

What they Dreamed Be Ours To Do
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
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TESTIMONY and VISION

By Monica Myers, UUCM member

Good morning. My name is Monica Myers, and I'm on the Caring Committee here at UUCM. Kent asked me to speak today a bit about how connecting with the wider world of UU's, and more specifically going to General Assembly last summer, has energized me and given me a vision of what I'd like to see happen here at our own congregation.

Let me start out by sharing some of my experience at GA. It started on a Wednesday evening. To set the scene a bit: I'd just had a very long day at work, I was exhausted from spending the last week frantically packing up my house, and I was feeling a bit timid. I felt like one person in a sea of many faces.

That quickly changed. I went to the Young Adult Caucus and had dinner with Rachel Williams, and was reminded that I wasn't here alone- I was here as part of a group from our congregation. Later on, we headed up to the Prairie Star District In-Gathering- a room positively buzzing with energy as each congregation whooped and hollered when their name was called out. I hadn't thought about it before, but our congregation was there as part of a larger group, our district, and I began to feel even more at home. What cemented the feeling, however, was worship and the opening ceremonies that night. I looked to my right, looked to my left, and knew that I was in a room filled with people who all shared similar values and visions. I no longer felt like one person in a sea of faces, but like one who belonged to a wonderful group. If I had any doubts before whether I was a true UU, they had all disappeared. This is where I belong.

The next day was even better. I got to attend workshops on everything from UU's for a Just Economic Society to Finding Spirituality in Every Moment. I got to talk to dozens of groups in the Exhibition Hall, and I got to go to worship ceremonies. I felt acutely just how much of a privilege it was to be there, and wanted to do something to be able to share this unique experience with those who didn't have a chance to come. I began to gather up as much literature as I could and put it into a GA binder for the church. If you're interested in looking through the binder, it is in the North Room.

However, I feel like bringing back materials and stories just isn't enough for those of you who want to participate in GA but aren't able to go for one reason or another. While it's a little late to do this year, I would like to see our congregation form discussion groups about the issues that will be discussed at Plenary the following summer at GA. This will allow for multiple things: those of you who are interested will get to have a say and have your opinions heard; we can come to a consensus on how our church stands on the issue and give that information to our delegates; and if there are any amendments we want to add, we can write those at that time. Doing this will allow for many more of the congregation to have an active role in General Assembly, and I think it will make the stories and materials that are brought back from GA all the more important to us.

If any of you are interested in helping me get the discussion groups going, next year of course, please feel free to talk to me or send me an e-mail, which is in the directory. Thank you so much!

READING**From *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*
By Warren R. Ross**

Universalism spread almost spontaneously as a response to the wide questioning of traditional authority, including religious authority, in the newly independent United States. Finding converts mostly in rural communities, it grew by 1888...into the sixth largest U.S. denomination. Unitarianism, meanwhile, inherited many of the organized parishes of the congregational “standing order” in Eastern Massachusetts as Calvinist doctrine became unacceptable to more and more of the Puritan’s descendants...

Hence, for many years, Unitarianism remained focused on Boston, with Harvard as its intellectual center and its clergy mostly Harvard-trained, while Universalism flourished as primarily a grass-roots, rural phenomenon, the seeds being planted by itinerant preachers. Both groups lacked any denominational structure, but by 1825 a group of mostly Boston ministers decided to establish the American Unitarian Association for “the promotion of pure and undefiled religion by disseminating the knowledge of it.”

Once one basic element of Christian dogma is called into question, it becomes almost inevitable that doubts are also raised about others. [The Universalist minister, Hosea] Ballou joined the Unitarians in rejecting the Trinity, while the Unitarians shed concerns about eternal damnation in favor of moral striving in this life...In addition, both groups made freedom of belief and conscience central to their religious convictions...

Inevitably, leaders in each of the two denominations saw the other as a natural ally. Thus began what was to become more than a century of flirtation – or perhaps a minuet is a better metaphor, for it was a relationship marked by a continuing series of approaches and withdrawals...[Some from both denominations were advocating fusion as early as 1856, and the first merger of a local congregation occurred in 1878 when the Unitarians and Universalists in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, merged their churches.] In 1937, the two denominations cooperated on the publication of a new hymnal.

[Eventually, and as is often the case with culture change, the youth led the way.] The American Unitarian Youth and the Universalist Youth Fellowship held their first joint conference in 1951, and in 1954 they each disbanded their groups and merged to form a common organization called “Liberal Religious Youth” (LRY). Finally, in 1956, the Universalist Church of America and the American Universalist Association agreed to form a Joint Merger Commission which, after many permutations and struggles, resulted in the merger of the two denominations in 1961.

SERMON***What They Dreamed be Ours To Do*****By Kent Hemmen Saleska**

This summer, in June, at our annual national gathering and business meeting called General Assembly, we Unitarian Universalists are celebrating our 50th Anniversary as a denomination. What began centuries earlier, and arose in different countries in different eras as the separate denominations of Unitarians and Universalists, merged in 1961 in the United States to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. The theme for General Assembly this year is the title of this sermon, “What they dreamed be ours to do,” which comes from the last line of our opening hymn, “Rank by Rank Again We Stand.”

So on this first Sunday in May, the day on which we hold our annual congregational meeting, I thought it fitting to talk about General Assembly, our 50th Anniversary, to look back at our history and tradition, to look forward to our future, and to explore where our individual congregation might fit into that context.

In their anthem, the choir sang about a turning point, and a life journey that takes one step forward and two steps back. Life can, indeed, sometimes seem like a frustrating and painful journey that only takes us one step forward and two steps back. But Stephan Hatfield, the composer and lyricist of this choir anthem, writes, “if we keep taking two steps back in a circular world, we will eventually wind up where we wanted to be, but we’ll arrive from a direction we didn’t expect.”

We do have many humans who are linear thinkers, but I don’t think much in our universe is linear. Too many influences work on us, too many surprises emerge, too many anomalies and alternatives raise too many questions, and just as in particle physics, the more closely we examine an event in time, the more our own observation changes and alters the event itself. So it may be that Stephen Hatfield is right. It may be that we live in a circular world. And if we live in a circular world, then the lessons we don’t learn at one point in our life will return again later in another form – and possibly, hopefully, we will even eventually wind up where we wanted to be, but will arrive from a direction we didn’t expect.

So for me this notion of moving “one step forward and two steps back” is less reminiscent to me of a forward journey than it is a metaphor for a dance, waltz, a minuet. As we look back on the history and tradition of Unitarianism and Universalism, this is exactly the way Warren Ross, in his book *The Premise and the Promise*, describes the century prior to the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists when he writes, “leaders in each of the two denominations saw the other as a natural ally. Thus began what was to become more than a century of flirtation – or perhaps a minuet is a better metaphor, for it was a relationship marked by a continuing series of approaches and withdrawals...”

For those of us who born after 1961 or who joined Unitarian Universalism after the merger in 1961, it seems amazing that any animosity or struggle would exist between the two denominations prior to 1961, but in fact, there was a great sense of ambivalence, suspicion and even resentment. It is an insight to discover that one of the primary reasons it took more than a century for the Unitarians and Universalists to merge had less to do with theology and more to do with socioeconomic and organizational factors – which are some of the same factors that dog us today, 50 years after merger.

Hosea Ballou, an itinerant and prominent 18th and early 19th Century Universalist minister, once said the social and educational differences between the two groups made most Universalists, “little better than barbarians when compared with the graduates of Harvard College and other polished literati.”¹

The Universalists felt that the Unitarians looked down on them since Universalism developed as a more rural than urban, more working-class than elite movement, and was dedicated to evangelism and missionary work. Nor did the Universalists have well-trained ministers. In fact, Warren Ross notes, many of them were Baptists renegades, and like the Baptists, many deliberately boasted of the uneducated condition of their clergy. In their view, the Holy Spirit operated freely among people, and did not need “the trappings” of schools.

The Unitarians, on the other hand, having early on “captured” Harvard Divinity School, remained committed to “the leadership of Jesus in the neighborhood of Boston,” as was a common saying at the time. The extent to which the Unitarians represented the Boston establishment is reflected by the fact that that UUA’s 25 Beacon Street headquarters is nestled between the Massachusetts statehouse and the official guesthouse of the mayor of Boston. In addition, when the statehouse was expanded in the 1920s, and the original 25 Beacon Street was taken by eminent domain, the American Unitarian Association was presented with a new site on the other side of the statehouse, the site of John Hancock’s home AND the association was allowed to keep its original address!

Thomas Starr King was the son of a Universalist minister who served the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco and maintained his loyalty to both traditions. During the Civil War, he saved California for the Union, and the UU seminary in Berkeley is named for him. The theologies of the two denominations led Thomas Starr King to say, “the [Universalist] thinks God is too good to damn them forever, and the [Unitarian] thinks they are too good to be damned”!

When a union of the two denominations came to the top of the agenda, a widely held view among Unitarians was that Universalists were theologically too conservative, too emotional, and essentially “not like us.” Many Universalists, understandably, feared that the more numerous and better organized Unitarians would swallow them up – “submerged and not merged” was a popular phrase – and that as individuals they would be patronized.

Since there was no grass-roots drive to merge the two, it probably never would have happened were it not for the visionary leaders of the two. But now, here we are, 50 years later, celebrating a long history together, and yet one that is just one year younger than this congregation, which was founded in 1960!

This 50 year history of course raises the question: was the merger a success? When writing his history of the association for the 40th anniversary, Warren Ross engaged in dozens of personal interviews with people who were around at the time of the merger and still alive in the late 1990s. He says, “the answers form not so much a consensus as a mosaic of dominant themes. Here are three that stand out:

¹ All of the quotes and historical information in this sermon is taken from Warren R. Ross’s book, *The Promise and the Promise* (Skinner House Books, 2001).

- 1) The main motive for consolidation – to join two religious traditions that had so much in common into a single religious family – has worked better than expected. No one nowadays asks, “Are you a Unitarian or a Universalist?” Instead, there is a sense of common identity.
- 2) Consolidation was inevitable. Without it, the Universalists might not have survived, and the Unitarians benefitted, too, because the Universalists had money to help sustain the new association through difficult times.
- 3) Universalism won. Not in the sense of power, but because UU values today are closer to historic Universalism than of Unitarianism. One minister says, “It’s been very healthy to have the Universalist tradition to refer to as people try to figure out how to live in this complex and secular age.”

So today, as we approach our annual congregational meeting after the second service, and as we look forward to our own future, how do we place our work in the context of this great history and identity of our faith and religion?

One way I’ve experienced it both in the larger denomination and here in this congregation is a rediscovery and renewal of our covenantal tradition. This first showed up very prominently when we adopted our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes at the 1985 General Assembly. As those of you who are more familiar with that document, it begins with the statement, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *covenant* to affirm and promote...” and goes on to list the seven principles and six sources of Unitarian Universalism. I also experienced this renewal of our covenantal tradition during my second year here, in 2008-2009, when the Committee on Ministry took the lead in working with the congregation to formulate our own “Covenant of Right Relations.” This covenant, this congregational agreement, is something we read now at the beginning of every congregational meeting, and refer to in our times heated engagement, as a reminder of our own stated desire to respect and honor one another, and even in our disagreements, to use it as articulated by our great 16th Century Transylvanian Unitarian, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

Rebecca Parker, the current president of Starr King, the Unitarian Universalist School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, also stresses the fundamental religious value of covenant as “a way in which we embrace and celebrate diversity but also cultivate community – something greater than the sum of its parts....Covenant making may be the key to opening the door to another way of understanding ourselves. The commitments we make to one another as a congregation, as an association, are what creates church community. Covenant requires a human presence, an active presence with one another, and gets us beyond *who am I?* to *who are you?* and *what can we do together?*”

I believe this notion and practice of a communal covenant is absolutely crucial to our existence and our future. Because we do not have a creed, and because we are so diverse in our theologies and beliefs, and because we say we want to grow in our socioeconomic and racial diversity, one of the primary religious tools we will have as we move into the future is the tool of our covenant. It may be that we will revise it, and that future generations will update it, but without it, we will fall back into our old habits of extreme individualism.

Every religion – including Unitarian Universalism – is an organized religion, and every organized religion is an institution, and every institution – if it is to survive and thrive – requires its members to understand the communal nature of a living organism that is larger than each individual. In our increasingly pluralistic world and in our increasingly pluralistic religion, if we are not only to survive, but thrive as we move into our future, we need a covenantal presence and relationship with one another in ways we never have before.

“Rank by Rank Again We Stand,” the song we sang this morning, and the song we sing every year at General Assembly during the Service of the Living Tradition, which honors the life achievements of ministers, contains the line, “what they dreamed be ours to do.” Though some of their dreams were not realized, I believe we have carried out many of the visions of our religious ancestors.

But we don’t come to this faith and enter into this religion as blank slates. We come with our own dreams and aspirations, too. So we are not here just simply to carry out the dreams of those who lived 40 or 50 years ago, but because they were able to dream and decide, we are able to envision our own future and create our own action, too.

Across the spectrum of Unitarian Universalism, our members are composed of 85 to 90 percent people who came to us as adults, often specifically because they are seeking religious education programs for their children that reflect their own values. Yet, ironically, as an organization, we traditionally claim so much independent thought and belief that we refuse to build, sustain, or envision a solid future for the church institution that nurtured us. As a result, estimates range as high as 90 percent of our children grow up, never to return to a UU congregation.

So as part of a way to dream our own dreams, what would you think about entering into a larger vision than we usually engage? What would you think about creating a religion that was not afraid to share with others what we do and what we believe, not because it is tied to our Christian stereotype of evangelization, but because what we do is help to grow whole people? What would you think about helping to create a religion where a priority is retaining our adults and our children in multigenerational congregational life, where we teach our children not just how to think, or about other religions, but about Unitarian Universalism? What would you think about actively and intentionally including all ages in social justice, in community activities, in religious education, and in worship? What would you think about raising our children in a way that would not just help them be independent thinkers, but would instill in them gratitude, loyalty, and inspiration toward and from a faith that helped shape them and nurture them and sustain them? What would you think about being part of a faith that compels us to engage in the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression, not because of some misplaced desire to help others, but because it would mean we are living up to our own aspirations and simply because it makes us whole people? What would you think about being part of a faith that didn’t just talk about what it believed, but also left the walls of the church building and took that faith to the streets, and back yards, and board rooms of our neighborhoods and cities?

This is the vibrant future of the Unitarian Universalist faith that I see and want to be part of, a vision firmly anchored in our history and tradition, and yet able to fly free through our pluralistic and diverse world. As we move into our future through a rapidly changing world, may we find a way not just to endure, but to be bold, active, vibrant, and relevant.