

Order of Service and Sermon

June 23, 2001

General Assembly, Cleveland Ohio

Dr. Sarah Oelberg, Minister

PRELUDE

OPENING WORDS

To worship is to attribute worth, to express appreciation, to revel in the enjoyment of something of value. Today we gather together in worship, for what we have together is of immense value. Welcome to our worship service!

Would you please stand as you are able and repeat the chalice words in your order of service while Dan lights the chalice.

* CHALICE LIGHTING (In unison)

Joining flame with wick kindles a new life. This morning we light our chalice to commemorate another joining which gave life to our Unitarian Universalist Association forty years ago.

* HYMN - "We Build On Life's Wonders" by F.A. Webster

We build on life's wonders with vision expanding,

Undaunted by stress or by turmoil or storm.

With light that gives wisdom to lead us forth and guide us,

Our way be everlasting; our faith still hold firm.

We stand at life's threshold where fate bids us harken,

And reach toward a world beyond foresight to see.

Our search must press forward toward realms that lead us onward;

Our debt, the strife of ages; our gift, hope set free.

We build toward the strengths that rise buoyant through trial,

Imparting a radiance that gloom cannot blight.

Our quest soars transcending, all human gains extending,

To sanctify in triumph a world crowned with light.

RESPONSIVE READING

What has emerged in the twentieth century is nothing less than a new synthesis, the coalescence of a new consensus;

A NEW WORLD FAITH, FORMULATED BY AND FITTED FOR THE NEW THAT IS COMING TO BIRTH.

It speaks to the needs and conditions of the modern, world-minded individual.

IT WILL SPREAD ACROSS THE EARTH LIKE THE LIFTING TIDE OF GREEN GRASS IN THE SPRING.

It has given us a new and broader meaning to the old labels "Unitarian" and "Universalist."

UNITARIAN IS THE UNITARY VIEW OF ALL LIFE, THE MERGING OF THE SACRED AND SECULAR INTO A SINGLE SUBSTANCE, EVERY PARTICLE OF WHICH IS

SACRED.

It affirms the unitary nature of the universe and everything in it as the single sacred reality whose physical and spiritual laws set the bounds of our being.

IT CELEBRATES THE UNITARY CHARACTER OF THE HUMAN FAMILY, REJOICING THAT NO MATTER WHAT OUR RACE OR FAITH OR CONDITION, WE ARE ALL ONE PEOPLE.

Universalism has grown beyond the idea of universal salvation to embrace the concept of the universality of truth.

TRUTH IS NOT SECTARIAN, DIFFERENT FOR A CHRISTIAN, BUDDHIST, OR JEW.
TRUTH IS UNIVERSAL.

Universalism has come to stand for the seeking out and stressing of the great universals which can lead sorely divided nations into the great unities.

IT STANDS FOR THE UNIVERSAL VALIDITY OF THE METHOD OF FREE INQUIRY AND THE RIGHT OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL TO SHARE IN THE DETERMINATION OF DESTINY.

It desires the one universal spirit of compassionate and all-redeeming love which has the power to inspire, judge, encourage and ultimately to gather humanity's separated and warring nations into one world fellowship of the free.

THUS HAVE THE UNITARIAN AND UNIVERSALIST HERESIES GROWN UP AND BEEN TRANSFORMED IN TIME,

Into the broad and philosophical foundation for Unitarian Universalism,

A NEW WORLD FAITH, WHICH IS INCLUSIVE IN SPIRIT, COMPREHENSIVE IN CHARACTER, AND UNITING IN INFLUENCE.

- Raymond Hopkins (?) Adapted

READING AND MEDITATION from Dana McLean Greeley, first president of the UUA. Dana McLean Greeley considered the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations one of his most satisfying accomplishments, although he said it felt like a dubious honor to be the last president of the American Unitarian Association--emotionally he had to struggle with that--but it was a challenge and a pleasure to be the first president of the merged association.

Here is one of his writings:

The sense of history has its place,
And prophecy has its place;
And very often they go together.
But they are joined in the present;
And it is in the present that we must gather inspiration

And determine the future.
The older I grow, the more I realize the value of continuity,
The necessity of memory and evolution
And the dangers involved in the interruption of history;
But I guess that the older I grow the more I should realize also
The value of innovation and the need for new ideas and adventures.
We should never be satisfied with our successes
Or bogged down by our failures.
Perhaps we have a trust from the past,
And we have a vision of the future;
And now in the present is the time to fulfill that trust
And to pursue that vision.
The great secret of life is to build upon the past,
With neither blindness on the one hand
Or bitterness on the other, And to trust the future,
However pleasant or unpleasant,
And to act in the present with courage and with faith.
And these words of his as we enter into a spirit of meditation:
We greet this day 40 years after one of the greatest days in our history. And we pray for the
dawn of a new age of righteousness and peace, worthy of the past and prophetic of the future.
Kindle both our recollections and our resolutions for the celebration of this time. Help us to order
our values and be true to our ideals, and to promote justice and peace among ourselves and
throughout the world.

Deepen our love and lengthen our vision and strengthen our wills at this time. Teach us to honor
the past, and to face the future with wisdom and with courage. Give us comfort and inspiration
and knowledge and dedication. We pray for strength for duty and a deeper faith in truth and the
right; for compassion and companionship; for light and for the uplift of our spirits, and for self-
forgetfulness in service to others.

INTROIT - "This House" by David Schafer.

SERMON - "Joining Together" - Rev. Dr. Sarah Oelberg
JOINING TOGETHER

My husband and I did not make it to the May Meetings in 1961 when the Unitarians voted to
consolidate with the Universalists to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. For one thing,
I was very pregnant, and it was a long way to Boston, but mainly I really didn't think it was a big
deal. I was sure the merger would pass, and I thought it was way past time!

I was raised with one foot in the Unitarian camp and the other in the Universalist church. My
mother was a fourth generation Unitarian, a Humanist and Democrat, and my father was raised a
Universalist who claimed to be an atheist and was definitely a Republican. (Discussions over
dinner were very interesting in our house!) During my childhood, we moved about every nine
months, and my mother's way of coping with that kind of dislocation was to head immediately
for the nearest Unitarian or Universalist church, where she knew she would find kindred spirits
and friendly souls. So I was raised a little of both, although I always considered myself a

Unitarian.

As I learned more about each, I came to know that, although they began from quite different theological principles, they had many similarities. One was that both were willing to change and evolve. This came out of another shared belief that, while the Bible was the basis of Christianity, it was only one of many sources of revelation, and it should be studied critically. Careful study of the Bible led them to notice the lack of any mention of a trinity, so both came to believe in one God, as the Jews did. Critical study involves the use of logic and reason, and reliance on scientific methods, and acceptance of different interpretations of the truth, which leads to individual freedom of belief; all ideas embraced by both Unitarians and Universalists.

Furthermore, whether you believe in "salvation by character," as the Unitarians did, or that bad deeds resulted in punishment during life, as the Universalists did, in either case you need to do good while here on earth. And they did. Both have been very involved in social action, ethical behavior, and moral considerations throughout their histories. When the focus is on being and doing good, then humanity becomes very important in organized life, and people tend to depend less on a God and take more responsibility themselves for what happens in our world. And both did. For all these reasons, I really saw almost no difference between the two religions, as they had evolved in similar theological directions. What differences there were seemed more organizational and demographic. And, in fact, issues like social class and educational achievement did loom large in the final discussions.

But these trifles did not bother me. I had been active in the Unitarian youth group in Champaign, Illinois, in the early fifties, when the American Unitarian Youth successfully merged with the Universalist Youth Fellowship to create the Liberal Religious Youth. This was not the last time the youth showed the adult organizations that it was time to stop dancing around an issue and take some action! And I was later involved in the first Channing-Murray Foundation to be formed, at the University of Illinois. My Unitarian church in Champaign merged with the Universalist church in Urbana in 1959, two years before the national merger. And I had sat in her music room while my godmother, Lorraine Bays, and Ken Patton, Vincent Silliman, Chris Moore, Arthur Foote and other members of the joint Hymnbook Commission, sang and played and discussed beautiful hymns from both traditions, deciding which should be included in the blue hymnal--Hymns for the Celebration of Life.

Yes, all of that, and so you can understand why I thought merger was long overdue, and the 1961 meeting merely a formality. To tell the truth, I was rather bored with the whole business. There had been several discussions about merger over the last century; and about the time the youth were actually doing it, the adults started seriously talking about it, but it still took nearly ten years of discussion before it happened. It seemed the Universalists were afraid that the larger, more organized Unitarians would swallow them up, and the Unitarians were afraid they might get indigestion! There is still some feeling on both sides that their fears were justified.

The Universalists were suspicious of denominationalism, centralization, and "Popery". Probably a major reason for their decline was because they resisted any national organization until 1942, by which time they had dropped from being the sixth largest group in America to one of the very tiniest. Since the Unitarians had been well organized since 1825, the Universalists were afraid

their identity and history would be lost in the merger. So they fought hard to retain their name--and we are forever stuck with the cumbersome name Unitarian Universalist Association. The Unitarians insisted their name come first, and the Universalists finally agreed, realizing that Unitarian then became merely an adjective describing Universalist!

Anyway, I missed the historic meeting at which the merger was finally voted upon. The next year, however, as lay delegates from the Church of the Good Shepherd, Universalist, (now the Olympia Brown UU Church) in Racine, Wisconsin, Jerry and I bundled up our baby boy, Brian, and headed off to Washington, D.C. to attend the first meeting of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association. We pitched our army surplus tent in Potomac Park (you could do that in those days), and headed off to the fancy hotel where the General Assembly was being held.

I soon discovered that I had been wrong in thinking nothing much would change because of merger--this was a different kind of meeting than the old Unitarian May Meetings. The first difference was that it was not in Boston. The merger had moved the population center to the south and west, and thereafter GAs were also moved--all over the continent! But there were other noticeable differences. The overall mood was one of celebration--singing the joy of living! People seemed less intense and more friendly (although I must confess having a baby in tow does help in that regard.)

Whereas the Unitarian meetings had been very institutional and organized, the tone here was more egalitarian and democratic. There seemed to be a better balance between corporate and congregational needs. There was also a different mix of people; fewer intellectual and academic stiffies and more just ordinary folks from various walks of life, who seemed to revel in their religion, and in being together. It was less businesslike and more like a family reunion. And this family had gathered from all over the United States and Canada, including more from the South, and from rural areas. And some of them even talked openly about their love of God--without apology or embarrassment!

These were some differences that were apparent even in the first year after merger. Since then, I think we have seen many changes and benefits as a result of these two denominations, which may have been more different than we realized at the time, casting their lots together. The Unitarians had always been a bit stodgy and elitist and even, as Ralph Waldo Emerson described them, "corpse Cold." The Universalists were more populist and diverse and more open. Theirs was a religion based on hope and love of God, and their love and faith in the future have helped us through some difficult times. They have taught the Unitarians to loosen up a bit, and to be more accepting of diversity.

The Unitarians had for many years stood on a foundation of freedom, reason and tolerance. But their freedom at times became unbridled radicalism, and at other times did not extend to people who did not agree with them. This freedom also contributed to individualism and threatened to destroy the ideal of institutional loyalty. The Unitarians were more organized, top-down, but the Universalists had more congregational liberty and denominational loyalty. The mix has been good.

Reason had become such a strong foundation on which to base ideas that there was little room

for intuition, or grace, or faith. Humanism reigned supreme in most Unitarian churches, and belief in the supernatural, as well as such things as ritual, liturgy, and prayer had largely been excised from them. The Universalists embraced a kind of wisdom which used reason, but also acknowledged and accepted other ways of knowing and being, and they had not strayed quite so far from their Judeo-Christian roots. They brought God back into the conversation, much to the relief of UU Christians and others who find solace in spirituality. The two together have given us a much broader and deeper approach to finding meaning.

Tolerance was the third Unitarian tenet, but it sometimes meant only putting up with someone or something; not embracing people and ideas that were different. The Universalists showed us that tolerance becomes genuine when it is guided by love, and infused with understanding. They have enabled our association to enter into difficult caverns, and confront our prejudices, pettiness and provincialism. I think it is because of different attitudes the Universalists brought to the table, that we now have a much richer mix of theologies and a more nuanced set of principles, and have been able to become as involved as we have in welcoming gay, lesbian, bi-and transsexual people, and working with anti-racism.

Most Unitarian churches were, and still are, in cities and suburbs. Their approach to nature was more principled than personal; more academic than appreciative. Because some of the Universalist churches were in small towns or rural areas, and some members were actually farmers or foresters or fishermen, they brought a deeper understanding of nature which, I think, has led us to our seventh principle and our honoring of earth-centered religions and acceptance into our fold of pagans, gians and deep ecologists. Certainly the environment and ecology have a much more front and center position than in the past, and the combination of scientific knowledge and spiritual feeling has given us a wholly new approach to nature and the environment.

I could go on, but time is short. We could talk about the universality that the Universalists brought; looking at all the world's religions and finding meaning in many, and recognizing that the different religions need to work together. We could also mention the uniting influence of the Unitarians, in trying to bring various peoples and faiths together. Their joint efforts have, indeed, led us to the possibility of becoming a new world religion.

In this fortieth year since merger, the UUA has become a deeper, richer, broader and more varied association. The strengths of its two partners have melded in many ways, and have allowed us to "build on life's wonders with vision expanding," in the words of our final hymn. It is, indeed, a time to celebrate our joining together.

HYMN - "We Sing the Joy of Living" by Deanne Starr

We sing the joy of living, We sing of mystery.

Of knowledge, lore and science, Of truth that is to be,

Of searching, doubting, testing, Of deeper insights gained,

Of freedom claimed and honored, Of minds that are unchained.

We sing the joy of living, We sing of harmony.

Of textures, sounds and colors, To touch, to hear, to see,

Of order, rhythm, meaning, Of chaos and of strife,

Of richness of sensation, Of the creating life.

We sing the joy of living, We sing of ecstasy.
Of warmth, of love, of passion, Of flights of fantasy.
We sing of joy of living, The dear, the known, the strange,
The moving, pulsing, throbbing--A universe of change.

CLOSING WORDS

Ours is a religion which stands for the universal validity of the method of free inquiry and the right of individuals to share in the determination of their destinies. It is a new world faith, grown from the roots of two other religions. It is inclusive in spirit, comprehensive in character, and uniting in influence.

The chalice lighter this morning is Daniel S. Schatz, who was an intern with Dr. Oelberg. He is currently serving as half-time minister of the UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes in Chocorua, NH, and will receive preliminary fellowship at the 2001 Service of the Living Tradition at GA. David Schafer wrote the words and music to "This House." He is a member of the Unitarian Society of New Haven in Hamden, CT, a composer and musician by avocation, and a molecular scientist by profession.

The hymn, "We Build on Life's Wonders" was written by F.A. Webster of the North Universalist Chapel Society, Woodstock, VT. It was published in *The World* in 1984.

"We Sing the Joy of Living" was written by Deane Starr, and was sung at the opening session of the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Boston in 1965.

Rev. Sarah Oelberg is the minister of the Nora UU Church in Hanska, MN and the UU Fellowship of Mankato, MN.