

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula**  
**Sunday September 30th 2018**

**Reading:** from “The Opening Doors”

I took the words of this reading from the final sermon preached by Universalist minister Olympia Brown. She was eighty-five and had just voted in her first presidential election following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

“A short time ago a correspondent of the Nation wrote to the editor begging him to publish something hopeful. He said he was so tired of being discouraged; he longed for something hopeful. And he spoke for thousands who in this time of uncertainty and chaos and confusion are longing for a ray of light, something to relieve the discouragements of the hour.

“He spoke for the whole world that is longing for hope, and Universalism is the answer to that cry, for this the world waits.

“And this is Universalism: the grandest system of religious truth[, t]he doctrine for which the world waits.

“You may say that this is impracticable, far away, and can never be accomplished. But this is the work which Universalists are appointed to do. Universalists, sometimes, somehow, somewhere, must ever teach this great lesson[:]

“that every human being is a child of God, entitled to the opportunities of life, worthy of respect, and requiring an atmosphere of justice and liberty for [their] development.

“And that is the message which I bring you today. Stand by this great faith which the world needs and which you are called to proclaim.

“What signifies that your numbers are few today when you are inspired by truths that are everlasting and have before you ever the vision of final victory, the assurance of the salvation of all souls?

“Universalism shall at last win the world.

“Dear friends, stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important to you as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before you the loftiest ideals, which has comforted you in sorrow, strengthened you for noble duty, and made the world beautiful for you.”

**Sermon:** “Good Luck: Universalism in America”

Thomas Potter was a farmer. He inherited the farm from his parents, on land that William Penn had purchased from the Lenape people, in Good Luck, New Jersey, what is now Ocean County. Potter was a fourth-generation Quaker, but he was also influenced by the Baptists. Indeed, there was a group known as the Rogerines, who followed John Rogers of Rhode Island, and they were both Quaker and Baptist. One of their beliefs was that, at the end of time, all of creation would be restored or saved, which made them Universalists. For that matter, there was another group, the Ephrata Cloister of Pennsylvania, that was founded by German immigrants who believed in universal salvation. Potter had some affiliation or interaction with these groups, and he came to identify himself as a Universalist.

In 1760, at the age of seventy-one, Potter had a chapel built on his farm. The story we like to tell is that he built it for a Universalist preacher, and that he had to wait ten years for such a person to appear. In truth, however, Potter allowed people of all faiths to worship on his land, and it's quite possible that a member of the Ephrata Cloister, perhaps even the Universalist missionary George de Benneville, came to Good Luck and preached Universalism from the chapel's simple, Quaker-style pulpit at some time during the decade that followed. In any case, there was clearly a network of Universalists, stretching from coastal New Jersey into Pennsylvania, such that when a suitable preacher was available, there would be more than just Potter's family in the chapel to listen.

What we do know for sure is that, in late September 1770, John Murray came to Thomas Potter's farm.

Murray was English and had done some preaching with the Methodists, amongst various other jobs to support himself. In London, he attended the non-denominational

church of the revivalist George Whitefield, and Murray found himself drawn into an effort to “rescue” those who had fallen away from the church. Specifically, there was another preacher, John Rely, who had been part of Whitefield’s church and was now gaining some followers of his own. This was no mere issue of a disagreement. Rather, Whitefield preached Calvinism, that a few elect souls were already saved and only they would go to heaven, whereas Rely preached Universalism, that all souls would reach heaven.

Murray and his wife, Eliza, were diligent in trying to “save” one young woman who had converted to Universalism, and so to try to better understand what they needed to do to win her back, they read Rely’s book, they listened to his sermons, and they studied what others had written both for and against Universalism. Well, guess what happened: First Eliza was convinced that Rely was right, and then John. Soon enough, he was preaching Universalism, too, and — no surprise — both Murrays were made to leave Whitefield’s church.

This wasn’t the first time that John had been turned away from a church, but soon that was the least of his problems. His only son died in infancy, and then Eliza also died. Soon after that, he learned of the deaths of four of his siblings, too. He had gone into debt to pay for doctors and medicine for his son and wife, but now he couldn’t pay what he owed, so he was thrown into debtor’s prison. Murray’s brother-in-law bailed him out, and he was able to pay off the rest of his debt, but he despaired of life. Rely urged him to preach, but Murray refused, and in 1770, at the age of twenty-nine, he decided to leave behind the suffering of the old world and start anew in America.

The story goes that the ship carrying Murray ran aground on a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey, and the captain sent him ashore to find supplies. It was at this point that Murray met Potter, who learned something of the younger man’s life and discovered that they were both Universalists. So Potter asked Murray to preach in his chapel, but Murray refused. The ship would leave Good Luck as soon as the wind changed, but Potter did not relent. He convinced Murray to promise that, if the wind had not changed by that Sunday morning, then Murray would preach as requested. And so the days passed, but the wind did not change, and so John Murray preached Universalism in Thomas Potter’s chapel in September 30th, 1770.

Then the wind changed. The ship took Murray to New York, but he soon returned to New Jersey, and he and Potter were friends for the next few years until the farmer died at a ripe old age. In his will, Potter left the chapel to Murray, and of his benefactor, the preacher wrote, “He had unbounded benevolence, was a friend to strangers, and a feeling, faithful man whose hospitable doors were open to everyone and whose heart was devoted to God.” For a while, Murray traveled the East Coast as an itinerant preacher, before settling down in New England, where he was invited to preach to a Universalist group in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In 1792, that group incorporated as “The Independent Christian Church in Gloucester” and Murray became their first minister. Murray also helped connect Universalists from New England to Philadelphia, and in 1793 they formed what would become a new denomination, the Universalist Church of America.

Now Unitarian Universalists like to joke that Murray’s ship running aground at Good Luck and the wind keeping it there until Sunday morning is our religion’s one bona fide miracle. But while we cannot claim that Murray brought Universalism to America — given that various Quaker, Baptist and German groups believing in universal salvation were already here, or else how would Potter have been a Universalist already? — we can imagine that our religious history would be rather different if Thomas Potter had not convinced John Murray to preach in that chapel on his farm in Good Luck.

Had Murray merely lost himself in America as he had originally intended, he would not have been the public face of the lawsuit over parish taxes that led to the incorporation of the Universalist congregation in Gloucester. And it was Murray’s idea to form an association of Universalist churches — he was often the only delegate from New England who attended the Universalist convention in Philadelphia — and without that, there might not have been a Universalist denomination that, two centuries later, helped to produce today’s Unitarian Universalism.

Of course, today’s Unitarian Universalism is rather different theologically from the Universalism — and, for that matter, the Unitarianism — that produced it. Murray and his colleagues and their parishioners considered themselves Christians, understanding their call to ministry as putting forth, in Murray’s words, “a public witness of the truth as it is in Jesus”. The one point of doctrine on which they disagreed with their “orthodox” colleagues was the nature of salvation, but otherwise they were in agreement with most other Christian teachings.

It was only during the twentieth century, when many mainline denominations had progressed to the point of embracing — in a “it’s no big deal, let’s not talk about it” kind of way — the idea of universal salvation, that Universalism developed aspirations to be a more universal religion, intentionally growing bigger than its Christian roots. The fact that the Universalist Church of America was denied — twice — membership in the National Council of Churches — and on the second occasion was told that the reason for the denial was that the Universalists were too much like the Unitarians — only reaffirmed their intention to be a larger faith, a bigger religious tent that would welcome people of differing beliefs to share their lives with one another, emphasizing above all else the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

But just as Universalism developed in these ways, so did Calvinism evolve.

Remember that Universalism, the belief in universal salvation, that everyone would get to heaven, was in large part a refutation of the Calvinist belief that only some people were saved and predestined for heaven. It’s not that surprising that, over time, universal salvation found its way into more traditionally Christian denominations because, let’s face it, which is more appealing? The idea that God is love, or the idea that God has already decided, for all time, that most people will burn in hell forever? The first one, God is love? Yes, I thought so... So with Universalism gaining ground, that also meant that Calvinism was losing ground, at least when it came to beliefs about life after death.

There’s more to Calvinism than the predestination of life after death, however. There’s also the idea that if someone is saved, it shows up in their life before death. After all, if someone is saved, which has nothing to do with anything they actually did because there’s nothing that anyone can do compared with God’s omnipotence, then they have been especially favored by God, and that favor must have consequences in life.

At first, this meant that the person who had been saved would live a more righteous life. They would be more upstanding, more pious, more honest and honorable and — and this is important — humble. They would be a good person, not to try to earn salvation but because they had already been saved. Over time, though, this sense of moral fitness as a result of salvation gave way to other, particularly materialistic, indicators. After all, if someone did well in life, if they became wealthy and powerful, if they had privilege, then it must be a sign of God’s favor. And vice-versa, if they were not

doing well, if they were poor and powerless, it must be because they had not received God's favor. Moreover, this means that privilege is divinely instituted and should not — must not — be questioned.

We saw this cultural Calvinism at work this week, in the hearings held by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Sadly, it's hardly an unusual occurrence that when a man is accused of sexually assaulting a woman, it is the woman who is effectively put on trial rather than the man. And in this case, the man responds with anger that he should have to put up with such an accusation, that his reputation is being ruined. After all, he is successful, a good person by society's measures, and so he expects to be accorded the privilege that half of the committee — the half that is all men — would be more than happy to grant him. And when that expectation is not fulfilled, he reacts with a tantrum wholly unbecoming a Supreme Court justice.

Cultural Calvinism is the narrative that people are judged to be of value according to their circumstances. Men are valued more than women: if you're a woman accusing a man of sexual assault, then you're the one put on trial. White people are valued more than people of color: if a black person is killed by a white police officer, then it's all about what the black person did wrong. Wealthy people are literally valued more than poor people: if you're poor, or if you get sick and can't afford treatment, then you're blamed for your situation. Cultural Calvinism tells us that privilege — whether male privilege or white privilege or economic privilege — determines our worth, because if we have it, it's because we deserve it, and if we don't have it, it's because we don't deserve it.

Today's Universalism wholeheartedly opposes that cultural Calvinism, just as the belief in universal salvation opposed the idea of Calvinist predestination in Murray's time. Universalism lifts up the inherent worth and dignity of each person, not as something determined by mere circumstances or merit, but simply for being human. By the same token, Universalism also holds people accountable for their actions because that is how we respect someone's inherent worth and dignity, not by giving them the privilege of a free pass on bad behavior.

This is a message that our world badly needs to hear today. The world needs Universalism, just as it needed it a hundred years ago when Universalist minister Olympia Brown preached her final sermon. I mean, you could take this paragraph from her sermon, and if you didn't know the source, you'd think it was written this year:

“A short time ago, a correspondent of the Nation wrote to the editor begging him to publish something hopeful. He said he was so tired of being discouraged; he longed for something hopeful. And he spoke for thousands who in this time of uncertainty and chaos and confusion are longing for a ray of light, something to relieve the discouragements of the hour.”

Doesn't that sound like it was written in 2018, not 1920?

And yet the lesson that Brown calls us to share with the world to offer the hope that is so needed remains the same great lesson of Universalism, of Unitarian Universalism:

“that every human being is a child of God, entitled to the opportunities of life, worthy of respect, and requiring an atmosphere of justice and liberty for [their] development.”

It's not the circumstances of privilege or power or gender or race or class that determine someone's worth, as cultural Calvinism would have us believe. Rather, we should respect our common humanity, and thus owe one another accountability for how we live it.

I do take some hope from the fact that we are making progress — if painfully slow progress — in that regard. It was only half of the Senate Judiciary Committee that disrespected Christine Blasey Ford whereas it was the whole committee that disrespected Anita Hill three decades ago. The MeToo movement has called attention to how many women have suffered abuse by men, and there is growing awareness that power and privilege cannot go unchecked and unquestioned. The Black Lives Matter movement is similarly calling white privilege to account. We are also seeing the distress that results when privilege is questioned, the pain that comes from the necessary process of being held accountable, and the backlash from white nationalists and so-called “men's rights” groups claiming that they are being oppressed is evidence that progress is being made. It's all the more reason to keep pushing forward. “Universalism shall at last win the world,” as Olympia Brown preached a hundred years ago. Let's make sure we prove her right before another hundred years pass.

May it be so.