

2025-11-23 Universalism – a Soul Cheering Doctrine

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I am guessing we all know the way thinking goes. Some of us, the ones who live right find our way to eternal salvation. Those of us who don't adhere to a set of rules, find ourselves facing eternity in a state of torture. I imagine you've seen, as I have, images from the painting, Garden of Earthly Delights completed sometime around 1500 by Hieronymus Bosch. The images of hell, of people being tortured, of distorted creatures and desolation, may have been enough to encourage adherence to the teachings of the church. It was a dark and violent interpretation, one that echoed through the centuries. Today contemporary evangelical Christian theologians may differ on the particulars, but the idea of punishment in hell is still taught. In fact, over history, and across cultures and religions, the notion of hell has persisted. In some cases, it wasn't as violent or tortuous as more dominant depictions. When an idea exists in multiple cultures, across time it leaves me wondering what human need it is meeting. I can't be sure, but it seems to me that a combination of impulses is behind the idea of a heaven or hell afterlife. Of course, there is the understandable reluctance to believe that our loved ones are gone. And I think we all, at one time or another, long for a world that makes sense; where people who do terrible things wouldn't prosper, and good people wouldn't have bad things happen to them. There is a logic here, maybe not one that you agree with, but one can understand where these ideas might have appealed.

I remember as an earnest little Presbyterian kid, wondering about heaven and hell. I was taught that admission to heaven was dependent on my 'being good,' and on believing in Jesus. I worked on both. But there were some mixed messages too, and I began to ask questions. It's a bit ironic that the Sunday school songs and lessons designed to help me become a good Christian sowed the seeds of some of my wonderings. I remember singing a song, "Jesus Loves Little Children,"

*Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black, and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world*

As I said, I was earnest, and found myself puzzling... If part of my weekly collection helped missionaries, so that they could teach people in other places about Jesus and God, that meant that some of the little children of the world didn't know about Jesus. But

that's not fair I protested. Jesus loves them! And if the reason they can't go to heaven is that they didn't know about Jesus, that is wrong... simply wrong.

There was another song too, another one that had a lovely sentiment that seems to have stood in stark contrast to some of the other lessons I was being taught. The last verse, of *God Sees the Little Sparrow Fall* is, ...

*God made the little birds and flow'rs,
and all things large and small;
he'll not forget his little ones,
I know he loves them all.*

These messages stood in contrast to the other message of judgment I was receiving... I was confused. As it turns out I wasn't alone.

Calvinism came to North America sometime in the early 1600s. It took the thinking about salvation and damnation to a new level. It taught that we arrived in this world with our fates sealed. The logic behind the teaching was that God was all-powerful and that while humans had free will to make choices about their behaviour, it would have no impact on the predestination that God has determined. Our free will is not more powerful than the great mystery of God. And that is where Universalism came in. In truth, the question about Universalism was as old as the earliest Christian teachings. There were councils, and votes and more councils, and creeds, and revised creeds, all with the goal of establishing official Christian teachings. And in time, the idea that all people could be saved, admitted to heaven after death, was largely abandoned. For a while. In North America, Hosea Ballou wrote a book in 1805 arguing that no sin is bigger than God's love. Later in the same century, Adin Ballou, a nephew once or twice removed, began to consider the impact of this teaching on humans. The teachings of equity and justice that Jesus taught, should be applied to social issues and policy. Universalism became extremely popular in North America, particularly in rural areas.

It is likely that Universalism first came to what we've come to call Canada in the first decade of the Nineteenth-Century, around the same time that Hosea Ballou was making his case for Universalism. It was not until at least 20 years later that there were enough Universalists in the region for loosely organized societies to form. Many of those connected with Universalism had easy connections, through family or geography to the US, where that time about 3% of the population were connected to Universalism. The earliest Congregations in Nova Scotia can be dated to 1837. It was also in 1937, the first known Universalist Congregation in Upper Canada (now known as Ontario) was founded, where the members of the congregation were, because of their American backgrounds, considered theological and political threats. Everywhere they organized,

the Universalists found themselves on the receiving end of the disdain of their neighbours. The 1937 Annual Report of the Brockville Bible Society notes concern about 'the prevalence of the anti-scriptural heresy of Universalism. In 1838 the Methodist paper in Nova Scotia reported, We are sorry to perceive by an advertisement in a recent Halifax paper that a place is opened... whose system saps the very foundation of Christian Holiness... in town people murmured about the Devil's work. In 1844 A Universalist group was founded here, in Toronto. It was atypical in its urban setting, and by the following year when this congregation was founded, the Universalists had either moved or had joined the Unitarians.

But in spite of the suspicion of others the movement grew. By the time the provincial censuses were conducted in 1851, Universalism was able to claim more than 7,000 adherents. Yet, because of the nature of settlement and the patterns of influence in Canada, almost, if not, all of these were located within 30 miles (or enjoyed easy access through a seacoast) of the American border and with few exceptions, most of the Universalists had roots, within one generation, in the United States. There is no evidence of any formal grouping of Universalists in Canada west of Ontario, though we do know that Universalist ideas were sometimes part of the story of individual Unitarian Congregations. In 1890, Magnus J. Skaptason, a liberal Icelandic minister, just outside of Winnipeg, preached a controversial sermon that was Universalist in theology. He was expelled from the Lutheran Synod and five other groups made application to join with the Unitarians.

The success was short-lived, by 1891, the Canadian census indicates that the number of Universalists had decreased to only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the 7,000 that had been identified 40 years earlier. There are many reasons suggested for this decline and it seems reasonable to conclude the decline was a result of several factors. As other Protestant traditions began to soften their teachings, Universalism failed, over time, to offer a distinct message of salvation. More and more Canadians moved, as the Nineteenth-Century progressed, to cities and Universalism, which had been a faith of rural areas, didn't move with them. As the Century progressed and Americans became less inclined to move to a British Colony the influx of American Universalist immigrants waned. In short, Canada's changing political, social, and religious climate eroded the foothold that Universalism had enjoyed.

By the time of the 1961 merger of the two strands of our current tradition, Unitarian and Universalist, only three Universalist congregations existed in Canada, and their combined membership was less than 70. In the 110 years since the 1851 census, membership had seen a 99% decline in membership numbers. Other than the Halifax congregation, which was in the largest Atlantic Canadian city, the other two congregations, North Hatley, Quebec and Olinda, Ontario, were in small rural

communities. In a period of 150 years, Universalism in Canada had begun, peaked and numerically at least, had all but died.

He sees the little sparrow fall, it meets his tender view... that idea is found in other traditions too, in one Torah portion, when the Hebrews were beginning to rejoice at the drowning of their enemies in the Red Sea we read that the people were rebuked, God saying why would you sing when my handiwork in drowning in the sea. Mahayana Buddhism promotes a universal compassion towards all sentient beings and sees all beings as equally deserving of compassion. We are, the teaching goes, all loved, we are all, in spite of our humanity, worthy of love. It was a coincidence that this reflection came on the same day as a baby dedication, but I couldn't be happier that it did.

The hey-day of Universalism is over, but the ideas persist and for an increasing number of Canadian Unitarians, they have become important in informing their theological understanding. There has been a shift from otherworldly concerns to more immediate ones. In 1915 Clarence Skinner defined the 'primal question' as how to turn this world into a 'Kingdom of Heaven'. I think, for many of us, that is where our current relationship with Universalism exists. Theist, Agnostic and Atheist alike can agree that we have a moral obligation to worry about justice and equity here and now.

As we reflect today and consider the contemporary call to action, there are threads of earlier understandings. Rev. Gordon McKeeman wrote about 'Basic Universalism' and suggested a powerful message of inclusiveness is part of our salvation – our collective salvation – as we grapple with issues, the environment, justice, global citizenship, and the economy. McKeeman believed we need to keep sharing the vision of Universalism and that we need to keep doing the hard work of living it. Universalism has often been romanticized as a simple faith, one that comforted more than it demanded. No doubt the idea of God as a loving father has been a comfort to many. Perhaps God does see the falling sparrow with tenderness, but the song doesn't suggest God acts in any way. If the sparrows are to be saved, if we are to be saved, we need to look to ourselves and each other to do it. As I see it evolving in Canadian Unitarian Universalism, I see a form of Universalism that demands much, and which does not fail to recognize the high stakes with which we are 'playing'. You may, or may not be a theist. The idea of God may hold meaning for you. But, St. Teresa of Avila who lived in the 16th century, wrote that: our hands, our feet and our eyes are the ones here on earth. Ethical Universalism, living with a God's eye view of the world is hard work. The concept of one world community, however appealing in the abstract, is far less so when it means equal treatment of one's immediate neighbors of every race, religion, class, political view, temperament and nationality. In short, it is simply hard to love one's neighbour, always and unconditionally, near and far. In fact, we, being the messy and imperfect beings we are, will fail at it. We may not always seem loveable, but we are worthy of it. This is the aspiration that modern understandings of Universalism challenge us with.

Holding ourselves responsible for one another, caring about the welfare of those beyond our close circles is making a theological statement. I know I do it imperfectly. I make mistakes. I will always make mistakes. But good communities, like this one, can help hold me accountable, can remind me of our ideas and our ideals. Our heritage, of people who believed they were in partnership with a God who loved the world, is one I'm happy to claim. There is work to do, there will always be work to do. I'm glad to do it, with others who hold the ideals of loving, compassion, inclusion, and forgiveness. I am glad to be doing it with you.