

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday September 2nd 2018**

**Sermon:** “Onward and Upward”

Unlike many Unitarian Universalist ministers, I didn't go to a primarily UU seminary. Officially, we have two such theological schools, Starr King in San Francisco and Meadville Lombard in Chicago. Unofficially, there's Harvard Divinity School in Boston, which was effectively taken over by the Unitarians in the nineteenth century, and there was Andover Newton just west of Boston, which had a lot of UU students and that was ironic since it was founded precisely because the Unitarians had taken over Harvard.

Unlike those schools, with either actual or significant UU alignment, I went to the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, a seminary that is officially Methodist. A majority of the students were indeed Methodist, but there were plenty who came from other denominations or even non-Christian faiths, including, at any given time, up to a dozen Unitarian Universalists. The headquarters of the UUA's Mountain Desert District were in Denver, too, so between district staff and the ministers of the UU congregations all along the Front Range of the Rockies, from Colorado Springs up to Cheyenne, we got plenty of support. Along with the standard seminary classes on church history and the Bible and world religions and practical theology, then, we Unitarian Universalist students were able to get classes for credit on UU history, UU polity and UU religious education. (We also organized our own seminar on UU theology.)

Now it helped us that Iliff was a liberal school. It had a somewhat troubled relationship with the wider Methodist denomination for pushing the envelope on such issues as LGBTQ equality, which at that time would not allow anyone who was “out” to become a minister, and further back in time, Episcopalian students had even been forbidden for a while from going to Iliff, given some of the school's progressive activities. When I was there, there were a number of students who were still very much discerning their call to ministry, even trying to figure out whether they were Methodist or something else. Given the noticeable Unitarian Universalist presence at the school, some of those students even visited the local UU congregations, thanks to the fact that they'd actually heard of us!

That always brought some mixed feelings for me. Certainly I was glad that some of the people who would be my future colleagues were learning something about Unitarian Universalism. And when they heard something about us they liked, such as our progressive theology or our deep engagement with social justice, there was pride. But I also had those “first date” jitters: Will they like us? What if they don’t like us? What if nobody talks to them at coffee hour? Or, worse, what if somebody is weird to them?

But there was one student’s visit to one of the local UU congregations that I read about in the newspaper, and it’s stuck with me. I didn’t know this student personally — she was in her last year before graduation when I was in my first year there — but she was apparently getting noticed in the local Lutheran community, hence the newspaper article. Speaking of her own faith journey, she said that she’d tried being a Unitarian Universalist for a while, and liked much of what and who we are, but in the end, she decided, she couldn’t be a UU because we have just too optimistic a view of human nature.

As I say, that has stuck with me in the eleven or twelve years since then. I’d like to think that, a decade later, Unitarian Universalists have a more realistic, more nuanced view of human nature than was previously true. There’s a difference, after all, between believing that humans have the capacity to fix our mistakes and make the world a better place for everyone — which is, basically, humanism — and believing that we never do anything wrong and that we just have to be nice and then everything will be fine — which is plain foolishness.

You may think that’s a caricature, but it’s actually not far off the mark when it comes to the impression that many non-UUs have of us — and these are people who have actually got to know us. And it has deep, deep roots in Unitarian Universalism, particularly on the Unitarian side.

Consider that in 1885, Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke preached a sermon entitled “The Five Points of Calvinism and the Five Points of the New Theology”. In this, he was responding to the primary tenets of Calvinism, which takes an extremely dim view of human nature to the point that people are not only powerless but inherently sinful, and yet God’s already decided who’s going to heaven and who’s going to hell and there’s nothing that any of us can do that can change that. The Universalist response to

that was to argue that God's love is so great that nobody would go to hell anyway, end of debate, but the Unitarians liked the debate. In Clarke's case, he claimed that the emerging progressive theology that was Unitarianism was based on the primary tenets of "the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever."

Now aside from the fact that the theological tent of Unitarianism got bigger — and even more so as Unitarian Universalism — such that the old Unitarian monotheism gave way to a whole spectrum of ideas about divinity, such that Jesus — even a fully human Jesus — is no longer the only source of religious teachings — there are some problems with this.

For one thing, it sounds a lot like a creed. Freeman himself explained that "there is no harm in a creed", if it simply states what people believe. Rather, he said, "the harm comes from making the creed a perpetual standard of belief, a test of [...] character, and a condition of [...] fellowship." So, okay, if he's saying "this is what most Unitarians believe", then it's descriptive. The problem, though, is that sooner or later someone takes it to mean "this is what Unitarians are supposed to believe", which is prescriptive. Today's UUs are suspicious of anything that sounds like a creed, which I'd like to think is more a recognition of our theological diversity rather than knee-jerk individualism.

For another, there's a lot of male language in that. Fatherhood. Brotherhood. Man. Mankind. I'm going to come back to that.

The third problem is that it's ridiculously optimistic. The "salvation by character" part is, of course, the Unitarians' own response to the Calvinist idea that God has all the power and humans have none when it comes to who goes where in the afterlife. For the Unitarians, humans had all the power — and it's not clear that God had any. Live a good life, at least according to the teachings of Jesus, and you'd go to heaven. What Clarke wrote about "salvation by character" doesn't even mention God except as an object, not as a subject. It's no wonder that Thomas Starr King, who was both a Universalist and a Unitarian minister, joked that the Universalists believed that God was too good to send them to hell, whereas the Unitarians believed that they were too good for God to send them to hell.

And then there's the "continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever".

Now I don't think that Clarke was some naive pollyanna. He certainly had his own struggles, in his personal life and as a minister, and he was responsible for many very practical re-imaginings of church life that still shape what we do today. Indeed, in his sermon, Clarke lifts up the importance of hope, indeed the necessity of hope, particularly the hope of progress, the hope that things will one day be better than they are now. That's all well and good. The problem comes from the fact that Clarke claimed that hope was a sure thing because progress was guaranteed. He said,

"If hope abides, there is always something to look forward to — some higher attainment, some larger usefulness, some nearer communion with God. And this accords with all we see and know: with the long processes of geologic development by which the Earth became fitted to be the home of man; with the slow ascent of organized beings from humbler to fuller life; with the progress of society from age to age; with the gradual diffusion of knowledge, advancement of civilization, growth of free institutions, and ever higher conceptions of God and of religious truth. The one fact which is written on nature and human life is the fact of progress, and this must be accepted as the purpose of the Creator."

Remember that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, all sorts of scientific discoveries were being made, an explosion of knowledge that promised a fabulous future. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had been published, the transcontinental railroad had been built, and the Civil War had ended slavery. There were still plenty of social problems, but with science apparently showing an inevitable march forward, and with machinery defining modern life, and with society even moving in the right direction for once, maybe we can forgive Clarke for his optimism.

But what's that saying they mutter so hastily in adverts for investments? Oh, yes: "Past performance is no guarantee of future results."

The last couple of years have proved to us, of course, that progress is not guaranteed, nor inevitable. But the belief that it is guaranteed, that it is inevitable, is not merely Unitarian, it's also thoroughly American. And that means that we Unitarian

Universalists, inheritors of that Unitarian theology, are not nearly as counter-cultural as we like to think we are.

And remember all that male-centering language in Clarke's Five Points? Well, as UUs, we have done a lot to be more inclusive in our theology, replacing male-centric terms with gender-neutral and, more recently, gender-diversity inclusive language. But the roots of it are still there, hidden from our immediate view.

Take Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road", for instance. Great poem, speaks to us of our connection with the world around us, the need to keep going rather than stay in our comfort zones, the importance of companions for the journey, all good things that appeal to our modern UU sensibilities. And yet, Whitman was inspired to write his poem by the western expansion of the United States, when white Americans had the freedom to claim whatever land they wanted, never mind the native peoples who were already living there, simply because those white Americans believed they had discovered it. And that "Doctrine of Discovery" still has legal force today, used by the Supreme Court as recently as 2005 to deny the land claims of the Oneida Nation in New York.

For much of the history of this country, progress was tied up with notions of what it meant to be male and what it meant to be white. When James Freeman Clarke's Five Points of the New Theology talk about the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, we have to wonder if Salvation by Character applied to women for their own sake or if they only got into heaven according to their husband's character. And how should a native, colonized person hear Whitman's "Song of the Open Road"? Not, I'm guessing, as any sort of promise of progress "onward and upward forever".

The future is not male nor is it white. And for those of us for whom the last couple of years have jolted us out of our comfortable sense of progress, we have to thank, ironically, those who are furiously clinging to their belief that the future is white and male, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. After all, the racism and the sexism that has seemingly exploded in the last few years has not actually appeared out of nowhere. Anyone who isn't male or who isn't white has long been trying to tell us that the Nineteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Movement hadn't fixed all the ways that our society is broken.

Unitarian Universalists continue to promote hope, because it is important. We have to be careful about the overdone optimism that is part of our tradition, but I believe that, on the whole, we do have a more realistic, more nuanced view of human nature than was previously true.

For instance, my own “elevator speech” explaining Unitarian Universalism consists of two parts. The first is the Unitarian part, a statement of fact that we’re all in this together. I don’t think I’m making the same type of misinterpretation of what science is telling us that James Freeman Clarke did, when I note that everything we know from quantum mechanics to the economics of international trade, from atmospheric and oceanic currents to highway traffic patterns, demonstrates the reality of the interdependent web of all of existence of which we are, inevitably and inseparably, a part. The delusion comes from thinking that we are, in any sense, independent from other people or the world around us; the danger comes from thinking that we can be okay even if others are not.

The second part of my elevator speech, the Universalist part, is certainly not a matter of fact. Quite the opposite. It’s a statement of faith, in that I choose to believe it, because it gives me hope, but I am fully away that there is absolutely no guarantee or inevitability. That’s why it’s a statement of *faith*, that together we shall be well. As I say, I choose to believe it, I choose to believe that, working together, human beings can figure it out, make good decisions, fix our mistakes, stop making holes in the interdependent web, and make progress — even if gradual, even if halting — progress toward the Beloved Community. It’s not guaranteed nor is it inevitable, but the one thing I do know is that if we are to get there, it is only by going together, because we are all in this together.

Actually, this sort of approach to progress is more empowering, because it asks something of us. If we truly believed in “the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of [humanity] onward and upward forever”, what role do we really have in that, if it’s something that’s going to happen anyway? How is that any different than Calvinist predestination? If growing the Beloved Community is something that is up to us — all of us — as humans, if it’s a shared responsibility amongst humanity as a whole, then each of us has a role to play in making it happen, and every one of us is needed to make it happen.

In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed,

“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

“It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

May it be so.