

**“No Soul Left Behind”**, by Rev. Jim McKinley, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville, NC. September 24, 2006

## **Opening Words**

From “To Speak Faith”, by Rev. Rudolph Nemser, March 31, 1996

[There are] important understandings and assumptions underlying Unitarian Universalism:

- the universe is a single unfragmented whole  
to which everything belongs; nothing is outside;
- all that is  
– every person that is-  
possesses inherent dignity  
and is entitled to be treated with respect;
- the universe (and therefore all its creatures)  
has a fundamental drive toward goodness and health  
which can be thwarted and even misdirected,  
but which nevertheless persists;
- creation is continuous – still happening-  
we are taking part as co-creators  
therefore and similarly, truth is an emerging process  
rather than a final definition;
- reason, by which I mean individual conscience and judgment,  
is our ultimate and not to be overthrown  
source of authority  
overriding history and hierarchy;  
we must be true to ourselves  
to create our faith in life;
- and finally we believe –  
or such is my observation of our community –  
that a fundamental law of being  
attests to the paramount importance of connection...  
and our commitment is to overcome separation  
by building bridges,  
nothing and no one stands outside.

## **No Soul Left Behind**

It is not all the time but often enough that it seems a part of the landscape and a characterizing if not defining feature of the landscape of Western North Carolina, that I notice a church sign that asks the question or some recognizable variation of the question “Heaven or Hell? Where will you spend eternity?”

And now is the season of the year when I begin to notice posters on the community board in the grocery store announcing the pre Halloween attraction at some local church of “Hell House.” It is that church’s, that community’s, religiously correct version of the Haunted House from Halloween carnivals. The difference is that Hell House is supposed to represent something real or give sufficient form to a vision of hell that it will help one focus on living a good, loving, moral life. Live right (where right is guided by strict interpretations here of the Bible) and you go to heaven; live wrong, you will not be saved and you will go to hell. The apocalyptic version of this kind of thinking is if you are not saved, you will get left behind when the “rapture” comes. Fear is an institutionally sanctioned and promoted guiding force.

Step back from the poster and the bulletin board and notice Me standing in front of that poster. I am a person who doesn’t think like that at all. I am a liberal, Unitarian Universalist, with no belief in hell. I have a vision of a universe with a fundamental drive towards goodness and health. I know you don’t have to be scared of where you are going after you die. I know you do need to be concerned about how you live and how you love. And there I stand, in front of that bulletin board in a communal gathering place in the middle of our town marveling once again at the different views of the world living in one community, often within the same family, and maybe even in conflict to some degree in the same person. This is not a new situation. In one form or another it is as old as America.

As I stand in the grocery store, somewhere in my reaction to the poster is the sense that I am a newcomer here in both religion and location. There is the sense that I may not fully belong. But I stop and I know that I am not alone in the way I think. Nor am I as isolated as I may feel while reading the editorial page of the Times News. I am part of an understanding of being that has arisen independently as an integral part of all the world’s great religious traditions. We are one and compassion and connection are at the heart of the belonging we seek and the world we are bringing into being. It is how things really are.

And in America, we have a history here. A strong proud history that is embedded in our country’s character. As early as the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century preachers were preaching that all were saved, not just a select few. A loving god would not condemn people to hell. Rudy Nemser puts it this way. “In the 1780’s, hell, which had been a theological requirement of religion, became optional and even inconsequential for Universalists.” It was more than an idea. It was understanding that fit people’s experience of life.

And the inclusive understanding that all are saved caught on, it became part of the democratic inspiration that established our country. Benjamin Rush, a physician, a medical professor, a revolutionary war doctor, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and a “passionate supporter of revolutionary politics.” (Robinson p.54) wrote in a letter to a friend in 1791:

“A Belief in God’s universal love to all his creatures, and that he will finally restore all those of them that are miserable to happiness, is a Polar truth. It leads to truths upon all subjects, more especially upon the subject of government. It establishes the equality of mankind[sic].”

The Universalist understanding was known then as the larger gospel and it spread with the expansion of the country. Itinerant preachers traveled by horseback. They

debated the orthodox and established churches in small towns. Historian David Bumbaugh says “they sought to apply their faith to the problems of the world in which they lived. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Universalism was said to be the 6<sup>th</sup> largest denomination in America.” Although universalism’s denominational numbers declined in the twentieth century, Universalist views and understandings did not. They were assimilated in progressive and liberal Christian traditions such that Hell became more a mention than a central teaching of Christian religious life. Within the American liberal Christian culture Universalism lost much of its separate identity while its influence spread.

Tradition has it that John Murray was the founder of Universalism in America and on Sept. 30, 1770 he preached his first sermon on these shores. So next Saturday will be the 236<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that moment. “Go out into the highways and byways of America” and give the people “something of your new vision. Give them not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

In my reading this morning from Rev. Nemser I mentioned the serendipity of picking up the book, a book I had never opened and having it open to the very page about Unitarian Universalist belief (ok not really so great a coincidence given that it was in a UU minister’s library. I can also hear someone saying, “there is no telling what you might find in there,” etc.) but the story of John Murray’s arrival in America is an interesting mix of serendipity in itself.

Murray was a Methodist minister in England who had begun preaching universal salvation, embracing the ideas of English Universalist James Rely. But personal tragedy and debt problems changed his life so that he, like many others in that period, looked to America for a new start. His luck however, seemed almost karmic-ly ill fated and his voyage did not go as planned. A storm forced his ship ashore in New Jersey before he had reached his destination. The name of his ship? the Hand in Hand. The name of the place where they went ashore? Good-Luck Point. Then as another coincidence, there on the coast of New Jersey, in the sparse population of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, he just happened on a supporter, Thomas Potter and a sympathetic audience. His career as a Universalist leader had begun.

Murray was characterized as a tireless traveler and as such took his message north toward Boston which was considered the religious center of the time for that area. After he had preached in Gloucester Mass. for awhile, the established Congregational church got sufficiently upset by what he was doing that they tried to expel church members who attended Murray’s preaching. They even tried to expel Murray from town, but he again had the support of one of the prominent members of the community, a man named Winthrop Sargent, who built a meeting house on his own property in 1780. As historian Robinson assesses, “Universalism had established a toe hold in New England.”

Universalism also had native roots as you would guess would happen if there was a general need in the culture. It grew naturally out of the difficulties of protestant Calvinism, particularly among Baptists. Even then we were really more than neighbors. People were worried about whether they were saved, saved from hell or not and the notion was that salvation was limited, only a select few would make it to heaven. Along with this was also an emphasis on conversion experiences or visionary religious moments. One Baptist preacher Caleb Rich was assured by several such visions that

salvation was for everyone, but when he preached his version of no soul left behind to his Baptist congregation, he “Was denied fellowship in the church.” (Robinson p.50) In 1774 he formed a Universalist society in Warwick, Mass.

The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great change throughout European settled America. It brought reactions that seem at least analogous to our own times. In the uncertainty of our times we feel the retrenchment of conservative religious views world wide. We aren't sure about what will come out of these times, but we are unsettled and feel anxious. Looking back on the beginnings of our country through the lens of Unitarian or Universalist history we tend to focus on them as the generative times or the beginnings of our liberal religious traditions. But it was also a time of reactive backlash then as well. Historian David Bumbaugh summarizes and simplifies it this way: “The Great Awakening of the mid eighteenth century forced the recognition that over the years significant changes had occurred in the thought of the churches descended from the Pilgrims and Puritans, and two parties now existed in the colonies – those who welcomed liberalizing changes and those who sought to return the churches to the pure doctrines of a previous day. This division festered for several decades with the more liberal churches gradually ignoring or abandoning such classic doctrines as human depravity, original sin, faith in a triune God, etc.”

Rev. Nemser provides a useful summary overview of some of these liberalizing changes that happened within our two traditions that brings us forward, back to the present. Remember, he said that in the 1780's because of the development of Universalism, hell had "become optional and even inconsequential for Universalists." He goes on to say that "In the 1830's Unitarian spokespeople were challenging the belief that all good people had to be Christian. By the 1880's it became commonly agreed that belief in God could not be made a condition for church membership. A steady shift was taking place toward the conviction that what you believe is a matter of individual conscience and not necessarily the essence of the religious life. Certainly not alone." "For Unitarian Universalists," he says, "the religious life is [now more] focused on faith [than belief]. More focused on What historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith described as ...a quiet confidence and joy which enable[s] one to feel at home in the universe; a meaning that is profound and ultimate."

The Universalist part of our tradition, our faith, has held up the knowing, commitment and challenge of the inclusive vision that we are one human family, one origin, one nature, one destiny. It is a vision to which people have "lived loyally with life and character shaped by that commitment (Fowler). It is the tradition that as we read in the opening words lives from the connectedness and oneness of all that is. In our lives we cannot only step back from ourselves much as I did from me and the poster in the grocery store, we can step off the earth, looking back on it as this "big, blue marble that is our home." We can see the oneness of our existence, the oneness of our earth community that floats before us. We do not have to take it as an article of belief. We can now move out farther and see our place in the universe, this "single, unfragmented whole to which everything belongs; nothing is outside." Our faith is consistent with our cosmology. The grand oneness of the universe. This grand understanding of being is brought home into our daily lives in the conclusion of the opening words that 'a fundamental law of being attests to the paramount importance of connection... and our commitment is to overcome separation by building bridges, nothing and no one stands outside.'" No one is left behind.

Rosh Hashanah began at sundown on Friday. It marks the Jewish New Year and the beginning of the High Holy Days which end with Yom Kippur. This time is both a celebration and a practice of the paramount importance of connection. People celebrate the New Year with a renewed connection with life, figuratively signing the Book of Life at the end of the Holy Days for one more rotation of the earth around the sun. But in order to sign the book, in order to reconnect with all that is, they spend the week before reconnecting with those from whom they are separated. They take on the challenge of forgiveness, asking and giving it-from those who have wronged them and to those they have wronged. (I'll talk more about it next week) If you want to use familiar religious language, sin, the creation of hell right here, is separation. It is whatever separates us from belonging and rightness with life. Separating ourselves from each other, the spirit of life and love, or the love of God.

A single, unfragmented wholeness. To which we belong. Our separation can be and is to be overcome. As Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church puts it; "On those rare yet blessed moments that we make full peace with ourselves, with others, and with the cosmos, the ground of our being, we experience salvation." This salvation is universal, it is for everyone. Nothing and no one stands outside.

Standing here in front of this poster, reminds me that I almost forgot to get orange juice and then stop by J&D's for fresh blueberries for my cereal. Gifts from the universe which sustains me. They are the real reason I came to the store in the first place. Time to go. See you later.