little control served to deepen the crisis of identity facing the Universalist Church. During the period leading up to the First World War, Universalism had not only stopped growing but, as it identified more and more completely with mainline Protestantism, had begun a gradual but inexorable decline. Faced with vast demographic changes in the country, which were a consequence of the Great War, the slow decline of Universalism avalanched into near catastrophe. Small town and rural church after small town and rural church closed as older members died and younger members moved to cities in search of broader opportunities. Urban churches, finding little to justify their continued existence as distinct entities, merged with Unitarian churches or Congregational churches depending upon the theological preferences of the remnant congregation, or they simply went out of business. (Church statistics are notoriously unreliable and difficulty to decipher. However, the records suggest that in 1896 there were 811 Universalist churches with approximately 65,000 legal members. By 1955 the Universalists were reporting some 41,000 members in some three hundred churches. Or as another measure, in 1905 there were 777 Universalist Church Schools with 54,529 members. In 1955 there were 229 church school with a combined enrollment of 13, 580.—SKSM Universalism Website)

In the years immediately preceding merger, the Universalists were busily responding to this challenge by redefining themselves, seeking to recover a distinctive voice, seeking to understand anew the radical tradition out of which they had emerged, and the specific gospel with which they had been entrusted. While many still hoped that they might find some way to

rejoin the larger Protestant tradition, many of the younger and more radical Universalists had begun to envision a more daring role for the once great and now sadly diminished movement.

As early as 1935 the Universalist Church of America meeting in Washington, DC, had adopted an affirmation of faith which reflected some of the changes occurring within Universalism. That statement said:

> The bond of fellowship in this church shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to cooperate in establishing the Kingdom for which he lived and died.
> To that end we avow our faith in:
> God as Eternal and All-conquering Love
> The spiritual Leadership of Jesus,
> The supreme worth of every human personality,
> The authority of truth, known or to be known,
> And in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively to establish the Kingdom of God.

This remarkable document is a landmark in the process which would define Universalism for the remainder of its existence as a separate movement. Unlike previous Universalist statements, this one does not mention the Bible; it redirects attention from a concern about eternal salvation and redefines the Kingdom of God as the consequence of human effort; it reaffirms a commitment to social justice, and it embraces Jesus as a spiritual model, leaving his relation to God unspecified. In many ways, it is a milestone on the journey from Universalist beginnings to a new self understanding. In this statement, adopted with little debate, the Universalist Church of America had not departed fully from its Christian identity, but it had opened the door to a much broader understanding of its mission and its nature.

Within a very few years, leaders of the national church were publicly questioning the Christian identification of Universalism. In 1943, Robert Cummins, General Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America, told the General Assembly that

> Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is Universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that *all* are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and color-less. A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.

Angus MacLean of St. Lawrence Theological School, reflecting on the rejection of the applications for membership in the Council of Churches, commented that twice having been turned down as not Christian enough, it was time for the Universalists to look elsewhere. Tracey Pullman, minister of the Universalist church in Detroit, called for a new religion that would be greater than Christianity. Another General Superintendent, Brainard Gibbons proclaimed that Universalism and Christianity were simply incompatible. The Massachusetts Convention of Universalists created Charles Street Meeting House and charged Kenneth Patton with establishing a liberal church in the bastion of conservative Unitarianism and creating new liturgical forms appropriate to a religion for one world. In these ways, the Universalists, smarting at their rejection by mainline Protestantism, stunned by their catastrophic decline, and driven to redefine their gospel in relation to a new and more complex world, entered into a prolonged and deliberate period of self-examination, redefinition and theological discernment. This process, which formed the background for some of the debates around the question of consolidation, was still unfinished at the time of the Consolidation of the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association in 1961. And it is this unfinished business that is the critical legacy of Universalism to the subsequent movement.

I've have spent this much time exploring the history of Universalism from the turn of the twentieth century until merger because I am increasingly convinced that many of the challenges facing us as we move into the twenty first century have striking parallels to those with which the Universalists were struggling during those years. Let me say at once that I do not believe that history ever repeats itself exactly. But I have enough experience with systems theory to believe that under stress institutions have a way of reverting to old responses even when those responses have proven ineffective or destructive in the past, that institutionalized behavior patterns have a way of reemerging within human institutions, both influencing how we understand the history in which we find ourselves and limiting the range of alternatives we are able to envision as we struggle with the challenges of any given moment. Therefore, it behooves us to understand the history out of which we have come, lest we miss the parallels and spend our energies on the same strategies that failed us in the past.

A quick word about what the Unitarians were doing while this turmoil was stirring within Universalism. Unitarianism was engaged, in the social gospel movement, in the humanist-theist debate and was also struggling with a significant decline in its own fortunes. However, with the report of the first Commission of Appraisal, the Unitarian movement chose to treat its crisis as an organizational rather than a theological problem avoiding careful theological discernment in favor of organizational restructuring. It recast the office of the president, it created the office of moderator, it supported a fellowship movement, reorganized the religious education department and intentionally or unintentionally pushed questions concerning the nature of the faith off into other arenas.

For a variety of reasons, the consolidated Unitarian Universalist Association has never completed or even taken up the work the Universalists had engaged prior to 1961. For a while, the necessity of perfecting the machinery of the merged denomination captured all available

energy and resources. (This, after all, was the arena in which the Unitarians who dominated the new movement seemed to feel most comfortable.) Then, swiftly on the heels of the merger, came the need to respond to upheavals in the larger social order, upheavals which produced a serious decline in the fortunes of many religious institutions--our own included--and created a fortress mentality, a culture of scarcity which produced a reluctance to engage questions which might appear divisive within the movement as a whole. Much of our effort, under the guise of serving democratic process, was aimed at achieving broad consensus and avoiding sharp distinctions. After 1968, we stripped the General Assembly of its power to control the resources of the Association and to direct program, moving the debates such power requires to the arena of the Board of Trustees and a handful of insiders. We altered the process by which general resolutions were handled so that relatively few items would be addressed and those only after they had been carefully sanded and rounded, molded and massaged. We turned the General Assembly into a giant and costly annual pep rally. We increased the power of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to exclude fringe and radical ministers and stripped the General Assembly of oversight of the committee. All these actions and others served to hamper careful consideration of the kinds of questions the Universalists had been forced to confront in the thirty years prior to merger--questions which we feared might limit our ability to attract and retain members and have a negative impact on the Association's ability to fund its continued existence.

I believe there are significant parallels to be drawn between the issues confronting Universalism in its last years, and the issues that now face us. To begin with, Let us take a look at the questions of size and growth. At first glance it would appear that our situation is vastly different from that which the Universalists confronted. They were in steep decline; we continue to boast of modest growth. If, however, we look at that modest growth without the rose-colored glasses provided by a persistent institutional boosterism, much of it begins to appear illusory. First of all, we need to ask what is the benchmark against which we are measuring. If we measure from the nadir years of the late sixties and the early seventies, we have clearly grown.

But if we measure from 1961, the year of the merger, that growth disappears. We are still clawing our way back to that number. Each year our net growth appears to amount to an average increase of between one person per congregation, or less. And we achieve that number by counting every babe in the nursery and every child in the church school. (The most recent directory actually reported a miniscule decline in the members of Church schools.) Whatever you make of these numbers, one fact remains indisputable. Every year since merger, Unitarian Universalism has lost market share. Our growth has never matched the rate of the growth of the nation's population as a whole. The latter history of Universalism would suggest that we need to take this demographic reality seriously sooner, rather than later.

In recent years, the fact that our people are, by and large, financially privileged has saved us from the extreme funding problems which have bedeviled some other religious groups, but our financial stability has been won at a price--we have become steadily more privatized in our understanding of the religious venture, steadily more ameliorative rather than radical in our responses to issues of justice. The fact remains that we are facing serious demographic challenges which, like the Universalists prior to the First World War, we often have failed to confront directly or with imagination, and which, when we become aware of them often result in the same kinds of responses which the Universalists offered--an attempt to emphasize the ways in which we are like other conventional religious groups rather than exploring the directive in our own history and seeking to build on that which has made us distinct and driven us beyond society's religious consensus. Thus, like our Universalist forebears, we dream of an interfaith coalition in which we are full partners in the struggle for a just society and in service to that coalition, are prepared to surrender our distinctive position within the larger religious venture and to soften the language of our social and theological critique. Since most people in the country appear to be Christian, or at least people of the book, or at the very least theist, ought we not be prepared to adopt their categories and a more conventional language in order to participate in the larger conversation? It may mean a not altogether exact translation of our religious values

and our specific tradition, but what does that matter? We are all engaged in the same larger social undertaking and if we can further that project by softening our distinctive edges, ought we not do precisely that?

Beyond the demographic challenge is a significant cultural challenge, not unlike that which the Universalists encountered when they sent their mission to Japan in the 1890's. Increasingly we find ourselves to be strangers in strange land--a land in which the cultural certainties in which we were nurtured have collapsed under the onslaught of an unforgiving deconstructionism, and the gospel we have inherited seems strangely dated if not irrelevant. In the postmodern world in which we find ourselves, the ground is littered with the debris of failed systems and once-eternal verities. We, who, in many ways, originated in a daring critique of conventional religious thinking, we who rested that critique upon a strong faith in reason and the human ability to reach toward objective standards of truth, find ourselves caught in a world in which all things have become contingent, in which all judgments are seen to be culturally conditioned and all values historically limited. Like our Universalist forbears, we are driven to ask what is our gospel, what truth do we serve, what is our tradition in a world in which there is no longer a guiding narrative to which we can relate either by embracing it or by critiquing it? What does it mean to be heretical in a world in which heresy is the standard of faith? Have we any story of our own, any good news, any gospel to proclaim in a culture which is suspicious of all proclamations and skeptical about any central and shared narrative?

Once more, our response to this cultural challenge is similar to the response of the Universalists of an earlier day. We have retreated from strong statements of faith and have sought refuge in more conventional thinking. Let me give you an example of what I have in mind. The first of the Seven Principles that Unitarian Universalists embrace with increasing, unthinking fervor as we struggle with questions of self definition affirms "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." This is a statement which appears far more radical than, in truth, it

is. It is a statement which is unlikely to be challenged from anywhere within the religious spectrum. It is an affirmation which, with precious little twisting, might be used to support a pacifist position, a just war position and a terrorist position, an evangelical's theology and an atheist's anti-theology, and might give comfort to supporters and opponents of a woman's right to choose abortion, supporters and opponents of the death penalty. And curiously, it is this ability of the statement to bolster a wide variety of positions, even antithetical positions, that many of us prize most highly about it.

Contrast that first principle with the statement from which it emerged. In their beginning effort at theological discernment, the Universalists, in 193--facingthe emergence of Fascism and the totalitarian state--affirmed "the ***supreme*** worth of every human personality." That was a statement which restated the Universalist tradition in a radical way for a new time It was an affirmation which had some sharp edges to it. The statement was provocative. The human individual--not god, not the state, not society at large, not some utopian dream of justice--but the human individual was of **supreme** worth. Every other value, every action had to be judged in terms of the its impact upon the human personality. Human beings might not be the measure of all things, but they were of supreme worth. There were sharp edges all over that statement of faith. And Universalists knew that here they were approaching a central, a core value which distinguished them in the religious community. Although the Washington Avowal of Faith was adopted unanimously, the debates about that clause echoed through Universalist churches for the next fifty years as preachers and congregations sought to understand what that affirmation meant in light of issues ranging from the death penalty, to racism, to poverty, to war. And people squirmed and wiggled and some were driven to the conclusion that if this statement truly defined what Universalism stood for, they could not be Universalists, given the state to which their own faith in human worth had fallen. This affirmation was a plumb-line set in the midst of a peculiar people, and that plumb-line depended from the central story which had always made Universalists radical. I find it difficult to imagine the Unitarian Universalist so challenged by the

current Seven Principles that she or he would be forced by conscience to withdraw. And maybe that is the reason we so prize the current statement.

Similarly, the Universalists, late in their history, affirmed in the same Washington statement their faith in "the authority of truth, known or to be known." (Small wonder that the Federal Council of Churches refused their application for membership.) Contrast that statement with the parallel from the statement of Principles and Purposes, which affirms a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Universalists, having surrendered faith in the Bible as the source of all truth and having thereby embraced a position outside the Christian mainstream, were, nonetheless able to affirm that truth was more than the focus of our search; that it had an authority of its own, that there was a truth beyond subjectivity and that it answered to its own imperatives and sometimes fell upon us with power when we would rather it had not. This is a far cry from the postmodern conviction that all truth is historically conditioned and a matter of perspective.

The point I would make here is that like the Universalists in Japan, we find ourselves challenged to reexamine who we are, and what is the nature of our gospel in a world in which the old categories are no longer adequate to human experience. The alternatives before us in this postmodern desert are stark and pointed and inescapable. Shall we retreat to a kind of religion-in-general in which we build communities focused on mutual support and encouragement, communities in which we share each others' joys and concerns, take in each others' emotional laundry and help each other feel a little better as we struggle to make it through one more day--congregations which, are largely indistinguishable from denomination to denomination, from place to place, from congregation to congregation, institutions which like contemporary shopping malls are largely homogenized in their understanding of religious mission and purpose? Or, have we the courage to construct out of the shards of broken hopes and disappointed dreams, if not a global meta-narrative, at least a guiding metaphor by means of which we can say who we

are and what matters to us, and what vision lures us to struggle for a world made whole and all its people one?

The legacy we have inherited from late Universalism suggests that unless we are willing to embrace and affirm that which makes us a different part of the religious venture, unless we say clearly who we are and what we are about, unless we are willing to give voice to a clear, honest critique of the conventional religious, social, political, economic thinking of the day, unless we are prepared to stand firmly at the left end of the religious spectrum, unless we are willing to proclaim a vision against which we and all religious faiths can be measured and judged, we have little to offer in any interfaith dialogue. Absent this clear self-differentiation, we have little to offer those whom we would have join us. Absent this clear self-understanding we have little justification for taking up time and space in a busy and crowded world.

I do not think that we are in danger of disappearing from the religious scene in one clap of thunder. Religious movements rarely die a quick and merciful death; most often they die a long, slow, agonizing death of increasing irrelevance and impotence. If I some of these conclusions seem strident, perhaps it is because as I travel around from congregation to congregation these days, I am haunted by a sense of fevered irrelevance and narcissistic self-absorption creeping over us. Perhaps in thinking of the future of our movement, this is what troubles me most--not that we will cease to exist, but that we will become one more of those religious traditions difficult to discern from the kind of twelve-step, self-help, mutual support programs which seem to be the postmodern version of the social gospel. I would rather we die out than live on--all our sharp edges smoothed over, our quirky distinctions blurred, devoid of any commanding vision--into lingering, irrelevant narcissism.

Faced with some of the same challenges which confront us today, The Universalists I knew in the years immediately before Consolidation set about the business of refining their

religious vision, restating their peculiar gospel, breaking out of the confines of conventional thinking, renegotiating their relationship to the surrounding culture, and breaking through self-imposed limits in search of broader possibilities. The questions they were asking and their example in the face of a very real and persistent crisis constitute their abiding legacy and their on-going challenge to our generation. To meet that challenge and embrace that legacy we will have to surrender our romantic vision of what the nature of Universalism was as it entered the process of consolidation, and see the reality of the difficulties with which it struggled, and the truly radical nature of the responses it formulated in the face of those difficulties.