

“Universalist Unitarianism”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Online Service via Zoom
27 February 2022

Reading:

Uncertain Bearer of the Weight of it All

- *Joan Javier-Duval*¹

Holy Mystery

Silent Presence

Uncertain Bearer of the Weight of it All

In these quiet moments we listen

We listen for the maybe still breathing, perhaps still whispering
faintest sign of the Universal Good

We listen between the cacophony of distractions
pulling us toward untruth and falsehood

We listen amidst the shrill cries of desperation
of we've-had-enough

of when will they stop killing my people

of how much more will the waters rise

of when will it be safe to return to my home

of how much longer can I hang on

We listen and we wait

through the tumult of these days

We seek assurance

We seek the fulfillment of a promise

a promise made to ourselves

a promise made to those we have been stretched to call neighbour

a promise written and enshrined and yet unfulfilled.

Help us, Abiding Mystery,

to hang on

¹ Joan Javier-Duval, "Uncertain Bearer of the Weight of the World" in *Conversations With the Sacred: A Collection of Prayers* (Boston: Skinner House, 2020), 70-71.

to hold on when all is in question
when all is in question
when all is in doubt
Help us to stay firm to our commitments
and our own promises
Lead us back into connection
back into the bonds of humanity
that help us to know each other as beloved
May we continue listening
May we keep watch
May we beckon Love and Justice and Mercy
with our own whispers
with our shouts
with our cries
until all know themselves part of the Circle of Love.

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Sermon: "Universalist Unitarianism"

(Following #18 "What Wondrous Love" sung by Gabrielle Byrnes)

What "wondrous love" is this?

What "Universal Good" might be "still breathing, still whispering..." Visible to us only in the faintest sign...as the poet describes it?

The beloved Black American theologian Howard Thurman said:

"Whatever may be the tensions and the stresses of a particular day,
there is always lurking close at hand
the trailing beauty of forgotten joy or unremembered peace."

What "forgotten joy" is this?

What "unremembered peace"?

Indeed, what wondrous love?

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Well, back in the late nineteenth century, the Universalists of North America, who were Christian, might have defined that wondrous love as the "saving love of God."

They believed in a loving deity who extended compassion and forgiveness to everyone without reservation.

They taught that God was too good, too loving, to damn anyone.

That is, they preached a doctrine of "universal salvation," saying that everyone was destined for "heaven" which of course was something that many people believed in at that time.

The old joke is that the Universalists believed "God was too good to damn anyone" while Unitarians believed that "human beings were too good to be damned."

Of course, that's another sermon entirely...and well worth reflecting on.

But today we ask, are there Universalist messages that can still offer us some "saving grace" today?

Even in a time when so many of us are experiencing a much darker shade of February blues because of the tragedies now unfolding in our world.

Could there be something in our Universalist heritage-- or something in new voices of a broader universalism today-- that could bring us "hope instead of hell"...

Even if the kind of hell we might see and imagine

is different than the one our religious ancestors did?

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Already today we've heard several expressions of what might be called a broadly "universalist" religious understanding...

From Chai Kalevar's "One World" poem to Amanda Gorman's story of a song that sings to all the planet.

I'll bring some other voices into the conversation in a minute, but first let's touch very briefly on the history of Universalism that led to our modern Unitarian Universalist faith.

It's interesting, also, to note that in Halifax, our UU faith is represented by the Halifax Universalist Unitarian Congregation.

There are several Canadian congregations that do include "Universalist" as part of their name...even though we are drawn together by the Canadian Unitarian Council...

and it serves all of us, no matter which combination of "U and U" is contained in our names.

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In a sermon called "Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism,"² Rev. Scott Alexander explains that Universalist theology arose at a time when Puritan preachers were upsetting people with terrifying stories of fire and brimstone...

Telling them that "hell" was their destiny because of their sinfulness.

I know that some people here, or perhaps your relatives,

² Scott Alexander, "Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism," on WorshipWeb, Unitarian Universalist Association, www.uua.org

may have been deeply frightened by stories of an angry and vengeful God...and are still healing from those harmful messages.

Scott Alexander writes:

"The early Universalists, in direct spiritual contradiction to Puritanism's gloomy gospel, simply proclaimed that the essential qualities of God were not wrath, disgust and judgment... but goodness, mercy and love.

The heart-felt good news of Universalism was that by God's grace and power all of God's children (every man, woman, and child—regardless of station or personality, weakness or wickedness) would ultimately be saved, welcomed back by an embracing and understanding creator. [...]

Universalist preachers proclaimed every human being to be a child of God—quite naturally possessing *their divine parent's inclination* toward goodness and right, and therefore unavoidably drawn toward heaven and health by God's all-powerful and encompassing love."

Scott Alexander goes on to say:

"Universalism's life blood was the spiritual insistence that the evil and pain we see in our world need not be a permanent and pervasive part of the human condition."

He points out that this message was so welcome, so hopeful, that at one time Universalism was the 6th largest denomination in the United States.

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It's easy to see how this hopeful doctrine would have been truly uplifting for Christian believers at that time!

But what happens to that Universalist vision when the belief in an all-powerful God--whether saving or unsaving--falls away?

What happens when many people operate in what's been called "functional atheism," even if some of us also sense a deep connection to a Something More?

Does Universalism lose its meaning, when human beings tend not to rely on a deeper or larger source of strength, but rather see ourselves as the primary authors of our own destiny?

Well, we might observe that without a God to damn us... we human beings are completely capable of damning ourselves!

It makes sense that we would project these qualities onto a concept of a personified, judging God.

When that vision falls away, the characteristics remain... just fully within us.

We judge, condemn, reject, dismiss, "cancel," exclude and marginalize...in both small and large ways every day.

As the late UU minister Forrest Church wrote, in his book "The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology":

"Each of us projects our limited experience on a cosmic screen in letters as big as our minds can fashion.

For those whose [perspective] is constricted [...] this can have horrific consequences.

But others respond to the munificence of creation with broad imagination and sympathy.

Answering to the highest and best within and beyond themselves, they draw lessons and fathom meaning so redemptive

that surely it touches the divine.”³

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Perhaps this describes our inner "universalist heart"--

The "divine within" that we seek to awaken in worship
and hope to stay connected to in our daily lives.

We know that it is so easy to fall into disconnection.
We are so prone, each of us, to engage in "us and them" thinking.

Of course I'm talking about racism, ableism, sexism...

But there are so many other ways to "other" each other...
and all of us do this, whether we want to,
or are fully aware of it, or not.

Our universalism calls us to become more aware of the ways that we
divide...and to resist that impulse when we catch it in ourselves...

While also loving ourselves *despite* the fact that we fall into this
harmful way of thinking.

Despite the fact that we fall, so often, into opposition and division...into
thoughts and actions that others might call "sin."

The Universalist message might "save" us from that.

It might beckon us toward a deeper sense, a deeper knowing,
of a universal peace that creates and sustains the circle of love.

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³ Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 21.

So let's share some more examples of broadly "universalist" inspiration.

Here are some familiar words from the poet Rumi:

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there."

This wisdom text comes, of course, not from the Christian Universalist tradition but rather from the Sufi, the contemplative branch of Islam, from which also sprang the modern Dances of Universal Peace, which some of you may have participated in.

We might think also of the image of the circle itself, in its spiritual dimension, brought forward in Celtic art, in labyrinths, and in Pagan-inspired songs such as:

"We are a circle, within a circle, with no beginning and never ending..."

These are very simple expressions of universalist spirituality.

And largely because of our Universalist heritage, our modern UU faith has expanded to welcome so many messages of saving hope, from so many religious traditions and secular sources as well.

In his book "The Cathedral of the World" Forrest Church wrote of "truth shining out through every window."

He wrote that "Most organized religions contain a universalist dimension, often placed somewhere near its heart.

To love your neighbour as yourself (a refrain, if differently worded, of many world religions) is a universalist first principle."⁴

⁴ Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World*, 33.

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At the beginning of this sermon I quoted Howard Thurman, the Black American minister and civil rights leader who lived from 1899 to 1981.

Thurman's ideas continue to be powerfully influential, and indeed they resonate deeply for many Unitarian Universalists.

He taught a message of radical non-violence, drawing on his personal relationship with Mahatma Gandhi and deeply influencing Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others.

In 1944, that is at the height of World War II, he co-founded the interfaith and interracial Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco.

Thurman once said, “Truth is found in every religion, and it is not true because it is found in those religions, but it is found in those religions because it is true.”

As one biographer, Mozella Mitchell put it:

“[Thurman] was able to envision not a universal religion but a universal religious and human perspective that lends crucial meaning to the whole of human life.”

It's worth pointing out, too, that when Howard Thurman spoke about "God" (as you'll hear in the next few quotes) he wasn't referring to the "god" of any particular religious faith, but rather, the "God beyond God" that defies all naming, and that underlies everything in existence.

He once wrote: “God bottoms existence; therefore, the deeper down I go, the more into [that] I find myself.

None of the categories of classifications—of faith, belief, etc.—have any standing in the presence of this transcendent experience, because I think that whether I'm Black, White, Presbyterian, Baptist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, that in the presence of God, all these categories by which we relate to each other fade away and have no significance whatsoever.

For in [God's] presence I am a part of [God] being revealed to [God].”

Thurman is described as someone who was continually looking for common ground...seeking to "break through the barriers that separate the human family--barriers that create suspicion, hatred, violence and death." ⁵

He sought to help people find "the God within" or the essential divine quality that reveals the underlying unity of all life and overcomes divisions.



Now it is admittedly a challenge to bring a universalist message of healing and saving love to "post-Christian" or even "post-religious" people today.

But many Unitarian Universalists are doing an admirable job of trying!

Both of our contemplative readings today were drawn from a book that came out in 2020 from Skinner House press, our Unitarian Universalist publisher.

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1. *Conversations with Howard Thurman*, Part 2. Videocassette hosted by Landrum Bolling (San Francisco: The Howard Thurman, quoted by Mozella G. Mitchell in article "*Seeing the Universalist Perspective in Howard Thurman.*"
 2. See also, Mozella G. Mitchell, "Religion and the Discovery of Self: Howard Thurman and the Tributaries of the Deep River," in *The Religion Factor: An Introduction to How Religion Matters*, pp. 84-95, edited by William S. Green and Jacob Neusner (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996)

It's called "Conversations With the Sacred"⁶ and it's full of creative ways of describing the "universal transcendent" in ways that might be accessible to more people today.

I found it remarkable that when I began to write this service earlier this week, my hand was drawn to this book on my shelf...and to the prayer I read earlier.

Although it had to have been written several years ago, it could not be more appropriate to the moment in which we find ourselves, with lines such as:

"We listen and we wait through the tumult of these days."

"Help us, Abiding Mystery, to hang on
to hold on when all is in question
when all is in doubt."

"Lead us back into connection...
back into the bonds of humanity that
help us to know each other as beloved."

"May we beckon Love and Justice and Mercy
with our own whispers
with our shouts
with our cries

until all know themselves part of the Circle of Love."⁷



My deep hope is that when--not if--but when

⁶ Manish Mishra-Marzetti and Jennifer Kelleher, eds. *Conversations with the Sacred: A Collection of Prayers* (Boston: Skinner House, 2020).

⁷ Excerpted from "Uncertain Bearer of the Weight of the World," Joan Javier-Duval, in *Conversations With the Sacred*, 70-71.

each of us falls into disconnection from the divine
and from the sacred bonds of relationship that
embody divinity on Earth...

When each of us is pulled down by despair,
fear and angry judgement...

That we may be lifted up by a Love that is stronger than fear...

By a Love that beckons us perhaps most insistently
in the times when hatred is visible.

May we then seek the Cosmic Good that shines at the heart
of everything...even when we cannot name it...

Even when it is so hidden, so shrouded from us,
that we may doubt its very existence.

And in those other times...
in those luminous times when we do sense the unifying love,
the universal peace, may we breathe in its power and beauty
with gratitude and with hope.

May we celebrate and affirm it,
may we name it in any way we can
and may we share it with others through our love and our service.

In our own fleeting, fumbling yet ever-sacred ways...
may we carry the Universalist light of our chalice flame
to illuminate and heal the world.

Amen.