

**United First Parish Church In Quincy
Sermon for 12/28/08 by Rev. Michelle Walsh**

“How We Became A UU People”

My tradition for the Sunday morning around New Year’s is that I preach a sermon related to our history as a Unitarian Universalist people. I have suggested in the last two years that we could benefit as a Unitarian Universalist people in taking a moment to reflect on where we’ve been and where we are heading by making such reflection part of our annual New Year’s liturgical calendar – similar to the way Yom Kippur functions in the Jewish tradition, Ramadan functions in the Islamic tradition, and Lent functions in the Christian tradition. Given that this is a particularly important year for us as a Unitarian Universalist denomination – we will be electing a new president of our denomination and we will be doing a preliminary vote on a revised set of purposes and principles – it again seems apropos to pause and reflect on who we are as a people.

But first, where do I get this term “peoplehood” from and why am I concerned with such a concept? Admittedly, I do not get this term from anything in explicitly Unitarian Universalist literature. If you spend some time googling Unitarian Universalism and peoplehood, you won’t come up with anything (unless the Google search engine happens to pull up one of my New Year’s sermons, which surprisingly it did!). Mostly what you find are links exploring UU identity. Now, “identity” is a much more static word, I think, than “peoplehood.” Here’s how Webster’s dictionary defines “identity:” “sameness of essential character;” “sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing;” “self-sameness;” “oneness.” The stress here is clearly on “sameness” – and Unitarian Universalists actually seem to embody diversity more than sameness, at least theologically. In fact, we often struggle to figure out good short “elevator speeches” to explain our identity amidst this diversity.

This is so much the case that many classic jokes about Unitarian Universalism revolve around our very lack of

“sameness” – jokes that seem to hint that perhaps we lack an ability to be decisive and to come together at all. One for example goes: “It is said that when three UU’s are together, among them on any subject there are at least four opinions!” Another one goes “Unitarian Universalism – where all your answers are questioned.” And I’m sure many of you have heard the one about the UU seeker who comes to a fork in the road and sees two signs: one saying “this way to heaven” and the other “this way to a discussion about heaven.” Guess which way our UU goes? Our last Commission on Appraisal report was also on this topic – *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. We cherish our individuality of beliefs as Unitarian Universalists – yet what *does* hold us together in our actions and in our practices as a people?

Perhaps we should take a step back from the word “identity” and consider instead our identity as a “Unitarian Universalist *people*.” Webster’s dictionary defines a “people” as: “a body of persons united by a common character, culture, or sentiment.”

Now this is a bit more of a fluid term – allowing for choice and

change, for identity through process and growth, rather than identity as unchanging sameness. Indeed, theologically, “peoplehood” may be a more fluid term fitting both with our Unitarian Universalist understanding that “revelation is never sealed” – new truths may always be discovered – as well as with our history of governing by covenant – by promises to each other of how we will be in relationship together. We are a vastly diverse group of individuals *choosing* to be in relationship with each other from a wide range of spiritual and ethical experiences and traditions – yet sharing a common character, culture, and sentiments.

My attention to the theological usefulness of the concept of “peoplehood” came from my exposure to its usage in the African-American theological tradition in the work of my advisor at Boston University, Dr. Dale Andrews¹. There are some things we could learn here because, like the African American Christian tradition, Unitarian Universalism remains much closer to its historical

¹ See Andrews, D.P. (2002). *Practical theology for black churches: Bridging black theology and African-American folk religion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Jewish roots. Puritans, our English-American ancestors, refocused on the language of “covenant” – a language of “promises” – as their way of organizing and governing religiously together, particularly as diversity of beliefs began to grow in their communities.

This same method of governing by promises to each other is how our current version of the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes is organized. The biblical roots of the language of “covenant” come from God’s promise to Abraham and his descendents and their promise in response to God – thus God’s mutual covenant with God’s chosen people. In addition to the centrality of Jesus in the African American Christian tradition, there is the centrality of the story of Exodus when God liberated God’s people from bondage – a story that has come to have deep meaning in the experiential reality of many African Americans. God fulfill’s God’s promise of justice in the story of Exodus, thus forever confirming the hope for this possibility in the face of suffering. In biblically rooted language, a “people” promise, they

covenant, to be in right relationship, in care, with one another and with, as we would say here at UFPC, a larger reality of hope, love, and justice to which a people respond and from which they seek a response – in whatever ways we conceive of that “larger reality”.

A “people” share and participate in the creation of their identity. Identity can become a mobile constructive phenomenon in the hands of a people – there is no timeless unchanging essential sameness when each individual participates continually in the establishment of the group’s character, creation of the group’s culture, and expression of the shared sentiments. When identity becomes static and dominated by a taken for granted sameness, the sense of peoplehood dies with it – likewise, when identity is dominated by a powerful elite minority, peoplehood also dies. Perhaps the reality of both of these possibilities is why John Adams would warn: “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There was never a democracy that did not commit suicide.” These are cautionary words we should hear well as both a Unitarian Universalist people and as an American

people. Those who participate, as well as those who fail to participate, impact the expression of group identity – one by seeking to influence the expression and one by taking that expression for granted.

I want to share with you today the story of our creation, of our birthing, as a Unitarian Universalist people – a story of passion and participation, of conflict and creativity – a story in which shared identity, “peoplehood,” was discovered in a very long process of coming together and finding common ground. It is not surprising that some of our most famous Unitarian Universalists have been politicians and diplomats, like Adlai Stevenson from our reading today, a UU who exhibited “an appreciation for compromise and the value of differences.” Creation of authentic peoplehood *is* a deeply political process because it entails clashes of real or perceived power as well as clashes of values. Our creation story as a Unitarian Universalist people is no different.

A large part of this story can be found in the book by Warren Ross, *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian*

Universalist Association. I highly recommend it. In 1960, the Unitarians and the Universalists joined together from two different religious traditions with two different creation stories of their own to become a new association. I have preached in a different New Year's sermon on the story of John Murray, but here is Ross' short version of the Universalist creation story:

John Murray leaves his native England in 1770 after the death of his wife and baby to start a new life in North America. When his ship runs aground off the New Jersey coast, he comes ashore looking for provisions and encounters Thomas Potter, who has built a chapel in the expectation that a preacher will come to testify to universal salvation. Murray is that man! Murray at first refuses, but when Potter persists, he agrees that he will preach on Sunday, provided the wind has not shifted enough by that time to set his ship afloat. It is a sign from God; Murray is still marooned and he not only expounds the Universalist faith he had adopted in England but is so inspired that he becomes an itinerant missionary, spreading his Universalist message from Pennsylvania to New Hampshire, eventually winding up in Boston.

Creation stories are important for identifying the themes of identity in a people – notice in this one the heavy emphasis on the rural, missionary quality of Universalism – on a poor man's faith in God, that God will uphold the covenant and deliver a preacher. We've

spoken before that the three core themes of Universalism are faith, hope, and love, but Universalists also tended to be from a different socioeconomic and organizational stratum than Unitarians historically.

Ross goes on to describe the Unitarian creation story, going back to our Transylvanian heritage, a heritage we've retained today in our meditation hymn selected for this morning "Find A Stillness". Ross writes:

The Unitarian tradition, predictably, deals not with simple folk (the threat of debtor's prison helped drive Murray out of England) but with a king. Though Channing and other nineteenth-century Unitarians looked primarily to England for their religious roots, twentieth-century Unitarians learned to trace their origins back four centuries to the time of King John Sigismund of Transylvania. In a Europe torn apart by the religious wars following the Reformation, John Sigismund summons representatives of the major faiths to plead their respective cases for becoming the kingdom's religion. The Protestants and Catholics argue for their respective orthodoxies, but Frances David, speaking on behalf of the Unitarians, pleads for tolerance for all, saying "We need not think alike to love alike." Persuaded that "no one shall be reviled for their religion by anyone," the king adopts Unitarianism and in 1568 issues an Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience, the first such document in recorded history. To this day, Transylvania is

still a center of Unitarianism, with some eighty thousand adherents.

Yes, as Ross himself points out, notice that Unitarianism is already tied into the center of elite power in this creation story – indeed, it becomes the state religion! This is not unlike the fact that Unitarianism in the 19th century *was* the religion of the Boston Brahmin elite, and most who wielded professional or political power were Unitarians in the Boston establishment. This is so much the case that when the State House was expanded in the 1920's, according to Ross, the American Unitarian Association was allowed to retain its current UUA address of 25 Beacon Street, even though they were moved to a different building and the numbers then became out of sequence.

In the Unitarian creation story, we also find the three themes typically lifted up for Unitarianism: reason, tolerance, and freedom. But interestingly, we also hear Frances David speaking of “love” underpinning tolerance – thus an early detected point of convergence with Universalism later. And a lot of “love” would

sure be needed to overcome the harsh stereotypes and rhetoric that flew between the Unitarians and Universalists in the 19th and 20th centuries. I'm sure Adlai Stevenson would agree that it takes a deep love and patience to foster deep understanding between people – for that matter, so would Thich Nhat Hahn.

What was the most significant barrier to Unitarianism and Universalism uniting? Again, Ross points to the socioeconomic and organizational factors. Universalists, Ross writes, “had long felt that Unitarians looked down on them” because they tended to be more rural, working-class, and less educated. Universalists were also more inclined to missionary work and less to institution building, believing in the power of the Holy Spirit to maintain their essential unity as a people. Ross affirms that “a widely held view among Unitarians was that Universalists were theologically too conservative, too emotional, and essentially ‘not like us’” when union began to be actively sought. Universalists were afraid of being swallowed up by the Unitarian institutional structure as well – this even bled into the debate about how to name the new union –

should it be Universalist Unitarianism or Unitarian Universalism and should the words be hyphenated? I think it was UU historian Mark Harris who told our UU history class that the Universalists were pleased that in the new name, Universalism was the central noun while Unitarianism was the modifying adjective – it would forever be Unitarian *Universalism*. It's also worth noting that consideration was given to calling ourselves the “United Liberal Church of America” to possibly attract Quakers and Ethical Cultural Societies, but the gathering of delegates opted for retaining recognition of the historic names of the two original denominations.

Unitarians and Universalists might never have gotten to the table finally to map out a plan of consolidation if their respective youth groups had not already merged under a new name in 1954, “Liberal Religious Youth,” and if the respective presidents of the two denominations had not heavily pushed the financial practicality and visionary potential of union. However, the biggest barrier which almost sank the union of the American Unitarian

Association and the Universalist Church of America was agreement on the wording of the Principles and Purposes in the plan for consolidation that was under consideration by 1,000 delegates – 600 Unitarians and 400 Universalists – in Syracuse in 1959.

When these delegates broke up into small group discussions and then separate business sessions, a man who would become the second president of the UUA, Bob West, reported that the Unitarian session was “unbridled democracy in action...a Unitarian Council of Nicea, a parliamentary cat fight...and a heated family squabble. They were all there, amid the determination to produce a reasonably good plan.” Amendment after amendment was offered and debated, pushing hours late into the night. But everything really broke down over the wording of those Principles and Purposes, with, of course, three factions forming: the Christian theists wanting recognition of the Christian heritage and God language; the “universalist” theists who wanted to acknowledge the many world religious traditions; and the

humanists who wanted no reference to any deities. (This was actually before the later version of the Principles and Purposes when the living tradition sources were separated into a different section.)

The compromise that salvaged the union literally hinged on changing one word. What was that word? It was a change from “*our* Judeo-Christian heritage” to “*the* Judeo-Christian heritage.” A change of just that small preposition, a compromise, gave some delegates the distance they needed – an experience of being heard and an affirmation of their right to be different but included – so that they now felt that they could participate in being part of this new Unitarian Universalist people. In 1960, the consolidation process was formally concluded in Boston with well over 1,000 delegates from the two denominations ratifying the plan by a vote of more than 5 to 1 and with the hymn “As Tranquil Streams” sung again and again to much tearful acclamation.

Formation and maintenance of peoplehood is a hard and challenging process. It requires reflection, participation, and the

ability to listen to one another and the willingness to compromise and to be transformed in the process. It also requires a capacity to ground our desire to find common ground and our practice of listening in a deep love of our higher purpose and larger reality.

Our creation story as a new Unitarian Universalist people is worth reflecting upon in this coming year. We understood when we created our UUA by-laws that maintenance of our peoplehood depended upon continual conscious reflection – we are required to revisit our principles and purposes at least every 15 years and revisions *have* occurred in the years since 1960, including the addition of the living tradition sources.

As I said in my October sermon, this year's proposal is the most major revision yet to the form and content of a document on which our very peoplehood was birthed and nearly died. There are quite a few congregations that have not spent time considering the implications of these changes in any depth. Many congregations are also not paying attention to or debating the two candidates for UUA presidency. In both of these omissions, we progressively fall

prey to the suicide of democracy of which John Adams warned so vigorously. We place ourselves in danger of saying – well, I never knew they were going to do that! *We are* the they. The increased hope and participation stimulated by the recent American presidency campaign has not yet carried over into increased participation in our UU associational life and politics. Here in Quincy, we may even benefit as a spiritual practice by reflecting upon our own church covenant every fifteen years, corresponding to the UUA's time of reflection on its principles and purposes. May we take that time in this new year to reflect upon the potential consequences to our sense of being a Unitarian Universalist people if we allow this static status quo to continue. Amen. Blessed Be.

Let us join together in singing as our closing hymn an increasingly popular hymn from the new turquoise hymnal, #1014, *Standing on the Side of Love*, #1014. Please rise in body or spirit as you are able.