

# Reflections on Being a Universalist

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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This November we are celebrating the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of our congregation. As part of this year's celebration I was asked to bring the history of the Church up to date and in doing so had the opportunity to think about my own Universalist heritage and the Church of my youth. Here at Olinda the land for our Church building was given to the congregation by Big Mike Fox who was a local farmer. Mr. Fox had been interested in the Universalist idea of salvation for everyone, for at least twenty years before our congregation was founded. During that time, he and Mrs. Fox distributed Universalist literature locally which they obtained from a publisher in Utica, New York. They were greatly taken with the idea of a loving God who would not condemn anyone to hell for eternity. However, at that time the largest Church in Essex County, the Baptist, did not agree with this point of view. The Baptist, in the words of a local citizen, "with renewed vigor, sought to counteract [Universalist] influence by a more literal presentation of an endless hell and kindred doctrines."

Olinda was founded by converts to this Universalist message of a loving God. There is some confusion about what the Church was called for its first years but the most likely name was The Church of Our Saviour, thus indicating that the founders considered themselves to be Christian, probably believing in Jesus as the Son of God. As befitting a Christian Church, Olinda has a communion tray with small glasses now kept in storage. In the forty years I have been a member here, this tray was used only once when Rev. Martha Munson had a communion service with modern words. It was not popular.

I remember taking communion with modern words in the Universalist Church I "grew up in" in West Hartford, Connecticut. That Church was then called The Church of the Redeemer, Universalist. Like Olinda its name denoted a connection to its Christian foundation. The Church of the Redeemer is a large brick building with two huge impressive white columns in front and a tall steeple. The interior is plain as befitting a New England Church, with tall Gothic windows not unlike ours, only much larger. On the wall behind the pulpit was a large painting in muted colours of a young Jesus sowing seeds. I wonder if it is still there now because the congregation has moved far beyond this close connection to Jesus. It is now called the Unitarian Universalist Church of West Hartford.

For thirty-five years the Minister of my Church was Rev. Dr. Wallace Grant Fiske. He was what I think of as an old time Universalist speaker, like Mr. Thompson the one time I heard him speak here at Olinda. Rev. Fiske had a broad education and could quote or reference widely from literature. Although nominally a Christian Church at that time, it was very liberal and belief in Jesus as the son of God, or even belief of a living God, was not required for membership. Therefore Rev. Fiske was not allowed to be a member of the Council of Christian Churches in the Hartford area.

I was in the Youth Fellowship. We met Sunday afternoons at 5pm for a three-hour meeting. The first hour was choir rehearsal because the Youth Fellowship was the choir for the early, 9am Sunday Service. Then we had a pot luck dinner organized by the Mothers of our group of around 30 High Schoolers, and then a meeting. As a choir member for four years while I was in High School, from the Choir Loft at the back of the Church, I heard many, many sermons. After High School I lived with my honorary Grandparents and attended Hartford College for Women. My Granny and I sang in the Adult Choir for the 11am service. Two more years of sermons! It was quite an education.

"Love is the Doctrine of this Church." That was the beginning of the avowal of faith that we said in unison every Sunday morning. I remember that Love was frequently the subject of Dr. Fiske's sermons. He talked

about love in our families, our communities and our world. He talked about what love is, what it means to love and why it is so important. He delivered sermons on other important topics such as charity, forgiveness, hope and the UU principles, but it seems to me that Love was a frequent topic. In my mind I can still hear him say “and the greatest of these is Love.”

As was common in his day, Rev. Fiske occasionally referred to the Bible in his sermons and often used a quotation from the Bible for the Reading. The Bible quotation, of course, was relevant to the subject of the sermon. It did mean that I heard a lot of readings from the Bible and also how the verses could be interpreted for a 20<sup>th</sup> Century audience. I cannot remember any time when Dr. Fiske mentioned the word hell. His sermons were about this life and how to live morally, happily, responsibly. His literary quotations were always apt and interesting. The Church prospered because Rev. Fiske was such a good speaker.

One outcome of all this Universalist “education” came in handy in High School. I attended a girls’ school. Our Headmistress arranged for a Professor from nearby Wesleyan University to come once a week in our Junior Year to instruct us in the Old Testament. Then in our Senior Year a different Professor came to lecture on the New Testament. By the end of our Senior Year, all thirty-four of us were exhausted with applying to Universities and getting ready for our final High School exams. So, when the Professor announced a final exam for our New Testament course, there were groans in the classroom. One of the girls asked if everyone had to take the exam. After a moment or two the Professor said that anyone with an A in the course would be exempt. During the year we had had homework on passages from the New Testament. We were asked to interpret or explain quotations. I did not find this difficult, after all I had had a lot of instruction from sitting in the Choir Loft. There were five of us who were exempt: me, the only Universalist in the class, my friend Priscilla, the only Unitarian, and the three Jewish girls. I love to tell this story. All the Christian girls took the final exam.

In 1961 I voted for the Unitarian Universalist merger and instantly became a Unitarian Universalist but my roots are in Universalism. When I left West Hartford, other things happened in my life and I did not regularly attend another Church until I came to Olinda forty years ago. However, I carried my Universal heritage with me, the benefit of all those sermons. Of great importance for me during that interval were the Unitarian Universalist Principles, especially the first one, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” I went to University in North Carolina which I told my northern friends was like going to a foreign country and then I lived in England for four years, another foreign country. In both places I was at first adjusting to people who spoke the same English language but whose thoughts and beliefs had quite a different basis. But my Universalist belief in the worth and dignity of everyone gave me a touchstone for my own behaviour. To treat other people with dignity because they have value, I realized at a young age, was how I should behave because I am the only person whose behaviour I can control, no matter who I am with or where I am in the world.

How does a religion control behaviour, you might ask. Well, one way is to threaten punishment for bad behaviour. In Christianity that means one’s whole life is judged at death and for a failing grade the possibility of eternity in hell. We Universalists, like Mr. and Mrs. Mike Fox, believe in a loving God, if we believe in a God at all, and so the possibility of eternity in hell does not motivate us. However, it is interesting to know that our Universalist idea of eventual salvation is a very old idea. One of the earliest Christian theologians, Origen, who lived from the year 185 to 253 CE, believed in universal salvation, that all souls would eventually go to heaven. He believed that going to hell first was temporary, a time and place to purify souls to make them ready for heaven. For this he was declared a heretic.

I think that we Universalists like to think that we have had an influence on Christianity, softening its stance that hell is for eternity. But here is a recent statement by a Christian Minister in his rebuttal of Universal salvation. He says “[t]he New Testament explicitly denies Universalism. Our Lord Jesus speaks repeatedly about the reality of hell, about the gravity of judgment, and about the eternity of hell, that the fire does not go out, that the darkness never ends.”

Even as a child I did not like the idea of a God who was watching over my shoulder and judging all my thoughts and actions. I guess I was always an agnostic or atheist, meaning for me that I was just not interested. And I am surprised when I talk with Christians who believe in a literal place of punishment. I did not grow up with that particular fear. It is a great motivation if you believe in hell but also, I think, destructive if it engenders fear of a vengeful God and fear of judgment. Everyone makes mistakes. We live in a complex world, a world not of right and wrong but instead a world of a huge number of possible choices. The best we can do is to try to make the best decision possible at the time, to try to be a good family member, good student, good citizen, good worker or good at whatever it is we do. This life has its pleasures and rewards and also regrets and even remorse but for a Universalist not the fear of everlasting punishment.

A few years ago, when I was visiting friends in West Hartford, I visited the Church of my youth. Inside the sanctuary I climbed up the narrow stairway into the Choir Loft. As I looked around, I felt thankful for the opportunity I had to hear many, many Universalist sermons, sermons which were focused on this life and on the Unitarian Universalist Principles which have helped me to navigate, as best I can, in the circumstances that have come my way.

Amen and Blessed Be. Jane A. Innerd

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*Suggested Hymns:*

**#145 As Tranquil Streams**

~)-| Words: Marion Franklin Ham, 1867-1956

Music: *Musicalisches Hand-buch*, Hamburg, 1690, adapt.

WINCHESTER NEW L.M.

**#88 Calm Soul of All Things**

Words: Matthew Arnold, 1822-1888

Music: Thomas Tallis, c. 1505-1585

TALLIS' CANON L.M.

**#134 Our World Is One World**

Words & Music: Cecily Taylor, 1930- , © 1988 Stainer & Bell, Ltd., all rights reserved, used by perm. Of Galaxy Music Corporation

Music arr. by Richard Graves, 1926- , © 1988 Stainer & Bell, Ltd.

CHERNOBYL 5.8.8.6.4.