

The Past is not History
UUF

Rev. Walter LeFlore
February 4, 2018

“The past isn't dead. It isn't even past”, one of Faulkner's best-known lines, from Requiem for a Nun. Barack Obama used the line in his “A More Perfect Union” speech, 2008.

An unidentified book critic said “Faulkner is too easily pigeonholed as being about race. Or about ‘The Fall of the Old South’. But both of those miss the point -- Faulkner is about the past, and the struggle to both accept it as a part of oneself and continue into the future.”

Despite this being Black history month---it always bums me out that black history gets separated out, as if, just plain History does not include black people....but it does reflect the way most of our history is taught...couldn't they at least have picked a longer month?

Despite this being black history month, I want to focus on Unitarian Universalism today. My hope is to dig into our history so that we might recognize the past, accept it and continue into the future.

I'm going to quote heavily from Rev. Mark Harris's pamphlet,

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ORIGINS: OUR HISTORIC FAITH. I studied UU history with Mark at Andover Newton Theological school. He was a much better teacher than I was a history student.

“Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith.... “Heresy” in Greek means “choice.” During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Among these was a belief that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Thus the word “Unitarian” developed, meaning the oneness of God. Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Common Era (CE) was universal salvation. This was the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus, a Universalist believed that all people will be saved.”

In Puritan New England, each town was organized around its church; the church on many town squares today. All residents of the town paid a tax for the minister’s salary, while church membership required a confession of Christian faith. The minister was responsible for church spiritual leadership and the moral order of the community.

Harris says:

Free from the authority of the Bishops of the English churches, the idea of a free church took shape among the people—a church whose individual congregations were controlled by no outside authority. Over a number of decades in New England, radically lay-led churches gathered by mutual consent rather than by mutual belief, founded in covenant rather than creed, and governed by the congregation itself. By not holding widely varying theological beliefs, they were able to gather based on their belief that churches should be self-governing organizations gathered in the spirit of mutual love.

This form of congregational polity became documented and known as the Cambridge Platform. It defined matters of church officers, ministry, membership, and cooperation between churches.

Although changes in practice were being made as early as the second generation, it remains a defining document for Unitarian Universalism, Of the 65 congregations that voted to ratify the Platform in 1648, 21 are members of the Unitarian Universalist Association today.

(from Faith like a River)

I want to pay particular attention to this concept of the Cambridge platform...it's the foundation of our governing practices. *“self-governing organizations gathered in the spirit of mutual love which defines matters of church officers, ministry, membership, and cooperation between churches. “*

Maybe it's just me, but I think we tend to clip the ends off of the Cambridge Platform. I suspect we've come to know a shortened version of it, not the full meaning.

We focus on the part about self governing organizations...and tend to drop out the *“in the Spirit of mutual love”* part. We tend to focus on our right to define church officers, ministry and membership. We tend to drop off the part about cooperation between churches.

One of our UU curricula says: *“Covenant is the silk that joins Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations, communities, and individuals together in a web of interconnection. The practice of promising to walk together is the precious core of our creedless faith. It says: “Covenant” is both a noun and a verb. It can be a written agreement among individual*

community members promising to behave in certain ways, and it can mean to engage in mutual promises with Spirit, with other people and communities. We would do well to emphasize covenant as a verb.

Like so many things in life, it's the doing that matters not so much what we call it. It's the verb part that truly makes a difference in our connection to each other, with other UU congregations and the larger community as a whole.

American Unitarianism and Universalism both grew up in the mid-late 1700s. Unitarian congregations emerged in New England, out of a rejection of Calvinism, with a belief in free human will and the loving benevolence of God. A significant number of Unitarians lived in the greater Boston area as the well-off business men, Harvard educated, the elite.

The earliest preachers of the gospel of universal salvation, Universalism, appeared in the Middle Atlantic and Southern states and in the rural, sections of New England. Through biblical studies they discovered the new revelation of God's loving redemption of all.

Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized.

Universalism was a more evangelical faith than Unitarianism. After officially organizing in 1793, the Universalists spread their faith across the eastern United States and Canada.

A fun saying that's been around for a while says, "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, and the Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned." The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and that worth and dignity are innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class.

I've long believed we need to emphasize our Universalist heritage more than our Unitarian, elitist heritage. Because the past is not history. The past is never dead. It's not even past."

I've been giving this a lot of thought lately; talking with colleagues. I want to point to what I've come to believe is the Achilles heal of Unitarian Universalism. It's what I believe keeps us from having a larger

presence in the public square; a bigger impact on life in our communities. And I fear it keeps us from having a deeper spiritual connection with the interconnected web of existence.

I believe we need to revisit the Cambridge Platform, if necessary, in order to place increased value on the connection between congregations and between congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association. Remember, we exist based on covenant...a covenant... of “*self-governing organizations gathered in the spirit of mutual love.*”

I fear we’ve placed such an emphasis on independent choice (the Greeks call it heresy) that we’ve gotten out of balance; that we’ve weakened the power of our belief in every person’s inherent worth and dignity, our belief in Universal Salvation, that everyone can be saved, reconciled with the all.

We do not need to give up choice in order to make this shift in orientation. We merely need to accept that every choice makes a different choice less likely.

Successful couples at some point make the shift from what's good for me, the "I", to what's best for us, the "we". As long as each or even one member of the couple is primarily focused on the "I", the relationship is diminished.

If we place a high priority on maximizing the power of our beliefs, we should choose to be in covenantal relationship with other UUs, both near and farther away. For we know there is power in numbers.

Lets choose to maximize a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Lets choose to enhance the reality of justice, equity and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Lets enhance the world's respect for the interdependent web of existence. And let our spirits be fed by our connections, and mutual trust and love.

Ashee and amen.

