

“Where is Our Universalism?”  
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I’ve studied Universalist and Unitarian history, and I’ve taught UU history courses. And I’ve been reading about Universalism for the past two weeks. There is SO MUCH I could say about Universalism. Its history is complex, and the early threads of Universalism are many. There are dozens of figures from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries who contributed to the development of Universalism. So, this is going to be one long sermon.

Seriously, though... I’m going to share with you a little bit about history and a little bit about theology this morning, but what I hope to leave you with is something about the larger legacy that our Universalist forebears have given us. Not just information, but something of the larger meaning of their contributions to who we are as Unitarian Universalists.

I’m going to start with a story about a young man. He was seventeen years old and 6 feet tall. So he stood out in the line of people who were waiting to be baptized on a cold January afternoon in Richmond, New Hampshire, The year was 1789. A revival had just ended at the Sunday service. Hosea Ballou and the other newly saved souls had trudged out there wearing heavy jackets, fur hats and thick scarves, tied around their faces, covering everything but their eyes to protect themselves from the bitter, icy wind.

Hosea Ballou’s older brothers had cut a hole in the thick ice of Martin’s Creek, over a deep spot. The new pastor of their Baptist church eased himself into the freezing water and, one by one, he dunked the newly saved in the frigid stream. The group was quiet, with the exception of Hosea. Emerging from the dip, he said, “Now I am part of the church.”

Hosea Ballou was the son of a Baptist preacher and he took his Christianity seriously. He and the rest of his family had moved to New Hampshire to get away from the oppressive state religion of Massachusetts. They lived a hard life on the frontier, in the southwestern part of the state and at that time there was almost no formal schooling available. His father had provided the fundamentals of his education. The Bible was one of the few books the family owned, and Ballou

studied it diligently, trying to square the Baptist church's teachings with what the Biblical writers had written.

One Sunday morning, not too long after Ballou had been baptized, he was sitting, listening to the sermon, when several men from a new church in town came by and started heckling the minister. They asked questions purposely designed to embarrass the preacher, questions that flew in the face of traditional church doctrine. These men included a former Baptist minister named Caleb Rich, and several members of the new church—a Universalist church. Ballou was stunned by the questions he heard. We're going to come back to this scene in a minute...

Here it might be helpful to mention that most Protestant Christians, including the local Baptist congregations, subscribed to a doctrine known as Calvinism, after John Calvin, one of the theologians who helped develop it. Calvinism, which is still alive and well, includes the belief that only some people will achieve salvation through Jesus Christ. God "elects" those who will be saved, and everyone else, when they die, will burn in hell for all eternity. These are the teachings that Hosea Ballou grew up with, as did most Christians of his day.

From where we sit as a congregation of liberal religious people, I think it can be difficult to understand how these ideas came to be, and why so many people believed (and still believe) in this doctrine of the salvation of the elect. For those who are interested in studying the evolution and diversity of Christian theology, learning about the thought of various Christian theologians throughout history can be quite fascinating. I did a lot more background reading and research over the past few weeks for this sermon than I had to, but I wanted to better understand Universalism in the context of its theological background. It's important to understand that Universalist thinking didn't just pop up one day in the mind of one person. It grew out of a more general chafing against Calvinist views. You can really trace the ideas which led up to Universalism all the way back to the beginnings of Christianity. And, I think it's also worth noting that a number of people developed similar Universalist ideas independently.

For today, here's a central point to bear in mind. After Jesus of Nazareth died, his early followers transformed the religion OF Jesus into a religion ABOUT Jesus. That is to say, the followers of Jesus were originally attracted by his radical message of love and justice, but after he died, they had a large problem. These followers, which included the authors of the Gospels, thought that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, someone anointed by God for some special task. We don't

really know exactly what the first-century Jews in Palestine meant by “Messiah” (which is “Christ,” in English).

But Jesus was arrested, tied to a cross and he died. None of the prophets who foretold the coming of a Messiah had mentioned this. So here was their big problem: no one had expected a crucified Messiah.

The religion ABOUT Jesus came out of the early Christians’ need to explain how the crucifixion of their Messiah could possibly be part of God’s plan. The theology OF Jesus was relatively simple and you could even summarize it as, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” But, in order to explain how God could have intended for their Messiah to be crucified, his followers and early converts had to do some pretty complicated theological acrobatics.

The explanation these early Christians came up with, which you can find in the Book of John in the Christian Bible, was that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son... so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life;” that is the essence of Christianity, the religion ABOUT Jesus.

And what exactly does that statement in the Book of John mean? Well, THAT was the question at the heart of many of the major theological controversies throughout Christian history.

Caleb Rich, the minister who stirred things up in the Baptist church Hosea Ballou was attending, was 21 when he had an intense conversion experience and became a member of a Baptist church in Warwick, Massachusetts. But, as writer David Robinson, in The Unitarians and the Universalists, wrote, “He was troubled by his religious motives, believing that a fear of hell was a selfish, and therefore tainted, motive for religious experience and moral action.”

The threat of hell, it seemed to Caleb Rich, was not a sound basis for conversion. This growing conviction was strengthened by several visionary religious experiences which confirmed to him the idea of universal salvation. The idea that the Christian God was a loving God, not an angry and punishing God.

That didn’t go over well in his Baptist congregation. They excluded him and his associates, which led Rich to form the first Universalist Church in America, in Warwick. He also founded churches in Richmond, New Hampshire (Hosea Ballou’s hometown) and in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

So, back to that morning in the Richmond Baptist church, where Hosea Ballou was a member. Caleb Rich and his cohorts were there asking questions in order to challenge the congregation. Don't just sit there and accept the status quo, they were saying, in effect. Think about whether or not what you're hearing makes sense!

Well, their questions stuck in young Hosea Ballou's mind. How could God be responsible for endless suffering in hell of men, creatures of his own making? The more Ballou thought about it, the more he became convinced that the only logical answers to questions like this led inevitably to the central idea of Universalism, that all people would be saved after death, not punished in hell.

Ballou's father, a Calvinist, was opposed to Universalism. On a sweltering August afternoon only 8 months after his baptism, Hosea Ballou was sitting inside the Ballou house, deeply engrossed in a book. His father came into the room and looked at his son, who had sweat pouring off his brow. Maturin Ballou asked him, "What are you reading, son?" Hosea replied, "A Universalist book."

"No wonder you're hot! The hell fires are singeing you!" his father boomed. "Get out; I won't have a Universalist book in this house."

As he rose to leave, Hosea showed his father the book's cover. It read, "Holy Bible."

In our reading this morning, Terry Sweetser refers to a process-ive approach to religion. Some would say that Unitarianism provides the rationalism to process-ivism, and that Universalism provides the fire of passion for it. Unlike the Unitarian intellectuals of Boston, Universalist's adherents were often self-educated. But they felt the joy of life and demanded a religion that expressed that joy and goodness. They didn't believe that they were evil and therefore doomed; they didn't read the Bible that way; and so they rejected the preaching of those who said they were. "This was the story of Hosea Ballou and the basis for his commitment to a religion of process," which is experiential and discovery-based, "rather than dogma," which is inherited tradition presented as absolute truth. (Sweetser)

When Ballou applied his process approach, he found himself "drummed out of his congregation" and out of favor with his father. (Sweetser) "Nonetheless," says Sweetser, "life still inspired him to speak out for the essential goodness of humanity and the loving nature of the divine."

Ballou was 19 when Caleb Rich approached him with an urgent mission: Ballou was needed to spread the message of Universalism to the people across the border in Vermont. Hosea protested, “But I have no education in theology!” But Caleb Rich was insistent and encouraged the young Ballou by saying, “You have the spirit, the love and the passion; they will fuel your voice.”

Ballou must’ve done well, because a few weeks later, at the Universalist Convention, Caleb Rich introduced Hosea Ballou to the gathering, saying, “This man is filling stony Vermont souls with the love of life and God. When he speaks, all have hope for the future.”

Ballou, Rich and the other early proponents of Universalism approached religion as a process of finding meaning. And they knew that often meant disagreement and controversy. After several years of itinerant preaching in small New England towns, Ballou had become a powerful preacher. And he was invited to fill the pulpit of the nation’s largest Universalist church, in Boston. Its regular minister, a well-known Universalist named John Murray, was in Philadelphia for 10 weeks, and Ballou decided to use the opportunity to try out some new ideas. The first week, he stated publicly that Jesus was human rather than divine. (This was 15 years before any Unitarian would utter such a radical notion in public.)

By the 10<sup>th</sup> week, Mrs. Murray, who had remained in Boston, had had just about all of Ballou’s theology she could stand. Ballou had gained quite a following and the room was packed. During his sermon, he noticed that Mrs. Murray was becoming more and more agitated. As he concluded, he saw her pass a note to the choir director, who interrupted to read the note: “I wish to give notice that the doctrine which has been preached here [today]...is not the doctrine usually preached in this church.” Ballou calmly said, “Will the congregation please take note of what has been said,” and proceeded to announce the closing hymn.

Ballou could tolerate controversy because he believed in process rather than dogma. From that point, Hosea Ballou went on to become the single most important leader in Universalism’s history. In 1805, he wrote his “Treatise on Atonement,” which brilliantly refuted Calvinism point by point, and was the first liberal theological statement published in this country. By 1818, he became minister of a Universalist congregation on School Street in Boston, where he remained for 34 years, until his death in 1852. Unitarians and Universalists would remark that no preacher had ever freed more souls than he.

And that is what religious teaching does, ideally. It frees us. It liberates people from the bindings of their beliefs, whether they are inherited doctrines, or personally-held ideas that no longer serve.

The religious journeys of Hosea Ballou, Caleb Rich and other early Universalists, I think, validate a processive approach to religion. Religion as a process of ongoing discovery. Not a blindly inherited belief system, but one that is examined and held up against our own experiences and understandings of what is true for us, what gives life meaning. Our Universalist forebears recognized that teaching people that they could live their lives based on love and life, instead of fear and punishment, would free them from their religious shackles. To Hosea Ballou, Caleb Rich and all the others, we are grateful.