

“Theological Options for Unitarian Universalists”
A Sermon Series by the Rev. Sue Spencer
UU Church of Columbia, Missouri

I
Liberal Christianity
September 25, 2011

In 1976, the year I turned 30, I decided it was high time I went to church again. Don't ask me what prompted this decision after many years away. Maybe it was the Spirit – or maybe it had to do with that landmark birthday close at hand. All I knew was that something was missing from my life. There was a void, and my intuition told me a church might fill it.

But which church? From the late sixties, I remembered grand old Arlington Street Church, one of the historic Unitarian Universalist churches in the middle of Boston. I'd first encountered it when I was new to Boston, fresh out of college, and involved in the anti-war movement.

Arlington Street Church had been making headlines in the late sixties. It was the site of a massive draft card turn-in, and later gave sanctuary to a young draft resister. All this had attracted me, and I'd become a member.

But, as with all my flirtations with religion in my twenties, this one didn't last very long. I'd signed the book, and then, after a year, drifted away. When I walked through the massive double doors again, one bright morning in October of '76, I'd been gone for eight years.

The Rev. Victor Carpenter had just become ASC's new minister. He'd served in Philadelphia before coming to Boston, and in Cape Town, South Africa, before that. My first Sunday back to church, he preached from the high pulpit – a powerful and moving sermon, much of it based on personal experience, about South Africa. I was enthralled.

But suddenly, toward the end of the sermon, Victor shifted gears. He mentioned the “How my mind has changed” series which appears sometimes in the journal *Christian Century*. He then said, “I want you to know that my mind has changed, too.”

Victor went on, and here I'm paraphrasing rather than quoting: “For years,” he said, “I subscribed to a kind of bland religious liberalism. But I've come to the conclusion that this doesn't speak to the condition of suffering people. Because of the suffering I saw in South Africa, I've decided that...I'm a Christian! A liberal Christian, to be sure – but still, a Christian.”

As I listened in the pew, my heart sank. “Oh, dear!” I thought. “What has become of the Arlington Street Church?” I looked nervously around – was I in the right place? Was

this the humanist ASC I had once known? Had the service not been nearing an end, I might have bolted for the nearest exit.

For, after all, I was definitely *not* a Christian! I had decided *that* during my junior year of high school! Since then, I hadn't given Christianity much thought at all – but I still knew I wasn't "one of those."

And so, on a Sunday morning in 1976, I was in a quandary. It had taken some gumption to get myself up that morning and head downtown, by myself, to church. But now I was wondering, "Do I really belong here?" On the other hand, I didn't know where else I might go - and so I stayed.

Since then, my religious odyssey has taken me many places I couldn't have imagined. Who would have dreamed, for example, that as militantly unchurched a soul as I, would end up at divinity school, preparing for the ministry? And who would have imagined, amidst the spiritual freedom that a UU congregation offers, that I would slowly be led back to God?

But that's another story. For now, let me point out one more irony buried in the narrative – one that has nothing to do with me. I'm talking about the irony of an Arlington Street Church minister announcing his Christian faith – and the irony of a person in its pews ever questioning it.

Arlington Street Church, you see, was the direct descendant of Federal Street Church, the church of William Ellery Channing. Channing, one of the founders of our denomination, was the most articulate 19th century proponent of "Unitarian Christianity." The wooden pulpit from which he preached still had a place of honor in Arlington Street's Sanctuary.

Had Channing attended services at ASC that morning, he might have been as surprised as I was – but for a different reason. "So!" he might have been thinking. "My successor in this pulpit has decided he's a Christian?! But of course! That's what Unitarianism is all about. It's been Christian since the mid-1500s!"

Channing would have been right. Unitarianism has been around for almost 500 years, unless you count 4th century Arianism. It started as a liberal Christian movement – some would say a Christian heresy – in Europe. It was part of the "left wing of the Reformation." And it continued as a Christian movement, on both sides of the Atlantic, for over three centuries.

Universalism is younger by some reckonings – some two centuries old, though one could argue that it, like Unitarianism, goes back to the early Christian church. Universalism as we know it began as a Christian movement, first in England and then North America, proclaiming the "everlasting love of God."

To be sure, Unitarian Universalism has evolved since Channing's time. Less than a generation after Channing preached "Unitarian Christianity," Ralph Waldo Emerson

stood up in the chapel at Harvard Divinity School, and issued his own manifesto, announcing his breakaway from Christian faith.

A few generations after that, Humanists declared that you could have a perfectly good religion without any concept of *God*, let alone Jesus – and in effect pronounced Emerson’s brand of mysticism a thing of the past. Over the years, UU Christians and theists have felt put upon by the Humanist movement. But now, in our post-modern age, many Humanists find themselves beleaguered, as theistic religion has made a comeback.

Within Unitarian Universalism, things have a way of coming full circle. Our religion is constantly evolving; it never stands still for very long. That’s not surprising, when you consider that we have no creed, no set doctrine. Without a creed constraining us, we engage in a kaleidoscopic process, giving birth to new perspectives, in a way akin to Hegel’s dialectical model of “thesis/antithesis/synthesis.”

What’s especially interesting about this is what happens to the “older” versions of UUism when new ones come along. The older perspectives don’t go away – they’re never completely eclipsed. Individual UUs continue to identify with them – and sometimes whole congregations do, too. Thus, in the 1950s and 60s, Humanism was probably the dominant mode within UU congregations. But Christian UUs, and Christian UU churches, continued to be there, though they felt beleaguered at times.

I don’t tend to think of Unitarian Universalism as a theological melting pot. We are really more like a mosaic, where the separate pieces retain their identity. What that means, in practical terms, is that UUs have a variety of theological options to choose from, and synthesize for themselves. Some of these options are fairly new – but some are deeply rooted in our tradition.

For the next three Sundays, my plan is to explore the three options most deeply rooted in UU history. Today, we look at Christianity. Next week, we’ll look at mystical universalism, or Transcendentalism. The week after that, we’ll examine Religious Humanism. All of these represent significant periods of our history. And all of them represent living options for UUs today.

Christianity has the deepest roots in our movement. Many people today believe that there’s no longer a place for Christians within Unitarian Universalism. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Liberal Christianity is alive and well within many of our congregations. In fact, some members of this congregation identify as Christian. And even if most UUs will never call themselves “Christian,” they may be surprised to discover how much richness there is within Christian tradition – in the stories, symbols, and liturgical calendar. This is a wealth that even non-Christians can draw upon in their spiritual explorations.

How do Christians come into our congregations? Some, of course, are born into them. They have a happy childhood in a Christian UU church, and never find any reason to

leave. Others leave a more orthodox church, attracted by the spiritual freedom within Unitarian Universalism.

Some come in because of a theological “mixed marriage.” The UU congregation becomes the place of common ground, between their Christian faith and the different faith of their partner. And then there are those who come in as *non*-Christians, and within the freedom of the UU congregation are surprised to discover a vibrant Christian faith for themselves.

Unfortunately, Christians in UU congregations often encounter obstacles. Chief among these, I’m afraid, is the intolerance of other UUs. When UU Christians come to our congregations, they often have to listen to anti-Christian diatribes from people whose knowledge of Christianity stopped in high school. They have to smile politely when UUs tell them, “I’m not a Christian because I don’t believe in X,” while knowing full well that they don’t believe in X, either - whether X is the literal truth of the virgin birth, or the anti-gay stance of fundamentalist churches.

In fact, UU Christians often have to deal with a certain kind of “UU fundamentalism” – UUs who strangely insist that the *only* valid form of Christianity is the conservative variety. These people sometimes tell UU Christians, “There’s no such thing as liberal Christianity. You *can’t* be both UU and Christian.” Sometimes, UU Christians must even endure other UUs telling them that they don’t belong in their own congregations – people who ask, “Why don’t you go across the street to the United Methodists?”

And some Christians finally *do* leave our congregations – they give up on us and decide the struggle isn’t worth it. But others stay – correctly insisting that they have as much right to be here as the liberal Jew sitting next to them at worship, or the pagan, the Buddhist, or the Humanist. And not only do they have just as much claim to belong here – they have an equal right to speak their faith, and be heard with respect.

What kinds of Christians do we find in UU congregations? They are as diverse as any other group of UUs:

There are classic Unitarian or Universalist Christians – those who follow the humane religion of Channing or Ballou.

There are Christian Humanists, who appreciate the bedrock assumptions of the biblical view of life, starting with the affirmation of creation found in Genesis: “God saw that it was good.” They also value the ways in which Christian art, music, and philosophy have shaped Western culture through the centuries.

There are Liberation Christians, who see Jesus as part of a long line of Hebrew prophets – people who spoke out against injustice, putting their lives on the line. Jesus’ animating vision was “the Commonwealth of God” – the reign of love and justice, the inherent worth and dignity of all. Liberation Christians work to make this vision a reality.

Another group of UU Christians might be called “Zen Christians.” Rather than focus on Jesus as a prophet, they see him in the context of other religious teachers, and revere him as a sage. They might study his parables as *Zen koans*, rather than as moralistic fables. They may also adopt some kind of contemplative practice, which bears a striking resemblance to other meditative practices. And in fact, Christian contemplation has a long history in the West. It was in eclipse for centuries, but is now making a comeback – part of that “emerging Christianity” that Marcus Borg talks about.

Some UUs are what Carl Scovel calls “narrative Christians.” Often, these are Christians with a mythological, or Jungian, bent. They take the bible “seriously but not literally” – recognizing the power of its stories and myths. The stories are valued, not in a literal way, but because they have something important to say about human life – perhaps even about *our* lives. The stories speak to us of finding hope in the midst of despair, and life in the midst of destruction and death.

By listing these specifics, I don’t mean to exhaust the possibilities. The variations may well be endless. Let me leave you with just one suggestion:

Next time a Unitarian Universalist tells you they’re a Christian, resist the temptation to say, “But how can you possibly be a Christian if you’re a UU?”

You might say instead, “Oh, that’s interesting – tell me more! How did you become a Christian? And what keeps you here, within our congregation?”

They will no doubt be pleasantly surprised by this line of questioning – just as you may be surprised by their answer.

And the exchange will contribute to the Creative Interchange: the ongoing conversation that makes being a UU worthwhile.

II Transcendentalism October 2, 2011

One bright New Year’s Day, I was cross-country skiing with a companion in British Columbia’s beautiful Manning Park. It had been a long day of skiing, with many arduous uphill climbs, and many intimidating downhill runs. My friend was far more skilled than I, and I had struggled to keep up. By late afternoon, I was tired and ready to call it a day.

We decided to go for one last downhill run before calling it quits, and herringboned our way to the top of a hill. By then, the sun had set; it was twilight. The sky was deepening into that jewel-like blue that you get at early evening. A full moon had risen to the east. It was quiet; most of the skiers had gone home. As I began to glide down the hill, the only sound was the crunch of my skis against the light crust of the snow.

It's hard to describe what happened next. I can't remember exactly when it began or when it ended. I don't know how long it lasted – maybe only a few seconds. All I know is that on the way down that slope, I, Sue Spencer, disappeared.

I lost all sense of myself. That is, I lost all sense of myself as a separate person. It was as though my ego had vanished, and with it, all my fatigue.

For one moment, I was totally at one with the landscape – one with the diamond-glinted snow, one with the hill, and one with the twilit sky, and rising moon. Even when I snapped out of it, a moment later, there remained a profound sense of peace.

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A few years later, I took a course in becoming a spiritual director, and had the chance to study experiences like this. What I learned is that they are more widespread than I thought – maybe even universal. Such a sense of “no-self” has been felt by people of all faiths, in all ages, in all walks of life.

It happens in the woods and mountains, but it also happens in the heart of the city. It comes to people who've been meditating for it for a long time. But it also comes in a flash, out of the blue, to those who've never expected it.

The experience has been called by many names: Awakening. Mystical experience. Cosmic consciousness. The experience of no-self. And, in the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, “direct experience of ...transcending mystery and wonder.”

The worldview to which it gives rise is also called by many names. It's been called “mysticism” and “holy wisdom.” Aldous Huxley called it “the perennial philosophy” in a book by that name. Philosophers have called it “panentheism” – not “pantheism” – the sense that God is in all things, and all things are in God.

Whatever it's called, those grasped by the experience know that their lives have been changed. They believe that somehow, they've been given a glimpse into the heart of reality.

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Unitarian Universalists don't always find it easy to talk about all this. Often, they dismiss such experiences, assuming they're weird or atypical. They may not even have a vocabulary to describe the experiences, and assume they're foreign to UU tradition. But actually, they lie at the heart of our UU heritage.

Some years after my experience in Manning Park, I read Ralph Waldo Emerson's first published work, the 1836 essay *Nature*. I learned that something very similar had

happened at least once to Emerson, this Yankee sage from Massachusetts. Here's how Emerson described his experience, walking in the Concord woods:

Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball, I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.

Before I had my own experience, I might have dismissed Emerson's description – found it overwrought, or counted it as romantic excess, especially the part about the “transparent eyeball.” But once it happened to me, I knew exactly what he meant.

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This sermon is the second in a series about the evolution of Unitarian Universalist religious thought. Such evolution has been Hegelian in nature; UUism has been pushed along by a series of controversies. A “thesis” gives rise to its “antithesis,” which in turn gives rise to a new “synthesis” – from which the process begins all over again.

Emerson was the spark plug behind one of these disputes. This was the Transcendentalist controversy, which pushed Unitarianism toward a post-Christian era. At one time or another, all of us may have studied Transcendentalism as a *literary* movement. What we may not have learned in our studies is that it was also a *religious* movement – perhaps primarily a religious movement.

Emerson was the son of a liberal Boston minister; later, he himself became a Unitarian minister. This was not a lengthy career; Emerson spent only three years in the pulpit before deciding that pastoring a church didn't suit him. With the death of Ellen, his beloved young wife, he sailed for Europe and never again held a ministerial post. Nevertheless, he returned to the United States, and stayed connected to the Unitarian movement throughout his life.

There were probably several reasons for Emerson's leaving the ministry. Grief was one, temperament another, and theological restlessness a third. Emerson's developing theology was putting him on a collision course with his fellow Unitarians, most of whom were Christian. This was happening on at least two counts.

One, it threatened their faith. In many ways Unitarians were different from more orthodox Christians. But in some ways, their views were the same. For example, though they interpreted the Bible differently, both Unitarians and orthodox Christians believed it was the inspired word of God, and put it at the center of their faith. When the Transcendentalists came along and said that people could know God directly, through their own experience, it was heresy!

Emerson's mysticism represented a second threat to the liberal Christians. It threatened their sense of reason, or rationalism. The Unitarian Christians were always trying to

reconcile Christian faith with reason – and they had perfect faith they could do it. The liberal Christians thought that scripture, interpreted by reason, would lead a person to God. When the Transcendentalists came along and said that God could be grasped through the *intuition*, it was subversive!

What really stirred things up was Emerson's Divinity School Address, one of the landmark sermons of Unitarianism. This address, delivered in 1838, marked the fault line between two kinds of Unitarianism. The traditionalists – who themselves had been radicals a generation earlier – were absolutely appalled by Emerson's speech.

What caused the break? It centered on some of religion's "Big Questions." First, there was the question, "Who is God?" Liberal Christians accepted the idea of God the Father. Their God was far more benevolent than the God of the orthodox, but "his" basic nature was the same. God was a personal, parental, deity. "He" was a "supernatural" being, who existed above and beyond reality.

In contrast, the Transcendentalists believed in a more impersonal and immanent God. Such a God was not called "Father," but rather "Oversoul" or "Universal Mind." In some ways, this God was more abstract and distant than God the Father. But in other ways, such a deity was closer and more intimate. In the Transcendentalist view, the Divine was embedded in nature, and available to anyone who went to the woods and paid attention. God was accessible to anyone willing to attune his or her soul to the mysteries.

A second big question, one I've already alluded to, is one of epistemology: "What is the source of religious knowledge?" or "How do I know about God?" Liberal Christians continued to believe that the Bible was the primary source of religious knowledge. In the words of William Ellery Channing, the Bible contained "the records of God's successive revelations to mankind."

Part of the early Unitarian Christians' theology was a peculiar doctrine called "supernatural rationalism." It was their attempt to hang onto Biblical truth, while at the same time preserving reason. "Supernatural rationalists" made Jesus' miracles the centerpiece of their faith. Such miracles, they thought, proved that Jesus was the son of God.

Emerson, on the other hand, would have none of this! For him and his Transcendentalist colleagues, it was ludicrous to speak of "miracles" as if they had happened only in the past. For Emerson, all of life was a miracle, and focusing on the biblical miracles got in the way. He put it this way in his Divinity School Address: "[T]he word Miracle, as pronounced by the Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."

Basically, Emerson was impatient with any religious knowledge that came second-hand – whether from scripture, history, or someone's personal testimony. In the Divinity School Address, he lamented that people "have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead." Declaring that "God speaketh,

not spake,” he exhorted his young colleagues to “dare to love God without mediator or veil.” His charge to them: “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men [and women] first-hand with Deity!”

Emerson and the Transcendentalists also parted company with the liberal Christians on a third big question, “Who was Jesus?” Some Transcendentalists continued to identify as Christian, though Emerson did not. What they all had in common was a belief in Jesus as a Great Soul, rather than a savior in the classic sense.

In this connection, Emerson said, “Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul...Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of [humanity]. He saw that God incarnates [God]self in [humanity], and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of the world.”

From this passage, it’s clear that the question about Jesus is also a question about human nature. What is a human being? What is our relationship to the universe? The Unitarian Christians, in their estimate of human nature, were far more liberal than their Calvinist neighbors. But they continued to believe that human beings needed a mediator to bring them to God.

In contrast, Emerson and his colleagues saw God and humanity as part and parcel of one another. They saw, in the soul, no wall of separation between human and divine. It’s not either/or, but a continuum, a matter of degree. The human task is to understand our divine nature – to grasp it, to experience it, to live it.

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Who is Emerson for us today? I am of two minds on this. One is that the Transcendentalists can still be fresh and new for us. Emerson and his younger friend, Henry David Thoreau, are still among the saints of the environmental movement. Speaking personally, I find that I can pick up a book of Emerson’s essays, or of Frederic Henry Hedge’s sermons, open it to any page, and find something that speaks to me.

When I do this, I understand that what we call “spirituality” is hardly new to Unitarian Universalism. Some UUs still speak as though spirituality were a foreign concept, imported from elsewhere. But in Transcendentalist thought, it’s all there. In fact, it’s one of Unitarian Universalism’s distinctive contributions to the world’s store of holy wisdom.

David Robinson, a contemporary historian, puts it this way:

Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relative whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, standing on the richest theological legacy of any American denomination. Possessed of a deep and sustaining history of spiritual achievement and philosophical speculation, religious liberals have been ironically dispossessed of that heritage.

Fortunately, we have the opportunity to dig into those riches, and once again make them our own.

But there's a caution here. Emerson himself would be aghast if we were to take his thought wholesale, substituting it for our own. He would insist that we apply our own experience, and our own insight, in our search for meaning.

The evolution continues – and we are a vital part of it.

III Humanism October 9, 2011

For those of you who may be joining us for the first time, this is the third of a series of sermons on “theological options” for Unitarian Universalists. If you're new to this congregation, the concept of theological options may surprise you. Some houses of worship, after all, don't offer options. Rather, they offer a creed, a statement of common beliefs to which anyone who wishes to belong is expected to subscribe. In contrast, Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religious movement. We don't assume that everyone in the congregation believes the same thing.

In fact, we start from the assumption that we *don't* share a common theology. Some of us are Christian. Some have mystical leanings. Some are Humanists. Some find inspiration from pagan sources. Some feel strong ties to their Jewish roots – or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Islamic ones.

People look at us sometimes and say, “So, how can you people call yourselves a religion? You don't all believe the same thing!” But for UUs, common belief isn't the point of religion. We're here for other reasons: A common quest for truth and meaning. A caring community of seekers. Courage and strength in anxious times. We believe that what *really* binds people together isn't belief, but love! We've discovered, in the words of an early Unitarian martyr, Francis David, that “we don't have to think alike to love alike.”

But it's important to point out that this theological diversity didn't just spring from nowhere. Our religious movement doesn't exist just because someone thought it was a good idea to create a religion of diversity. We didn't begin by hanging out a shingle and saying, “All are welcome, regardless of belief.” Maybe that would have been a good idea, but that's not how it happened.

It happened this way through history. Unitarianism began about 450 years ago, as a heretical Christian movement. Similarly with Universalism, about 200 years ago. From that starting point, our diversity evolved, and it did so according to a certain pattern.

It seems to work like this: Every so often within our ranks, a new religious viewpoint emerges, which is a break from the established theology. This viewpoint has been growing for some time, underground – but when it comes to the light, it’s given a name. It generates great excitement – and also grave anxiety. It becomes the occasion for hand wringing, or even denunciation, by the “old guard.” These “old guard” were once radicals themselves – but now they insist that the new viewpoint will cause everything that is precious to crash down and shatter around them.

Eventually, though, everything calms down, and the new movement becomes part of Unitarian Universalism. It takes its place alongside older viewpoints. Eventually, it becomes part of the consensus. It may even become the new old guard! And then some new controversy arises, and the sequence unfolds again.

The strange and beautiful thing about of the process is that very few people leave. There’s no schism. The new doesn’t replace the old. It simply takes its place with other points of view; it becomes part of the UU mosaic, another “theological option.”

In this sermon series, the first “option” we considered was liberal Christianity, which emerged from orthodox Christianity in 16th century Europe. This was the dominant force within Unitarianism, and later Universalism, for some 300 years. Then, in 19th century America, Transcendentalism emerged – in part a revolt against the Boston Unitarian version of Christianity.

Last week, we looked at Transcendentalism as the second UU option. Today, we examine Religious Humanism, the viewpoint that became dominant within Unitarian Universalism in the 20th century. Historian David Robinson has called it the “most vital and distinctive [Unitarian] movement since Transcendentalism.”

Religious Humanism emerged as a distinctive movement around the time of World War One. It had been brewing for some time before that, foreshadowed by some of the controversies of the late 19th century. It can best be understood as a thoughtful and articulate attempt to bring religion into the 20th century – in other words, to bring it into alignment with the discoveries of science.

But how do we define Humanism? Since the word is used in different ways, it can be confusing. It has certain general meanings (humanism with a small ‘h’) and other, more specific ones (Humanism with a capital ‘H’). In its small-h sense, humanism is any philosophy that holds human beings to be important. It is any outlook, whether God-centered or not, emphasizing human values and the enhancement of human life.

In its capital-H sense, Humanism is a name bestowed on various worldviews emergent in specific periods of history. In classical Greece, for example, Socrates was considered a Humanist because he concerned himself with social, political, and moral questions, and thus “called philosophy down from heaven to earth.” Humanism also emerged during the Renaissance. The medieval focus on God shifted to the Renaissance focus on humanity.

This shift was seen and felt in many areas of life: art, philosophy, architecture, science, and religion.

But until the 19th century, it never occurred to anyone that “Humanism” might be synonymous with atheism or agnosticism. The publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, in 1859, began to change that. After Darwin, a lot of what happened in religion was in response – or reaction - to his ideas. Fundamentalism, which is very much a product of the modern era, arose to challenge the theory of natural selection and evolution - while Humanism arose to support and defend it. It was in this particular crucible that Humanism became identified with atheism and agnosticism.

John Dietrich was one of the pioneers. Expelled as a heretic from the Dutch Reformed church, Dietrich became a Unitarian minister. From this platform, he began to preach Humanism as a non-theistic religion. He maintained, “Humanism simply ignores the idea of God, failing to see any evidence of intelligent purpose in the universe.”

It’s important to note that Dietrich’s Humanism was not simply a negative philosophy. There was a positive focus on human development and fulfillment. Dietrich declared “the enrichment of human life” to be “the object of our allegiance and consecration.” His colleague Curtis Reese declared the human personality to be the thing in the universe of “supreme worth.”

Many of the ideas of Humanism were brought together in 1933 in the “Humanist Manifesto.” Although this was drafted by Roy Wood Sellars, a university professor, half its signers were either Unitarian or Universalist ministers. The Manifesto contains many of the themes that inform Humanism even today.

Not surprisingly, it puts forth a resolutely non-theistic cosmology. Contradicting Genesis, the Manifesto states with confidence: “Religious Humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.” It then goes on to affirm evolution: “[Humanity] is part of nature, and...it has emerged as the result of a continuous process.”

The Manifesto specifies the relationship between religion and science, saying that religion must “formulate its hopes and plans in light of the scientific spirit and method.” It even suggests that the scientific method should be applied to personal life. Human beings must learn to face life crises rationally and stoically, without reliance on religious crutches. “Sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking” are to be discouraged.

Other significant themes include the following:

- ❖ Abolition of the distinction between sacred and secular.
- ❖ The necessity of living in the here and now, with no concern for what happens after we die.
- ❖ An emphasis on democracy, cooperation, and a “socialized...economic order.”
- ❖ Finally, a ringing endorsement of the human ability to build a just and humane social order. As the Manifesto proclaims, “[Humanity] is at last becoming aware that [we] alone [are] responsible for the world of [our] dreams, that [we have] within

[ourselves] the power for its achievement. [We] must set intelligence and will to the task.”

Where is Humanism within Unitarian Universalism today? Basically, it has followed the evolutionary path described earlier. When it arose, it was hailed by some and scorned as heresy by others. Overcoming opposition, Humanism eventually became the dominant position within Unitarian Universalism.

By the 1960s or 70s, most people took it for granted that if you were a UU, you were also a capital-H Humanist. But then, in the late 70s and early 80s, this assumed consensus began to break down. Why? Some credit our culture’s renewed interest in spirituality. Others attribute it to the influx of women into the ministry – though plenty of my female colleagues are Humanist, and many of my male colleagues are not.

Perhaps the best explanation is simply that times have changed. Physics has depicted a universe far more mysterious than the one contemplated by the Manifesto – a universe that even re-admits the possibility of God. Einstein said that everything he had done in his career as a physicist, he had done in order “to know the mind of God” – admittedly a different God from that of traditional religion. Freud, no less than Einstein, challenged the Manifesto’s rationalistic view of human nature.

In the 1940s, world events conspired to support these challenges. After World War II, it’s hard not to conclude that the Manifesto seriously underestimates the human capacity for evil. Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams, who was in sympathy with the Humanist viewpoint on some counts, points to the cruel paradox of human progress: “The very means and evidences of progress turn out again and again to be also the instruments of perversion and destruction.” Jewish theologian Eugene Borowitz states it more bluntly: “After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, how anyone can say that ‘man is the measure of all things’ is beyond me!”

But it’s important to be fair. Just as liberal Christianity has evolved since the days of Ballou and Channing, so has Humanism evolved since 1933. It’s entirely possible to develop a Humanism that more adequately takes account of tragedy and evil. It’s also possible to develop a Humanism that takes ecology seriously - that sees humanity not as the pinnacle of evolution, but as part of an ongoing process.

I myself am not a Humanist-with-a-Capital-H. My life has preached me a different sermon. Nevertheless, I know that I hold many beliefs in common with Humanists, as do most UUs I know.

For example, I believe that the main focus of religion should be what’s happening here and now, not in an afterlife. I believe in evolution, and in the scientific method, and do not place these in opposition to religious truth. I also appreciate the Humanist challenge, because I think it helps keep theism honest – more searching and more grounded. That’s part of the creative tension on which Unitarian Universalism thrives.

Theologically, where is our movement headed now? We seem to be in a period of creative ferment. In addition to Christians, Emersonians, and Humanists, Unitarian Universalism now offers many other theological options. There are feminists, pagans, Buddhists, Jews, process theologians, to give just a few examples. I'll have more to say about this next week.

Perhaps in time, some new synthesis will emerge. But maybe it won't – and that's okay. For I believe that, just through our way of being in the world, we UUs make a very important statement. It could even be considered what former UUA president Bill Sinkford called a "saving message" – the affirmation that that people with different beliefs can nevertheless come together in friendship, and worship side by side.

In today's world, I don't believe that the most important divide is the one between those who believe in God and those who don't. By far the most crucial struggle is between exclusive religions that divide people from one another, and inclusive ones that affirm human love, growth, and freedom.

Such distinctions cut across religious denominations and theological categories. As UUs, whatever our theological perspective, we like to think of ourselves as standing on the inclusive side of the divide. But it's important to remember that many other people of faith are standing with us.

So much in our world smothers human dignity, and chokes the human spirit. So many current events remind us of this. There is so much good work to accomplish. The Humanist Manifesto encourages us to set "intelligence and will" to the task. Intelligence and will, yes – and also spirit, and imagination, and love.

For we need not think alike, to love alike.

IV Creative Unitarian Universalism October 16, 2011

"What do Unitarian Universalists *believe?*" As a minister, I get that question a lot. And maybe you have, too – if you've ever ridden on an airplane with a stranger and began talking about religion, or ridden in an elevator at a conference, wearing your UU name badge.

It's a natural question to ask about a religious tradition, since many churches *do* require assent to a set of beliefs. And there's nothing inherently wrong with that – belief is certainly one possible foundation on which to build a church. It's just that Unitarian Universalists have chosen to do it differently.

The reason for this can be found in our history. It goes back almost 500 years, to that time of ferment known as the Reformation. Our spiritual ancestors spoke

out against religious persecution - and often were persecuted themselves. When they began to build their own churches, they shrank away from imposing religious tests.

Over time, the result of our creedlessness has been the development of different belief systems within one faith tradition. (Some Sunday in the new year, I'll preach about the difference between "faith" and "belief.") These have presented UUs with a variety of "theological options" to choose from, and we've been examining these over the past few Sundays.

For the first three Sundays of this four-part series, we looked at the three options most deeply rooted in our history. This entailed first a look at liberal Christianity, which was the dominant mode of both Unitarianism and Universalism until the 19th century. We next explored Transcendentalism, rooted in New England (those "oracles of Concord"), which was a religious movement as well as a literary one. Finally, we examined Religious Humanism, which found a home within Unitarianism in the early 20th century, and dominated Unitarian Universalism until the late 1970s or early 1980s.

It's important to note that all three perspectives represent significant periods of our history, but they're of more than antiquarian interest. They also represent living options for UUs today.

Today I'd like to wrap up the series by looking at what has happened since about 1975. One of the compelling things about this part of UU history is that many of us have lived it - or lived through it, perhaps - or at least we know people who did.

This part of our history is open-ended. Although people have started to write books about these times, there's not much in the way of consolidated, written history. People who experienced the events first hand are still telling the stories, and the events themselves are still unfolding. It's hard to imagine what historians will say about Unitarian Universalism 50 or 100 years from now.

What seems to be happening now within our movement is creative ferment, with a profusion of religious perspectives. In some ways, UUs reflect the religious pluralism we've seen develop in the United States over the last 30 or 40 years, even though we don't reflect it sociologically - not yet, anyway.

In addition to Christians, Emersonians, and Humanists, Unitarian Universalism now offers many other theological options. To give just a few examples, there are feminists, pagans, Buddhists, Jews, process theologians, and combinations of the above. If you attend a UUA General Assembly - which I encourage you to do at least once in your life - you will encounter these and many more.

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What caused this opening up, this flowering of perspectives? My tentative guess is that the feminist movement had a lot to do with it.

An important theological turning point for UUs came in 1977. This was the year the General Assembly, meeting in Ithaca, NY, unanimously passed the Women and Religion resolution. At the time, second wave feminist consciousness was about a decade old, but women still made up only 5 percent of UU clergy. (Gertrude Lindener-Stawski, UUCC's Minister Emerita, was one of them.)

The Women and Religion resolution was cast as a "business resolution," meaning that it bound the denomination to certain actions, rather than being simply a statement of high-flown principles. It urged individual UUs, to look at the religious roots of sexism: "to examine carefully their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes within their own families." It also urged the UUA administration and all UU religious leaders (a) to "put traditional assumptions and language in perspective" and (b) to "avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future." And to ensure that the resolution was implemented, it established a continent-wide Women and Religion Committee.

Over the next few years, several consequences flowed from the resolution. In 1979, district Women and Religion leaders convened in Grailville, Ohio. One of the documents coming under their scrutiny was the Statement of Purpose hammered out at the founding of the UUA in 1961, less than 20 years before.

From a feminist perspective, there were obvious changes needed in that statement - for example, replacing "dignity of man" and "men of good will" with more inclusive language. But the Grailville women, as they looked at the statement, asked deeper questions as well. Among other things, they challenged the statement's hierarchical language, and its lack of ecological consciousness - its tendency to elevate human beings ("Man") over the rest of creation.

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The eventual result of this critique, after 6 years of drafts, discussion, and debate, was the Seven Principles, together with the Six Sources, that we know today. But I think that the transformation of the UUA's principles and purposes reflects more than a shift from patriarchal to feminist consciousness. It also reflects an intellectual and cultural shift from modernism to post-modernism.

Modernism looks for essences, for universal truths, for “over-arching meta-narratives,” in the words of one philosopher. A good example of this is found in Purpose #2 of the original UUA statement, which called on the Association to

cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man.

To statements like that, post-modernism says, “Wait a minute!” It’s skeptical of the idea that the many religions of the world can be boiled down to a few universal truths, let alone that they can be summarized for all time in the language of one tradition. Post-modernism allows for the possibility that different perspectives can exist side by side, without needing to be reconciled with one another.

In coming to a new statement of Principles and Purposes, UUs discovered that they had to give up on the idea of a unifying statement of belief. They came to the realization that, as the portion we read together this morning puts it, we share a “living tradition” that “draws from many sources.”

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A further consequence of the Women and Religion initiative was the emergence of the Pagan movement within Unitarian Universalism. The national CUUPS web site tells us that “No one had put ‘UU’ and ‘Pagan’ together as a serious conjunction” before then.

Paganism is part of the sixth source, “spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions.” It has had at least two different manifestations in this congregation – an earlier CUUPS chapter, “Covenant of UU Pagans,” and the current WEBS group, “Whole Earth-Based Spirituality.”

As far as anyone knows, the first organized UU Pagan worship took place in 1980 at a Women and Religion event, the Continental Feminist Theology Convocation in East Lansing, Michigan. This event attracted mostly women, but also a few men.

According to the CUUPS web site, the convocation included “much Goddess discussion, a witchcraft workshop, and a Z. Budapest film.” The first “water communion” celebration, from which UUCC traces its water ceremony, also took place at the convocation.

It took a few more years before UU pagans organized themselves into a national network. There were organizational meetings at the 1985 General Assembly, the same GA that passed the current Purposes and Principles. In 1987, journalist and practicing pagan Margot Adler appeared at the GA in Little Rock, and drew a crowd that “totally overwhelmed the available space, providing clear evidence of the hunger within UU circles for earth-centered spirituality.”

The 1990s saw evidence that paganism had become an accepted part of the UU mosaic. Our current hymnal, published in 1993, was the first UU hymnal to include pagan source material. In 1995, “earth-centered traditions” became the “Sixth Source” in our principles. For its first five years of existence, CUUPS doubled in size each year. Although it never amounted to more than 1% of the UU population, its influence has exceeded its actual numbers.

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Another of the Sources is the third one, “Wisdom from the world’s religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” Among the religions of the world, Buddhism may be the tradition that has most captured the imagination of UUs. There are studies suggesting that 9 percent of UUs consider themselves Buddhists, and that 25 percent of us have been influenced by Buddhism.

Unitarian fascination with Buddhism actually has a long history. It goes back to 1844, when Elizabeth Peabody published a chapter from a Buddhist sutra in *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist journal. This was the first Buddhist text to be published in the English language.

But “that first flush of interest among our Transcendentalist ancestors was at best confused,” as my friend and colleague James Ford points out. Back then, even scholars couldn’t tell Buddhism apart from Hinduism. Furthermore, most people failed to grasp what Buddhism is really about. Unable to conceive of a religion without God, they tried to understand Buddhism within the terms of Western religion – for example, describing the Buddha as a “heavenly spirit.”

Today, our understanding of Buddhism is more sophisticated, thanks in large part to UUs who are themselves deeply Buddhist. James Ford, a Zen priest and UU minister, is a good example. He says he came into Unitarian Universalism out of a hunger for community, something not particularly emphasized in Western Zen. Other UUs, both clergy and laity, are authorized teachers within various Buddhist traditions, including Zen, Vipassana, Tibetan Buddhism, and the mindfulness tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh.

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When they look at Unitarian Universalism from the outside, many people find our diversity quite confusing. In fact, many people on the *inside* find it confusing. They ask questions like, "Why do you need to be a UU Buddhist, or a UU Christian, or a UU Pagan? Why can't we just all be UU?"

The longing for a unified, homogenized tradition is understandable. But a look at the history of religion suggests that it's also unrealistic. Last year, I drew upon the work of the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who concluded after a lifetime of study that the religions of the world aren't like boxes. They're really more like rivers - moving, changing, being fed by streams, and mingling with other rivers.

This applies even to seemingly unified traditions like Islam. Thus it shouldn't surprise us that it applies to our own disunified - some would say disorganized and chaotic - living tradition.

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Whoever you are, and whatever you are, and wherever you may find yourself on your own journey of faith, please know that you are welcome here.

We welcome everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, who respects the inherent worth and dignity of all.

If you choose to join us, you become a part of this living faith. You add your own creativity to the mix.

And you contribute to the ongoing evolution of this rich tradition - an evolution that will continue, I suspect, as long as there are people who call themselves Unitarian Universalist.