

Discussion Guide for Video

Long Strange Trip, Part 4: Universalism, 1600-1860 (01:04:51)

Opening and Chalice Lighting

Introduce this excerpt from Judith Sargent Murray's *Universalist Catechism*, published privately in 1782, the first known writing by an American Universalist woman. Point out that the child is asking the questions, rather than being queried. If you wish, invite a volunteer to play the role of the child. Light the chalice and share the reading:

Q. But what idea (give me leave to ask) ought I to form of a Being whom I have never seen?

A. The Deity is invisible, incomprehensible; it is impossible, my dear, for a finite being to form an idea of infinite perfection.

Q. How then can I judge of his power, love, or tenderness?

A. If, upon a return from any of your little visiting excursions, you should behold some beautiful addition to your apparel, or some advantageous alteration in the disposition of the furniture of your chamber, you would take it for granted the hand of affection had been employed, though you was not a spectator of its beneficent operations: So, when you behold the effects, of love, manifested in rain, sun-shine, seed time and harvest, you ought to conclude there is a power divine, though to you invisible; and further, that that power is all good, all gracious, and all mighty.

Discussion Questions

Choose among these questions and lead a discussion:

- Which events or stories highlighted in the video surprised you? Made you feel proud, or, not so proud? Which events or stories intrigue or unsettle you?
- Which people, stories, and events in the video strike you as important pointers to Unitarian Universalism as we know it today?

- Early Universalism has roots in Christian mysticism which lifts up the universal and abundant love of God for God’s creation. Is there a strain of mysticism in our faith today?
- The John Murray story is often called our UU miracle story. What makes this story compelling for people of all ages? What wisdom does it offer for adults?
- What stories from the life of Judith Sargent Murray—religious educator, writer, and feminist—ought we to teach UUs of all ages today? How can we tell the Murray story in a way that lifts up the influence of both John and Judith on our movement’s history?
- Much of the Universalists’ 19th-century debating about theological ideas took place via books, pamphlets, and printed sermons. How are we still a people who love words and enjoy a good theological debate? What can we learn from examining a period when theological debates were destructive for Universalism?
- Hosea Ballou argued that God wants people to be happy. What role does happiness play in the faith of Unitarian Universalists today?
- Are you convinced by the film’s claim that Abraham Lincoln held a universalist theology, if not a Universalist religious affiliation?
- Universalists were often asked: Without belief in punishment after death, what compels someone to live a moral life? How would you respond when asked what consequence—other than legal—awaits a person who has done something immoral, or even evil? In your opinion, do all people, without exception, have inherent worth?

Closing Reading

Share words by Hosea Ballou, Reading 705 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook:

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.

Extinguish the chalice.