

**“The Importance of
Appreciating Our History”**

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Universalist Church
Kansas City, Missouri
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June 11, 2006

Today is not only an historic day in the life of this congregation; but it is an historic day in my own life as well. Not only does this service mark the first time in its one-hundred thirty-eight year history that All Souls has conducted a Founders' Day service; but it also marks the first time that I have ever preached a sermon from this pulpit. It is my hope that just as this sermon shall inaugurate for me the beginning of one of the most important dimensions of professional ministry, that so too shall this be just the first of what will hereafter become an annual event here at All Souls.

But today is not merely an *historic* day for All Souls, but is also an *historical* day for All Souls; that is, not only does it mark a significant event in our history, it also serves the purpose of commemorating our history. It seems very appropriate to me that my first sermon here at All Souls should allow me to combine two of my most passionate interests; those being religion and history. Likewise, considering the nature of this event, it also seems appropriate that its genesis would have taken place within the context of a religious history class.

During my first year in seminary, I took a course on the religious history of the United States. One of my assignments for that course was to write a history of this congregation. In order to complete that assignment, I spent a great many hours pouring over thousands of documents contained in this church's archives, the existence of which I was previously totally unaware. During the few short weeks that I researched the history of this congregation, I managed to learn more about its history than I had managed to learn in the entire previous twenty-five years since I first joined this church, which at that time constituted half of my life.

That experience prompted me to wonder why it is that this congregation could have such a rich and fascinating history, but that so few persons could be aware of it. During the course of my research, it also became very apparent to me that not only does this congregation not do very much to instill within its membership an appreciation for

its history, but that it has been down-right neglectful of its responsibility to preserve and to protect that history. The very fact that this is the first time that this congregation has held a Founders Day observance is itself testimony to our neglect and our lack of appreciation of our history.

I found the archives to be highly disorganized, and that it was extremely difficult to find any particular piece of information for which one might be searching. Despite the progress that has been accomplished over the past three years, it is still quite difficult to locate any particular piece of information that one may desire to find. I also discovered that there were errors contained in some of the various short congregational histories that had been written over the years, including within the one that is considered to be the most definitive history of this church prior to its present location; which was written by one of its former historians.

But there was one discovery which I made during the course of my research that illustrates better than any other the degree to which this congregation has neglected the stewardship of its history. I discovered that in 1945, this congregation acquired from the American Unitarian Association a pulpit from which Ralph Waldo Emerson had once spoken. That pulpit had been previously owned by the University Church of Lawrence, Kansas, a Universalist congregation that became inactive. This was the pulpit that was in use at this church's previous location on Baltimore and Armour.

In what seems an almost miraculous manner, that pulpit actually survived the fire that destroyed that church in January 1951 because it became completely encased within a coat of ice, which allowed it to escape from that fire utterly unscathed. However, that seemingly miraculous intervention which saved that pulpit eventually proved to be all for naught, because sometime during the subsequent years, that pulpit was simply thoughtlessly discarded.

There is no question that we really did at one time own a pulpit from which Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke; we have the documents to prove that we did; yet no one knows what became of it. Even more surprising to me than this was the fact that when I started inquiring about the whereabouts of this pulpit, that no one in the congregation was even aware that we had ever owned such a pulpit. I find it to be absolutely staggering to realize that we once owned a pulpit from which Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke; and that not only was it thoughtlessly discarded, but that there was likewise absolutely no recollection of our ever having even owned such a valuable object.

So this morning at this first Founders' Day service for All Souls, I would like to acquaint you some of the most significant facts about this congregation that I have discovered while researching its history, and I hope to thereby pique your interest in it enough that you will want to learn more; and maybe even that you will become as passionate about celebrating our history as am I.

Since this is a Founders' Day service, it is appropriate that we begin with the founders of this church, of which there were three. Their names were Maj. Henry A. White; Alfred Pirtle and Edmund K. Rugg; and all three were New England abolitionists who had moved to the Midwest to attempt to halt the westward expansion of slavery during the 1850s.

This was a time when it was not uncommon for mobs of angry pro-slavery advocates to march through the streets of Kansas City shouting "Death to all the damn Yankees!" and for abolitionists to rightly fear for their lives. Another one of the earliest and most prominent members of this congregation, Col. Kersey Coates, who was also a New England abolitionist, reported in his diary that during this time he and his wife always slept with loaded pistols under their pillows and a shotgun next to their bed just in case they might be attacked by anti-abolitionists.

This congregation was formally established on the second of June 1868; and was originally called the Unitarian Society of Kansas City because the term *church* was deemed to be too "Romanish." Since its beginning, the history of this congregation has been inextricably intertwined with the history of Kansas City itself.

The fact that Kansas City became the major metropolitan area that it presently is, is attributable primarily to the construction of the Hannibal Bridge across the Missouri River in 1868, which resulted in Kansas City becoming the top destination for cattle drives in the post Civil War era. That, in turn, resulted in Kansas City becoming the second largest railway hub in the United States, being surpassed only by Chicago. This bridge was designed by a man named G. S. Morrison, who was, in fact, one of the founding members of this congregation. Other founding members of this church were among the prominent civic activists who promoted locating this bridge in Kansas City rather than at one of the other cities which were vying for its construction. Thus, the very rise of Kansas City to its present status as a major metropolitan center is largely attributable to some of the earliest members of this congregation. Appropriately, that bridge was completed in the very same month that this congregation was founded.

The present location of this church is not the first, but is the fourth location that this congregation has called home. Two of those previous locations were destroyed by calamities; our first church building was destroyed by a tornado that swept through downtown Kansas City in 1886; and our third church building was destroyed by a fire in 1951.

But tornadoes and fires are not the only adversities with which we have been confronted throughout our history. Over the years, All Souls has suffered many setbacks and disasters, some of which have brought it to the brink of extinction, but the congregation has persevered through adversity time and time again, only to bounce back with greater strength and resolve every single time.

There have been times when we have been forced to meet in temporary spaces because we did not have our own building; and those temporary spaces included a YMCA, a movie theatre, the Kansas City Atheneum, the chapels of other churches, and the auditorium of the Art Institute.

There were times in the history of this congregation that its financial condition was in such dire straits that it was forced to rent its building out to a Christian Science denomination and to a military regiment which used it as an armory. There have been several times during the history of this congregation that it has been precariously positioned upon the brink of utter collapse, but that in each of those instances it has managed to pull itself back from the precipice, and to subsequently experience periods of dynamic growth and prosperity. One such instance in particular deserves mention.

In 1904, the congregation had incurred such an insurmountable amount of debt that it actually decided to close its doors, and had put its building up for sale. It was only because a Unitarian couple from New England, John D. and Elinor C. Stevens, moved to Kansas City and sought out the local Unitarian church that it was saved. Much to their dismay, they found a "For Sale" sign on the front door of the church. Fearing that the congregation was on the verge of disbanding, they immediately sought out members and visited with them. Their considerable enthusiasm was successful in renewing the optimism of the congregation and persuading them to persevere during this time of difficulty. Without the fortuitous intervention of these two persons at that time; which seems to me as nothing less than absolutely providential, this church would not exist today.

Soon thereafter, the Booth Oyster Company, whose West Bottoms location had been flooded out in the Flood of 1903, bought the property, once again enabling All Souls to pay off its debts, and to have money left over in the treasury.

The congregation soon thereafter began construction on a new stone building on Baltimore Street near Armour Boulevard. Construction on this building was completed one hundred years ago in 1906; and this became the church's third location, marking another rebirth for All Souls.

Another great crisis in this congregation's history occurred in 1897, when the minister of this church, John Emerson Roberts, who was not a Unitarian, but a Universalist, resigned his position after coming under considerable criticism from the Board of Trustees because his views were deemed to be too liberal; taking with him approximately seventy percent of its membership to form his own church, which he called The Church of This World. I imagine that this time must have been for this congregation akin to what it was like for Israel when the Assyrians invaded them in 722 b.c.e., and carried off ten of its twelve tribes, which were subsequently never heard from again, and whose fate has remained a mystery throughout history. Yet, like Israel, All Souls was able to bounce back from this crisis as well.

There are literally hundreds of other significant facts about the history of this congregation of which I imagine very few of you are aware. For instance, did you know that the first constitution that this congregation established in 1895 contained a provision stating that it considered the Bible to be a "sufficient rule of faith and procedure;" and that that provision was not removed until thirty years later?

Did you know that the Rev. David N. Utter, who along with the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, conceived of the first Parliament of World Religions in 1893, had previously served as a minister of this congregation?

Did you know that the very first women's organization in this church was a theatrical troupe called the Merry Unitarian Maidens?

Did you know that while Sinclair Lewis was conducting research

for his novel *Elmer Gantry* among various Protestant denominations in this city that it was the minister of this congregation, the Rev. Leon Birkhead, who was a personal friend of Sinclair, who introduced him to many of the ministers upon whom the title character of his novel was based?

Did you know that that same minister, Leon Birkhead, was also one of the earliest and most vociferous voices against the rising tide of fascism in Europe at a time long before the danger that it posed to civilization became widely apparent, and that he resigned his position as minister of this church at the outbreak of World War II to concentrate on his anti-fascist work and to found an organization called The Friends of Democracy?

Did you know that during his tenure as minister here, that this church was known as *The Liberal Center* and that its newsletter was called *The Liberal*?

Did you know that during the 1930s, the great pioneer for women's reproductive rights, Margaret Sanger, gave a series of lectures on that subject in this church?

Did you know that it was women from this church who led the campaign to clean up the widespread political corruption engendered by the administration of Tom Pendergast that had so thoroughly infected Kansas City politics?

These are just a few of the very fascinating facts that comprise the vast history of All Souls that are largely unknown by the vast majority of its membership.

But exactly why is it so important that we know our history, that we make it known to new members, and that we both preserve and celebrate it? George Santayana's maxim that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" is of course one of the

most familiar admonitions in the entire English language; but we seem to be more guided by Henry Ford's dismissive utterance that "[h]istory is more or less bunk."

I believe that there are two primary reasons why we should pay a lot more attention to our history. The first is that knowing the history of our congregation provides to us a much deeper sense of connection to that congregation. When one realizes that one is part of something that has deep roots and a long history of advocacy for social justice and active involvement in social justice issues, one is much more likely to see himself or herself as carrying on an important legacy that has been bestowed upon them by previous generations of individuals who strived to make this city and the world a better place. Knowing the history of this church provides to us an assurance that we are all part of something much bigger than our individual selves; and thus, that whatever personal dissatisfactions we may have with the church are greatly outweighed by the legacy that has been bequeathed to us by our forebears.

The second reason that we should pay more attention to our history is that there are many lessons which we can learn from it. There are two lessons in particular to be discerned from our history that I would like to share with you.

One of these lessons is that this congregation has seemed to flourish during times that it has had a charismatic minister as its leader, but that it has always fallen back upon hard times following the departures of such ministers. So our history tells us that, while it is good to have a charismatic minister, that it is possible to place too much responsibility on the minister for the welfare and continued survival of this church; and that ultimately maintaining the welfare and continued survival of this congregation is more the responsibility of its membership than it is the responsibility of the minister.

But perhaps the most important lesson which I have been able to

discern from my research of the history of this congregation is that this congregation must minister not only to the intellectual needs of its congregants, but also to their spiritual and emotional needs as well.

There is one passage in earliest written history of this congregation which better illustrates that than any other. It is in the history written by Mary L. McCarthy in 1924. Describing a fifteen year period of time during which she dropped out of membership, she wrote that she was able to gain just as much from staying home and reading a book than she was from attending the service. It was only because that after Leon Birkhead became this church's minister in 1917, that he took the trouble to visit her and other former members who had dropped out of membership, and to ask them how the church could address their needs and concerns that she decided to return.

Over the years since I first became a member of this church, I have noticed that members quite often drop out of membership for a period of time and later return. I have myself dropped out of membership and subsequently re-joined this church several times; and I know that there are many others who have followed this same pattern.

A lot of you probably remember the state of dissension that wracked this church a decade ago. The dissension within this church was so great at that time, that it had to hire professional consultants to come in to examine the situation, and to make recommendations about how to remedy it. One of the observations contained in their report was that this congregation suffered from what it called a "revolving-door membership;" and that one of the reasons for this was that a great many new members did not feel that their spiritual needs were being met. I think that our present minister, Jim Eller, has done a lot to diminish this "revolving-door membership" phenomenon, but that it still exists to a considerable extent; and that there is more that we could do to address it.

Clearly, for many of us, this congregation has not always adequately

provided for our spiritual needs. I think that there are two reasons for this, and that they can both be derived from studying our history. The first is that we have valued individualism too highly; and the second is that we have valued intellectualism too highly. I think that individualism and intellectualism are both very admirable traits that we *should* value highly; and that we should strive to nourish them within our membership; but I think that they also have limitations as virtues.

Individualism must be balanced by a recognition that we are not simply individuals; or even that we are simply the sum of our individual selves, but that none of us are entirely self-reliant, and that collectively we are more than the sum of our individual selves. And while intellectualism is also a virtue that we should strive to nurture within ourselves, it is also important to realize that we can not continue to survive if we are only a religion of the mind; that we must address the emotional and spiritual needs of our membership as well; that we must become holistic in our approach to ministry.

In a poem written to commemorate the centennial of the establishment of this church, this church is described as one "whose sole concern is saving lives, not saving souls." I find this description to be remarkably ironic considering that the very name of this congregation is *All Souls*. Yet we have considered the task of ministering to the souls of its members to be of secondary importance to that of ministering to their minds, even to the point that the soul is considered entirely irrelevant by some persons, and at best a junior partner to mind by others.

I can actually remember once hearing it stated in a sermon within the past two years that Unitarian Universalism is a religion of the mind.

Nothing better demonstrates the secondary status to which the soul is consigned than the fact that we have a separate service which we

designate as Service for the Soul. That designation implicitly conveys the message that our Sunday morning service is for the mind, and *not* for the soul; and that the soul is of secondary importance. That service is in fact a *ghetto* to which we consign the soul.

I believe that the greatest challenge facing both Unitarian Universalism as a denomination and this congregation in particular at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that of healing the schism that has been created between its mind and its soul. We have to allow the soul has to come to the forefront; and to take its rightful place alongside the mind, instead of treating it as though it were some poor relation of whom we are embarrassed. I am not suggesting that the salvation of souls should become our congregational mission, but rather that the *care* and the *nurture* of the soul must become a more significant component of both our identity and of our mission.

I believe that this is the most important lesson that we can discern from our history; and I hope that this first Founders' Day service will mark a new era in our history, one in which we truly value our history, teach it to our new members and to our children, and learn the many valuable lessons that it has to teach to us.

I believe that the rediscovery of our history, and the fostering of its appreciation, are in fact, the first steps in restoring the soul of our congregation because it is only by knowing who and where we have been in the past that one can truly understand and appreciate who we are in the present and where we are going in the future.

One way in which I intend to further this process is by teaching a class in All Souls history beginning this fall. It is my most fervent hope that by doing so, we may take the first step toward not just rediscovering our history, but also of rediscovering and renewing the soul of our congregation.