

## **Some of Unitarianism's Best Ideas**

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UCV

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*"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. "Let your light shine in such a way that all may see your good works." (from MT. 5:14-16)*

Do you remember the long, dry summer of 2015 in Vancouver? Like a dream now. My sabbatical leave had ended and it was time for me to refocus on the work. As a means to that end, I thought—what are some of the Unitarianism's best ideas? So I started writing back in those warm, dry days of late summer.

Not knowing whether I was on the right track both in substance and style, I invited UCV members to participate in a reading group last Fall to review and talk about what I'd written. To you seminar participants—thanks! I appreciate your close reading of the chapters and the thoughtfulness, generosity and constructively critical ideas and suggestions for changes you shared with me.

There's a Unitarian Universalist minister down in Austin, Texas who said that when people find out her profession and ask: so what do Unitarians believe—she replies: "One God, No Hell." Now down in the Bible Belt that usually shuts people up right away, or it leads to further questions and conversation, and, who knows—maybe even to some enlightenment on both sides. I have a little more time than Rev. Barnhouse's pithy One God, No Hell elevator sermon, but not a whole lot. So here goes.

(First) *One of Unitarian's best ideas regarding God, or Nature, is that each person is welcome to understand and affirm it in his or her own way.* Unitarians share a particular worldview, or belief— that there is a fundamental, meaningful continuity across the whole array of everything that exists—from people to atoms to the cosmos and its rhythms and laws. This vision entails an insight, a conviction, that everything is energetically alive, in motion and interdependent—from root to infinite manifestations. I think we perceive and agree that where there is continuity and interdependence, there is the possibility of kinship; where there is kinship

moral claims arise to which we respond as best we can. We respond with loyalty, with love and with a compassionate intensity to know, understand and cooperate so that each and all may fulfill the potential and measure of its being.

That's why we sing opening songs like "Love Will Guide Us"; "and if we can't sing like angels, if we can't speak before thousands, we know we can give from deep within us, and change the world with our love." We don't just sing that. We see and feel, we try to understand and act according to our best lights. And what's remarkable and distinctive about our religion is that we don't dictate how we're going to understand and affirm that transcending mystery and wonder. There is no dogma, no one book, no one prophet, no one guru in the capacious house of our Unitarian way. And this makes us about as different from other religions as I can think of.

When it comes to trying to picture and describe something as vast, connected and intimate as Nature or Nature's God, Unitarians draw from many sources as we build the house of our theologies.

*For some of us, the stories and words of Jesus and his disciples still help us imagine that "in which we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28) For others, words from the Tao Te Ching speak with special resonance: "The Tao is filled with eternal possibilities, hidden but always present; mystery and manifestations arise from the same source. It is the mother of the universe." Here, I'll invoke the Persian poet Hafiz again, where he writes: "Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still shall I know you my Beloved. You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great. You are the breathing of the world."*

*For some of us, it's the awe and reverence of someone like Einstein that speaks, deep to deep: "The most beautiful and profound experience a person can have is a sense of the mysterious," he wrote. "For the scientist it takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural laws." From the source of Earth-centred traditions, I'll just quote Tseil-Waututh Elder Amy George who, up on Burnaby mountain, said: "This red cedar tree is alive and has as much right to live as I do. Everything is alive; the land is alive, and we are just one member of a great family."*

This is just a sample of the sources Unitarians draw from for inspiration. Rather than a recipe for chaos under the cope of a single religious community, it is a central, cherished way we walk and worship together. It agrees with our commitment to a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning," and with the ways in which we encourage "spiritual growth in our congregation" for all our members—children, youth and adults alike.

*(Second) A second Unitarian best idea, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present, is that Jesus was a virtuous man, a prophet, teacher and example of profound and enduring ethical truths, and the human son of mortal parents. We respect and honour him, but do not worship him, or*

*believe that he is God; nor do we believe that he died for us, atoning or paying some kind of debt for our sins.*

This conviction sets us apart profoundly from the rest of the Trinitarian Christian world from which our Unitarian faith dissented beginning back in the 1530s. The recovery of a human Jesus by 16-17<sup>th</sup> century religious humanists, who set aside 1300 years of dogma had a life transforming effect on those brave and open enough to read, see and embrace, what had been for centuries in Christian Europe, the dangerously heretical idea that Jesus was human being and not a god in human livery.

*(In case you're wondering, and as I have stated before, there was a historical Jesus. No credible historian of antiquity has doubts about when and where Jesus lived and how he died; and most agree on the basics of what he taught. By all accounts, he was a charismatic teacher and healer who freely shared his message with solid citizens and social and moral outcasts alike. His belief in the imminent coming of an ethical Kingdom of peace, a paradoxical domain where the first would be last and the last first sealed his fate in a brutally occupied, hierarchical, law-and-order obsessed province on the remote fringes of the Roman Empire.)*

Listen to this, and try to imagine what's actually being said.

“When I was hungry, you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me... As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.” (from Matthew 25: 35-40)

These words, that vision still resonate, they could provoke and inspire to this day. And because they said it far better than I what I wrote, I want to quote from two UCV members who were part of our reading seminar, talking about Jesus:

“One can leave aside the Trinity...and the elaborate myth-making of the early Christians; Jesus' moral teachings are quite another matter. He was one of the most vigorous, and by far the most influential defender of the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalized and the othered in the whole history of the West...”

“If Jesus was only a man, if he achieved enlightenment and/or self actualization without uniquely privileged divine assistance, then his story is truly redemptive. It means, there's hope for the rest of us...because what one human being can do other human beings can do also. We do not need divine intercession and forgiveness. We have, subversively, the material for our own perfectibility right here in our hands, if we would but so choose. The important point is not that his father was god, but that Jesus was a man, an ordinary man, a carpenter.”

In December 1551, commanded by the Inquisition Court judges in Venice to sum up his

Unitarian heresy, a young swordsmith named Zuanjacom Spader, replied: “Our life is not to take things that belong to others; we are to help everyone; we have learned from scripture that we need to love one another, and that we should never do to others things we would not wish done to ourselves.” He affirmed that from the Bible,” he and others Unitarians learned that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, not a mystery, but a man whose moral message was summed up in the Sermon on the Mount—in the blessings invoked on the humble, the merciful, the peacemakers, and in his call to love both enemy and neighbour.

The trial by the Inquisitors was brief; the sentence of heresy was delivered. Shortly thereafter, with a heavy stone tied to his feet, Zuanjacom the swordsmith was rowed out into the lagoon and thrown into the sea.

(Third) *A third Unitarian best idea is that ours is a non-dogmatic, intentionally pluralistic religious faith.* I’ve attended and preached in Unitarian churches centered on the life of Jesus and the teachings of the Bible as their primary religious text. I’ve seen Unitarian fellowships without a minister, candles and hymns focused solely on lectures on human rights, astrophysics and coffee. I’ve worshiped in settings led by Unitarian ministers casting circles and invoking the goddess. And then there’s us! Working as a minister in the context of this kind of diversity—and it’s a worldwide phenomenon in our denomination—is an aspect of being a Unitarian that I value, and that I find challenging, provocative and inspiring.

From Simon Budny, accused of “Jewish atheism” in the late 1500s for consulting respected Lithuanian rabbis-- to Emerson and Thoreau who introduced Asian religious classics and categories to a North American English reading world-- to Unitarian women in the 1970s and 80s who led the effort in the US and Canada to spell out our basic beliefs and the pluralistic sources of our faith—for nearly five hundred years, we’ve been on this journey together toward a deeper and richer religious, aesthetic and ethical life. Or so we hope. We think that path is best achieved by bringing together various spiritual, artistic, social justice and scientific traditions into genuine conversation—because we want to grow in our perceptions, appreciation and experiences about the world, and then act accordingly.

An object example: This may look like a hymnal, this book of ours sitting in the pews in front of you; a book full of “songs of praise, especially to God in Christian worship,” according to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. But open it up, and what we’ll see is a commitment to

religious pluralism in one song and reading after another. Christian hymns and carols are followed by Islamic poetry; there are songs of harvest and the seasons, and the wisdom of Jewish mystics and Psalms. Buddhist sages are here, so too, the insights of science and reason; hymns in praise of labouring folk, the interdependent web, and prophetic activists struggling for environmental and social justice. A whole, great teeming congregation of wisdom from the world's religions, poets and secular sources are gathered here. We turn to these hymns, poetry and prose to celebrate our history and belief and to accompany us times of grief and joy.

All-too-often, our world divides up into grim, distressed religious and secular camps. And because of that, I believe that ours is a crucial experiment. Unitarians seek to practice a frank, respectful co-habitation of plural sensibilities, rituals and ways of being in community. We hope that what follows will be a mutually enriching dialogue, where we learn from and strive to support one another in our search for meaning and spiritual growth. And not for a moment should we forget how important an experiment a pluralistic faith like ours could be for a troubled and divided world.

*(Fourth) A fourth Unitarian best idea is our affirmation of the inherent dignity and worth of everyone; that we're born innocent and good and that everyone could be "saved." Given that belief, our challenge in this world, this one life, is to "confront powers and structures of evil" through life-giving relationships of love and justice.*

It may be hard for us now to imagine, but it's crucial that we know that in North America, 85-90% of the people who lived here from the 1600s through the early decades of the 1800s believed they were sinners in the hands of an angry God. Women, men and children took this seriously, and the emotional consequences of that belief were devastating; they lived in the grips of gnawing anxiety over their ultimate fate.

Perhaps, the most important thing we ever did as a religious movement was to change that theological and emotional landscape. It started in the 1770s: "Give them, not hell but hope and courage," said the pioneering minister John Murray. "Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach kindness and the everlasting love of God." "We cannot bow before a being, however great and powerful, who governs tyrannically," said William Ellery Channing in 1819 as he brought the message of Unitarianism out onto the public stage in a big way on this Continent. "We object to systems of religion that teach that we are brought into

existence wholly depraved and that consist in disparaging good works and human virtue. It is absurd to speak of us as forgiven when our whole punishment is borne by a substitute. We believe, instead, that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man...and that these faculties are the grounds of responsibility and the highest distinction of human nature.”

By taking a principled stand on the issue, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors contributed substantially to waking people up from the nightmare of damnation and their thralldom to the ministers of doom.

When I read Channing’s words in 1984 in a graduate seminar in religious history, I realized I was a Unitarian. And since that time, step-by-step, one piece of furniture at a time, I moved out of the household of faith into which I was born and moved into another until I came home again, here, with you. And ever since then, I have worked to create for myself another kind of religious genealogy and to reconfigure the map by which I reckoned my bearings and thus find a meaningful way through the territory of the rest of what’s left of my life.

And there are these Unitarians who’ve given me hope that I can make it with some dignity and sense of self worth. They’ve taken our faith in the goodness of people and their potential, seen it thwarted and marred by powers and structures of evil, and responding to that moral nature with which we’re born, they felt the call—as we all do—to realize some love and life-giving justice in this world.

There’s our own Leonard Marsh who laid the foundations of social welfare in modern Canada; Joseph Workman in Toronto and Dorothy Dix in the States who worked for the recovery to health of emotionally distressed and traumatized women and men; Tim deChristopher in Utah and his recent, inspiring act of civil disobedience on behalf of the environment; Martha and Waitstill Sharp’s work on behalf of the Unitarian Service Committee saved the lives of thousands of Jewish and political refugees during World War II; Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo gave their lives to secure civil rights in the States; Rachel Carson’s visionary work help define and galvanize a global environmental movement.

I could go on with this—the stars modest and great that fire up the constellation of our Unitarian firmament. They’ve helped me plot a new and better course for my journey through life and by their lights help steer me still.

What gives me hope and keeps me going is that, though cracked pots we may be, I see some of these best ideas of ours embodied and made real here, by us; made real and thus true as we serve and worship together, and reach out into the world in loving, artful, soulful, justice-making work and relationships. May we keep this faith of ours, and in so doing help create more, best ideas for Unitarians in generations a-borning now and in undreamt futures in days to come.