

Universalist Heritage Foundation Board Shares Vision, Planning in Annual Retreat

by Paul S. Sawyer

The Board of the Universalist Heritage Foundation met in Ashby, Massachusetts on January 8, 2010 for its annual retreat and planning session for the coming year. The Rev. Dr. Tracey Robinson-Harris brought her extensive experience to our organization, serving as facilitator for the day-long event.

The board began the day by highlighting the visions each board member held for Universalism as a whole within our Unitarian Universalist movement. The discussion proved uplifting and diverse, with (no surprise!) many different ideas among the members of the group. A few statements of this vision were eventually synthesized into loose, but heart-felt guidelines for the rest of the day's discussion:

Our vision is to claim and share Universalism's powerful stories of love, including our Jewish and Christian roots, to strengthen the heart of our sustaining Unitarian Universalist faith for a diverse and pluralistic future, knowing that in the end we hold ourselves accountable to the transforming power of love.

Several agenda items filled the bulk of the day, including discussions of the buildings and grounds of the Foundation, the UHF's relationship with other Unitarian Universalist history and heritage organizations, and the programmatic offerings of the Foundation in 2010, including an upcoming DVD project, and the exciting Universalist Heritage Tour that will take place in October.

By the end of the day, the board had listed several areas of focus for the Foundation's work for 2010, including the points highlighted below.

Significant work will go into a project spearheaded by the Religious Education subcommittee entitled "Love Saves." The group is working on a book project, collecting stories that exemplify the saving power of love, and board members, along with some very special guests, will lead a workshop at General Assembly in Minneapolis exploring such stories. In addition, the board will look for opportunities to use this exciting work in other areas, including summer services in Winchester.

In the coming months the board will also begin a significant overhaul of the

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electronic media of the Foundation. The Foundation's website will be refurbished to connect more to the current future-oriented work of the UHF, and the board will look to build into the electronic presence of the Foundation a clearinghouse of ongoing and historic Universalist documents, theology, and thought.

The board will also begin to look specifically for ways to bring the important message of Universalism out to the wider world, in particular, looking for projects and ideas that will extend the Foundation's work beyond its physical base in New England.

Members of the board are particularly energized by the possibilities inherent in that last goal—finding ways to share the Good News of Universalism as a healing message not just in our past, but particularly for today, when the Universalist vision of the power of faith, hope, and love, is deeply needed all around the world.

Overall, the annual retreat was inspiring, challenging, well-led, and very promising. The board looks forward to joining with congregations, ministers, ministerial students, theologians, and with faithful dedicated people from all over to carry the work of the Universalist Heritage Foundation forward.



All that was left was a smoldering pile of ashes

This picture was taken on September 12, 1909, the morning after the Universalist Church in Winchester, NH burned down. It was replaced in less than two years with the present building, constructed largely from donations by Universalist individuals and churches across the continent. Most of the buildings seen here across Main Street are still standing today.

“Universalism 101” - a review by Jeanne Nieuwejaar

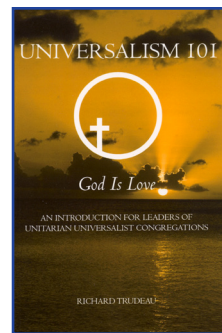
Rev. Richard Trudeau, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Weymouth, Massachusetts, has given us a gem in his recently published little book, “Universalism 101.” It is short and easy to read, touching on Universalist history and presenting clearly and concisely the distinctive ideas of this faith tradition.

Trudeau traces the evolution of Universalist theology from its historical beginnings to its important place in our contemporary Unitarian Universalist experience, helping us to understand how a deeper embrace of this theology might bring renewed power to our presence in the religious landscape today. He reminds us that the first and seventh principles of Unitarian Universalism (the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and respect for the interdependent web of life of which we are a part) are the statements which resonate most strongly for most Unitarian Universalists. And, he suggests, these principles are, in fact, “Universalist spirituality rising to the surface,” reflecting core affirmations of the historic faith in ways that are deeply meaningful to our modern sensitivities.

He discusses the relationship of Universalism with the Christian tradition, celebrating that Universalism has been able to shed limiting, archaic assumptions of Christianity while retaining much that continues to be life-affirming. And he explores the relationship of Universalism to humanism, suggesting that the core of this faith, “God is love,” offers us a way to engage with the mysteries of the universe and the great questions of the meaning of life, without affirming a belief in a personal God.

With an endearing edginess, Trudeau compares and contrasts Unitarian and Universalist beginnings and spiritualities. He examines class and culture differences, not just from an institutional perspective, but from a theological one, and finds that the working class assumptions of Universalism offer a way for our faith to move into a stronger future.

With stories, jokes, laments and meditations, he offers us an accessible and provocative view of our rich Universalist heritage and the gifts it has to offer us in the 21st century. The book may be ordered from www.amazon.com.



Universalist October 2010 Tour

Watch for a special mailing later in February about the exciting Universalist Heritage New England Tour being planned for October 2010, right in the middle of New England’s gorgeous “leaf peeping” season! A full itinerary and registration forms will be included in the mailing. Dates are October 11-17, 2010, traveling to Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont and New Hampshire.

2009 Universalist Heritage Award Sermon

excerpts from:

“The Triumph of Love: The Gospel of Universalism” by Rev. M’ellen Kennedy

I wonder if Olympia (Brown) would be disappointed in us modern tepid Unitarian Universalists? Mainline churches are no longer emphasizing a message of harsh judgment and despair. So Olympia’s message doesn’t have the punch it had back then. In a sense, Universalism won. The debate over hell and damnation in the American Protestant churches has all but ceased.

So, what does Universalism mean today? Olympia herself gave us a clue of how to proceed now. Over 100 years ago she sent forth the charge:

“Go on finding ever new applications of these truths
and new enjoyments in their contemplation,”

It is up to us to keep on delving the depths of the meaning and power of Universalism. See how Universalism speaks to the world today. It is up to us to have the courage to face today’s fears . . . As Mark Mosher DeWolfe says:

“Know that the love which blooms inside you is stronger than fear,
for people who love find strength they didn’t know they had.”

A religion that is meaningful is an antidote to the agony of the era. What are the agonies of this era and how does our faith speak to them? It seems to me that one of the greatest agonies of our time is the religious factionalism within the United States and also across countries and faith traditions of all sorts. We are fighting and killing each other over our different beliefs. How does our faith address this agony of our modern world? Universalism asks, do you have the courage to open your heart to this aching world? Do you have the courage to love? The Sufi poet, Rumi, provokes us: “Risk everything for love if you are a human. If not, leave this gathering.” Love is risky. Love opens the heart.

In past centuries exclusionism was about judging who was “saved” and who was “unsaved.” Those in our lineage believed that a loving G*d excludes no one – that in G*d’s eyes everyone was redeemable and valuable. Such a loving G*d calls us to find greater capacity for love in our own being. They believed that as humans we should try to emulate G*d’s love. They stood up strongly and spoke out against exclusion. Exclusion is “othering.” Our Universalist foremothers and fathers preached love and acted for inclusion.

Have you felt the pain of being excluded somewhere where you really wanted to be? What forms of exclusion are devaluing individuals and harming communities now? The exclusion of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered) folks is certainly one area. And true to our Universalist roots, our denomination has taken a stance. We open our arms to all people, to all families. This denomination was one of the first to support ordination of GLBT folks,

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and to take a stand in support of civil unions and gay marriage. Many congregations have gone through the process of become self aware in terms of GLBT issues through the “Welcoming Congregations” training and process. All of these are examples of living our Universalist heritage of love and inclusion.

And what other forms of exclusionism are playing out in your life? What forms of exclusion are playing out in our congregations? I invite you particularly to look at not just places where you might be excluded, but also places where you may be excluding people. Where do you personally draw the line? Are there people whom you feel are “other”, so different from yourself that you can’t relate? I have for example noticed in particular that Unitarian Universalists can be unintentionally exclusive along class lines. This I think is a very challenging area for us to have the courage to look at. It’s very important that we do. Where do you draw the line? Who is “other” to you? Where is fear playing into how you relate to those whom you perceive as different? Universalists were lower class people and their fear of the exclusion of folks like them after the merger seems to have come true. The Universalist message of love and inclusion suggests that we all have work to do in this area.

A second meaning of contemporary Universalism is oneness of religious sentiment. This meaning of Universalism is summed up in the bumper sticker: “God is too big to fit in one religion.” . . . Rumi puts it this way:

“I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Muslim. Doing away with duality, I saw the two worlds as one. I seek One, I know One, I see One, and I call One.”

The roots of the word “universe” mean “turning as one.” Whether we like it or not, we are all interconnected, interdependent, indeed, “turning as one.” As Universalists, we seek for the unity that harmonizes. As Universalists we attempt to discern the Oneness -- not only in our theologies -- but in all the known world.

The gospel of Universalism has a message of hope and a message of warning. We are all indeed one, interconnected, interdependent. The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh calls it “Interbeing.” Our very being is interdependent, interrelated with every other being. So there is no being that is not inherently part of us. There is no “other.” As a species, we’ll either recognize our commonality or perish from our divisiveness. Our very survival may depend on our ability to live the Universalist message of all-embracing love. In these times of global strife, particularly across religious lines. Universalism offers a compelling message of hope.

Bede Griffiths was a great teacher of this deeper Universalism. He was one of the greatest religious leaders of the 20th century whose influence is only now beginning to emerge. The Dalai Lama credits Bede with “opening the hearts and minds of mankind to gain understanding and acceptance of all the major religions.” He was a Benedictine monk. He also lived in India for more than 40

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years. Bede went deep into Christianity and also very deep into Hinduism. And you know what he found? One light. Within both Christianity and Hinduism -- the One same Light. In the words of Bede Griffiths:

“One of the greatest needs of humanity today is to transcend the cultural limitations of the great religions and to find a wisdom, a (universal) philosophy, which can reconcile their differences and reveal the unity which underlies all their diversities....”

Bede uses the example of the hand . . . with each finger representing a different faith tradition. At the finger tips they seem so different. But when you go deep to the center they share a common light. When Bede studied the different traditions deeply, he found the same light in the center. Do you know this Unity that Bede is speaking of? This is the religious experience, beyond words, beyond logic, beyond duality. This is the unitive state that members of any religion or no religion can experience. Some would say it is Love.

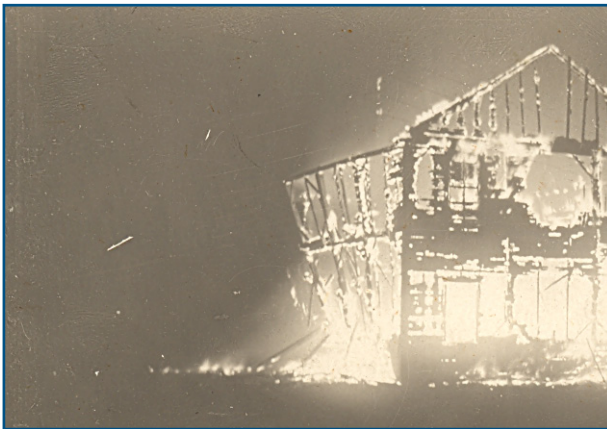
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Summer Services 2010

As in the past several years, the Universalist Heritage Foundation will again organize a series of summer services at the Universalist Memorial Church in Winchester. Watch for an announcement of dates and speakers in the late spring.

Our Website

We are in the early stages of developing a new website. As we have evolved over the last few years, so we want our website to keep pace. Hang on!



The frame of the old Universalist Church in Winchester, NH, the night it burned to the ground on September 11, 1909.

Announcing the Third Annual Universalist Heritage Sermon Contest

... to encourage deeper study of Universalist history and spirituality and the sharing of the Good News of this faith with ever wider audiences.

Theme – Sermon entries should bring to life the essence of the Mission of the Universalist Heritage Foundation:

To educate future generations in the Universalist tradition

To continue to put forth the Universalist message as an agent of hope for a fractured world, and

To celebrate and preserve the rich legacy of the Universalist faith.

We are especially interested in sermons which lift up in a compelling fashion the contemporary power and relevance of the Universalist message.

Award – \$500, and the opportunity to present your sermon in the summer of 2010 at the Universalist Heritage Center in Winchester, New Hampshire, site of the adoption of the historic Universalist Profession of Faith in 1803. The award-winning sermon will be featured in the fall 2010 issue of the UHF newsletter.

Eligibility – The sermon must have been delivered between January 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010. Theme talks at summer conference centers, District meetings, etc. will also be considered. Both ordained clergy and lay preachers are eligible for this award. We especially encourage seminarians to send us their sermons.

Submissions – Sermons should be sent by April 1, 2010 to:

The Universalist Heritage Foundation, PO Box 1641, Nashua, NH 03061. They may also be sent electronically as a Word attachment to UniversalistHeritageFoundation@gmail.com.

As much identifying information as possible should be removed from the body of the sermon. Attach a cover sheet with your name and contact information, as well as the date and the congregation or other gathering in which the sermon was presented.

Universalist Convocations

The 2010 meeting of the Universalist Convocations will be held in Rochester, NY, May 14–16. The keynote address on Saturday morning will be delivered by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, retired co-minister of First Unitarian Congregation at Toronto. His topic: “Dragged Kicking and Screaming to Heaven.” Saturday evening entertainment will be provided by pianist Alden Gatt, a senior at the Eastman School of Music, and Company B, a women’s vocal jazz trio.

For more information, please go to nmuc.org/Convo



The Armbruster Family, generous donors of the organ in our sanctuary at the Universalist Memorial Church in Winchester, NH, are shown here at the Dedicatory Service in August 2009. From left to right: Ed Armbruster, Harriet Armbruster, Skip Armbruster, Leslie Armbruster, Cathie Spruck, Mary Lou Spencer. The Armbrusters gave the organ in memory of Harriet's father, Rev. William J. Metz, and two relatives, Rev. Clinton A. Moulton and Rev. DeWitt Lamphear. All three were Universalist ministers.

General Assembly Workshop Affirms That “Love Saves”

Under the sponsorship of the Universalist Convocations we are able again to offer a workshop at this year's General Assembly in Minneapolis. The workshop will be a sampling of stories being gathered for an anthology to be published soon on the theme, “Love Saves.” This anthology will include stories appropriate for children, youth and adults, for use as Stories for All Ages, as sermon illustrations, in children's and adult religious education, even in a pastoral context.

Presenters at this workshop will be Universalist Heritage Foundation Advisory Board members, Rev. William Sinkford, and Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, as well as Board members Rev. Paul S. Sawyer and Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar.

A Preaching Workshop

Watch for an announcement coming soon of a Preaching Workshop led by Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, winner of our 2009 Universalist Heritage Sermon contest. M'ellen is a practitioner of an old and very effective Universalist extemporaneous style of preaching that is, as she describes it, “preaching from the heart.” The workshop will be open to ministers, seminarians, and lay speakers. The date has not been set at this writing, but is likely to be this spring.