

**"A Hermeneutic of History:
The Living UU Tradition"**

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Reading

Let us start with a story and a symbol of what the Living Tradition might be for us as seekers.

Recently, I went to a Buddhist monastery for a retreat. I'd forgotten to take my official meditation cushion and so I looked around for one there. I was accustomed to the traditional type that is firm and inflexible. Nothing was available. I looked for one of those buckwheat-filled ones to use instead. No luck with that, either. Finally, I decided to do something radical and try out an inflatable meditation cushion that had been made for general use.

Despite my distrust of anything new, I discovered the inflatable meditation cushion to be bliss. Even though a part of me whispered that "no real Zen student would use such a thing," another part of me reminded me that my Zen teacher—one of the most highly regarded Zen teachers in the U.S.—had been using one for years with no ill effect.

Later it occurred to me that the traditional cushion is a metaphor for orthodoxy, rigid tradition, and the presumption that pain is good for us. "Sit and cope with it," it suggests. The buckwheat cushion is better, but after a while, every nugget of buckwheat becomes engrained, if you will, on your posterior and numbness is the result. Dealing with religion can be like that, too.

This cushion—the inflatable one—is, I think, a good metaphor for our Living Tradition. It says, “pain is not required—you need not assume a painful position of body, mind, or spirit.” Your mind need not become paralyzed or numb. Just sit, be open, and see where your spiritual journey can take you.

Sermon

How might we answer difficult questions? Consider these two: How might we respond to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina? And a very different question: How might we respond to the increasing number of believers and Christians in a denomination that was once mostly humanist? The answers can be given context and more easily answered using a hermeneutic of history. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, especially as it deals with explanation and critical analysis of religious issues. Let us start with some imagery and a bit of history.

Universalism began the imagery that is now our Flaming Chalice, but when it began it was a single circle with an off centered Cross. The Universalists realized in the early part of the Twentieth Century that they were no longer Christ-centered. The cross was also placed off-center, because they believed other faiths, other world religion perspectives, might come within the circle as equally valid.

When the merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists took place in 1961, the merger was symbolized by the placement of two circles overlapping. Taking the Flaming Chalice imagery from the Unitarian Service Committee, a new symbol for our faith came into being.

Then just a couple of years ago the image became two open circles, two "U"s and the chalice stand opened at the bottom to create an image subtly drawn depicting the letters U-U-A.

I use this imagery as an illustration of the evolving nature of our living tradition. We are a living tradition, because we are a viable and existent institution, as a congregation, as an institution and as a religious movement. One member, in describing our church and movement and its ever changing, ever growing and evolving faith, said we are "the church of what's happening now." This is in part true and can also be misleading. We are open minded and open to change, but not so open that our brains are about to fall out of our heads. We are open to growth and change, but our excitement about life-long learning is grounded in hundreds of years of tradition. This church and our movement did not begin today or even a few years ago. We have a history with at least four hundred years of paper trail and a couple thousand years of cultural history. Out of this history and religious culture our new ways of being have life and give meaning. We tend to

take the best of the past and use it as a model for our ways and times.

Unitarianism was called by this name for the first time in the 1500s in Transylvania. The new technology of the day had arrived, the printing press. People were reading the Bible for the first time. They did not read about the Trinity, and many in Eastern Europe decided that God could be better understood as a unity and not a trinity, that Jesus was more fully understood as a man than as a half man and half God. These ideas arose from the Christian heresies called Socinianism and Arianism. Fustus Socinus was an Italian intellectual who traveled over much of Europe in the mid-sixteenth century and whose influence became profound in Eastern Europe. He was a reformation firebrand encouraging the use of reason in religion. He espoused the belief that Christians were saved, not as a result of paying for some infinite sin but by the power to live lovingly and in the way that Jesus lived. This view was heretical then and still is now. We come from a long line of people willing to stand against the culture of their day for the truth we believe.

Then and now we have been people who embrace and use emerging technologies. We see the power of reading. It is from leaders like these that we gained both our values of religious freedom and the Unity of God, more often described now as reverence for Life.

Universalism began two hundred years ago, in terms of a paper trail that can be followed or a name used. It began in the United States with the preaching of John Murray and Hosea Ballou, but the idea of universal salvation goes back to the thinking of Clement of Origin who lived and wrote about universal salvation in the first and second centuries. These early Christian Universalists believed in God as all-loving. These are our origins. Debates about the existence of a literal hellish afterlife are no longer a part of our current concerns, but it is from this legacy that we gain our belief in the dignity and worth of every person. No one is beyond the capacity to find heaven in the here and now, some of us believe. Contemporary Universalism promotes lives of love, service and justice.

The picture I am trying to create is that of an ever-evolving faith. The Universalists of the early Twentieth Century said, "We do not stand, we move!" The Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said of religious liberalism depends upon its first principle "that revelation is continuous. Meaning has not been fully captured." The process of discovering truth is a life-long process and not a once-and-for-all experience. The meaning of our lives is not final, but can and will change, as we and our world change. This is truly a way of being religious. The meaning of your life is not fully defined as long as you live.

I could tell stories about members of this church whose lives have changed for the better, because of their openness to new discoveries and new learning about how to be in the world. Every year I see members of this church grow and bloom, and create new meaning for their lives. I will not share those stories for fear of embarrassing some of you, but if you look around, you know that those stories are all around you, or maybe one is even story of your own life.

So, I will tell you the story of my parents who were also UUs, believing in life-long learning. As seekers, they sought the power of new truth and meaning. In the 70's my mother took the teaching of feminism seriously. She had always been a career woman, as was her mother. This was not new, and the idea that men could be equal partners in house work, child rearing, and in emotional support appealed to her. She wanted more from my very reserved and stoic father, a fine man who worked hard and traveled a lot. Things were about to change. It wasn't easy at first. She invited my father to be more nurturing with my sister and let her be the disciplinarian. My father began to cook more. He became more accessible as a person. The power in their relationship shifted to a much more equal footing. My father loved what he was learning and the changes he was experiencing. He found he liked being more involved in the family and more emotionally available. After several years, the children of our family presented my father with the award for the family member who had grown the

most in the last few years. This was a family of young adults and adolescents who were changing rather rapidly themselves, and still he was the one who had changed the most. He was born again. The meaning of his life became a different story. They were and are Unitarian Universalists committed to life-long learning.

We do not have one set of scriptures that guide us on this path of personal and religious discovery. We do not have one great figure or personality as our sole prophet and prime imprinter, but we do have our tradition of continuous discovery and ever-evolving truth. I believe we can use our living tradition as a guide in the same way that others may use their scriptures. By knowing who we have been and how we came to be who we are, we can better know our own context and more clearly see the direction we are heading. This is a kind of hermeneutic of history.

Let us look at the reality of a compassionate response to human suffering. During the Civil War, Henry Whitney Bellows was the President of the American Unitarian Association. He was a friend of Abe Lincoln and one of the great ministers of our movement. He was also serving All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. In response to the Civil War, he wanted a way of helping. He looked for a compassionate way of helping all Americans. He invented the U. S. Sanitation Commission. With the help of Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, Thomas Starr King and others, he raised millions of

dollars to provide medical relief for all those wounded in battle. Nurses were trained, bandages were made and distributed, and doctors were hired. Soldiers were healed. Prior to the Sanitation Commission, wounded soldiers were on their own to tend to their wounds, or die if they could not. These great Unitarians knew things could be better and they made it so. Their work gave rise to the American Red Cross and the U. S. military medical corps. Many lives were saved as a result.

This is very similar to the work done by Fredrick May Eliot, the President of the American Unitarian Association at the time of World War II. He hired Ray Bragg as the first executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee. This is the same Ray Bragg who later served as this church's minister. It is the same organization now called the UUSC. Their response to World War II was to create an underground for smuggling Jews, intellectuals, Gypsies and homosexuals out of Germany and away from certain death. That was then.

More recently the UUSC responded to human suffering by raising \$1.5 million for Tsunami relief efforts last year. The money they raised went to local grassroots organization, to fishing communities, farm workers, and groups offering job training, women's empowerment, trauma counseling, alternative employment skills, and human rights education.

UUSC President Charlie Clements said the need for help will continue for years. The tsunami killed 130,000 and left a half million homeless. "In disasters of this magnitude, there is a danger of a repeat tragedy when international relief efforts begin to fade and infrastructure has yet to be restored," said Clements. "That is often when disease and death stalk the survivors." Which is why our UUSC efforts went to strengthening local infrastructure and building long-term relationships with local leaders.

These responses can be instructive as we seek how to respond to the disaster in New Orleans, Southern Mississippi and the Gulf Coast. The Sunday after Hurricane Katrina hit, we raised \$3,795 in one Sunday morning offering, the most we have ever raised in this manner, and hundreds of dollars have come in to support relief efforts since that time. That money went to the UUSC, which will direct its funds again to local grassroots organizations.

There is now and there will soon be opportunities to work with local organizations here in Kansas City, as we go from 1,000 to 10,000 or more survivors here in KC. My hope is that we will work with the Bethel AME Church, which will probably become our new congregational Partner Church. This African American congregation and its leadership will be worthy allies as we seek to find the most helpful ways to minister to this largely black group of refugees.

The same process of looking at any of our current challenges can be useful. We have deep roots and our branches reach wide. The way our forebears moved from a Christian denomination to a movement of diverse beliefs and largely humanist theology maybe instructive. We face the challenge of welcoming more believers and liberal Christians into a humanist denomination with pluralist theologies. Again, Henry Whitney Bellows was the pivotal figure in the historic struggle. He called for a broad church with room for all. "We need not believe alike to love alike," we now say--different words with a similar understanding.

It is important to know our history in order to understand the present better. We live neither in the future nor in the past, but in the here and now, which matters most. But, our living is framed by hope present - in what has been and in what will be.

Poet Carl Nelson wrote:

All things have fused within themselves

The ceaseless urge of change.

Forever shaping and remodeling,

The hands of time gently knead its leavened loaves.

No existing thing is final,
All must yield their being
To the continuous becoming.
We are impelled;
We cannot stop the motion;
And we will journey from our past and present
Toward the things we set our eyes upon.