

Unknown Visions of Love

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[Nota bene: This sermon by the Reverend Colin Bossen is the 2012 winner of the Universalist Heritage Foundation's award for best sermon in the Universalist tradition.]

Each year in my congregation during Black History Month I make a point of offering at least one sermon focused on an aspect of black theology. This year I focused on something that the scholar Joanne Braxton calls organic universalism. In Braxton's words organic universalism is "a theological tradition that resists the division of humanity into the saved and the damned and is concerned with the salvation of all souls/all being." She believes that organic universalism is "a theological tradition that dissents from religion that functions oppressively."

Organic universalism is a form universalism that usually arises up out of communities of historically marginalized and oppressed people. It is not a learned tradition but rather an organic discovery. It develops when people learn that they were not born into original sin but into what the theologian Matthew Fox calls original blessing. Original blessing recognizes that life is a gift, that, in Fox's words, "we do not enter [the world] as blotches on existence, as sinful creatures, we burst into the world as... blessings."

The future of our Unitarian Universalist faith lies in embracing and uncovering organic universalism. Our movement has never been strong on evangelism. Many Unitarian Universalists go into anaphylactic shock when the term is mentioned. In a culture growing more diverse and racially integrated our congregations need to diversify if they are to survive. Embracing organic universalism helps connect us with those who already share our religious values.

This is a more difficult task than it might appear. It requires us to examine our culture and crack it open in those places where it is not welcoming or inclusive. It challenges us to move beyond our comfort zones and recognize that we can share religious values with people even if we do not share their culture.

One glimpse I had into how hard this can be came a couple of years ago when the African American poet Sonia Sanchez gave a talk a Ministry Days, the annual gathering of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. She began her presentation by listing names like: Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Malcom X, Martin King, June Jordan, Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, Miles Davis, Adam Clayton Powell, Nina Simone... Each name was followed by a click of her tongue.

The names ran at least a hundred long and the whole recitation lasted more than five minutes. This annoyed some of my colleagues. I remember one of them, in particular, a white minister who is about my age, was almost enraged by it. The list went on too long, he complained, it detracted from his experience of her poetry and added little to her message.

My colleague's reaction was rooted in his own lack of awareness of cultures other than his own. In some traditions it is customary to begin a presentation with an invocation of one's lineage. Over the years I have heard poets, musicians, activists and even some religious leaders do it. The practice reminds me of the line from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Hebrews: "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." Reciting names brings that cloud of witnesses into the present. It reminds the speaker and the audience that the speaker is a representative of a community. Whenever I preach a sermon, around me, holding me up, are the spirits, the words, the thoughts, the love, of all of those who have gone before me and paved the road I now trod.

This is true of every preacher but it is not something Unitarian Universalist ministers regularly acknowledge. Much of our tradition is rooted in the illusion of the individual. To recognize our dependence on others reveals the tenuousness of that illusion. We are social creatures. Preaching is a social act. Religious experiences are experiences of connection. They are relational. The individual only exists alongside others. All of us are buoyed up by a cloud of witnesses.

If our Unitarian Universalist movement is to become the powerful, progressive and transformative faith it has the possibility to become then one of the things that we must struggle with is understanding who inhabits our cloud of witness. We are quick to claim abolitionist or transcendentalist heroes like Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson or Margaret Fuller as our own. We lift up the involvement of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in our movement. We celebrate our connections to U.S. Presidents like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. But so often we fail to recognize the slave holders, the misogynists, the colonialists, the imperialists and even the white supremacists who share our lineage. So often we fail to acknowledge that men like Jefferson were themselves slave holders.

I invite you to contrast Theodore Parker with Ezra Stiles Gannett. Most of you who have been coming to this or another Unitarian Universalist congregation for awhile will recognize Parker's name. Raise your hands if you have heard of him.

Parker is one of the great orators of the Unitarian tradition. His words are part of our national rhetoric. He inspired Martin King's phrase, "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice" and Abraham Lincoln's words, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." A militant 19th century abolitionist, he sheltered runaway slaves and helped arm John Brown for his raid on Harper's Ferry. He preached radical religion and radical politics and built a congregation of many thousand.

He was, however, cast out of the Unitarian establishment of his day. His fellow ministers refused to let him preach in their pulpits. And efforts were mounted, unsuccessfully, to drum him out of the ministers' association.

Far more influential among the Unitarians of Parker's day was Ezra Stiles Gannett. Raise your hands if you have heard of him. Gannett was the minister of what is now the Arlington Street Church, one of our movement's most prestigious pulpits. He was one of the founders of the American Unitarian Association, one of the forerunners of the

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and served as one of that body's first Presidents. He was also a staunch theological conservative--at least far as Unitarians went--and sparred with Parker over political and theological issues.

Their most famous dispute was over the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. The law dictated that escaped slaves must be returned to their so-called masters. Parker argued for active, armed, resistance to the law. He hated slavery and believed it immoral to allow anyone who had successfully escaped to be returned to bondage. Gannett, meanwhile, was a believer in law and order. He asserted that the Fugitive Slave Law, like all other laws, must be obeyed.

Gannett's congregation included members of the Boston establishment, some of whom were charged with enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law. Parker's congregation contained some of the very people the law sought to return to slavery. The differences between the ministers and their congregations led Parker to proclaim: "A parishioner of my brother Gannett came to kidnap a member of my church; Mr. Gannett preaches a sermon to justify the fugitive slave law, demanding that it should be obeyed; yes, calling on his church members to kidnap mine, and sell them into bondage for ever."

Despite Parker's fiery rhetoric, the Unitarian establishment largely sided with Gannett. Partially as a result of Gannett's leadership the American Unitarian Association failed to adopt any meaningful antislavery position. Today we like to think of Parker's views as representative of our tradition. Truthfully, it is Gannett, not Parker, who best exemplifies the Unitarian spirit of that day.

In order to be honest about our religious heritage we need to acknowledge that men like Gannett are part of our cloud of witness. They built many of our liberal religious institutions. They are just as much our religious ancestors as the abolitionists we celebrate. As a religious movement we are not without our faults. To pretend otherwise is to fail to address those faults. If we do that then we cannot seek to correct them.

One of the things that needs to be acknowledged about most Unitarian Universalist theology is that it is white theology. Throughout the 20th century there were only a handful of Unitarian, Universalist or Unitarian Universalist ministers who were people of color. The number of people of color in our ministry during the 19th century was, as far as I am aware, precisely zero.

These demographic facts mean that the majority of Unitarian Universalist theology is created from the perspective of whites. This is not something to be denigrated. It is something to be recognized. As the black liberation theologian James Cone reminds us, "Theology cannot be separated from the community which it represents." Recognizing that most Unitarian Universalist theology is white theology accepts its limitations. It helps us as a movement develop a self-awareness of where we have been and where we need to go.

This is where the power and the potential of organic universalism comes in. Unitarian Universalist theology may be largely white theology but organic universalism is not. Religious values similar to ours can be found among many communities. Unitarianism

and universalism, both with small "u"s are not the exclusive claim of Unitarian Universalists.

Nora Zeale Hurston demonstrates this beautifully in her short piece "Mother Catherine." Mother Catherine was an African American religious leader in New Orleans in the 1920s or 1930s. She preached a radical universalism that held that every living thing was sacred. Hurston reports that throughout her services there were birds singing, dogs wandering about and even a donkey that made its presence known. Mother Catherine encouraged individuality rather than conformity. She accepted everyone, preaching, as Hurston records it, "I got all kinds of children, but I am they mother. Some of 'em are saints, some of 'em are conzemptts [convicts] and jailbirds; some of 'em kill babies in their bodies; some of 'em walk the streets at night--but they's all my children. God got all kinds... So says the beautiful spirit."

This spirit of organic universalism can be found in other places unfamiliar to most white Unitarian Universalists. Two inspiring examples of the last decade are the story of Carlton Pearson and the recent growth of Unitarian Universalism in Africa. Both cases are instances where on their own people discovered the truth of universalism and then recognized their theological kinship with our Unitarian Universalist Association.

Pearson's name might be familiar to some of you. His story has been featured on the public radio program "This American Life" and Dateline NBC. For many years Pearson was one of the most prominent African American pentecostal ministers. Preaching an orthodox theology of sin and salvation, he built his congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to more than 5,000. He was mentored by Oral Roberts and had a program on the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

One evening Pearson had an epiphany while watching a television program about the genocide in Rwanda. Shocked by what he was seeing he prayed to his God for clarity: "God, I don't know how you can sit on your throne there in heaven and let those poor people drop to the ground hungry, heartbroken, and lost, and just randomly suck them into hell."

Pearson says that God replied to him, "We're not sucking those dear people into hell. Can't you see they're already there... We redeemed and reconciled all of humanity at Calvary." With those words Pearson realized that the everyone in the world is already saved, whether or not they are Christian--Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, lesbians, gays, the transgendered, the rich, the poor, everyone, everywhere is already saved.

When Pearson started to preach a theology of universal salvation based upon this vision--he calls it the gospel of inclusion--he quickly found himself shunned by his fundamentalist religious community. In short order, his congregation dropped to less than 1,000 members and lost its building. But Pearson could not stop speaking his truth. He found the local Unitarian Universalist congregation, All Souls, and after working closely with the senior minister there merged his congregation with it.

The result has been transformative for All Souls. The previously almost entirely white and wealthy congregation suddenly had a couple of hundred African American

pentecostal universalists in its midst. Worship changed as the music director from Pearson's church worked with the music director at All Souls to develop music that appealed to all congregants. All Souls went from being an almost entirely white congregation to a multiracial one.

In Africa today organic universalism is also on the move. For many years fundamentalists have engaged in active evangelicalism across the continent. Often they have preached a virulent form of Calvinism and taught that God condemns homosexuals and non-Christians to hell. This religious movement is behind the anti-homosexual legislation in Uganda and has been linked to the assassination of the Ugandan gay rights activist Joseph Kato.

One response to this spread of Calvinism has been the development of organic universalism. Starting in the late 1990s, Africans like Alice and Patrick Magara began to discover Unitarian Universalism on the internet. Patrick Magara had trained as a non-denominational minister in Atlanta for two years before returning to Africa to preach a fundamentalist theology. The theology he learned in school did not reflect his experience. Upon discovering Unitarian Universalism he converted and began to spread the message of his new faith. In dialogue with one of his African colleagues, Patrick Magara describes his faith: "We stand as a family of love, peace, unity, and justice... we only believe in one God... We try to teach... [people] to think for themselves, not to be excited by somebody else... We imagine Jesus as our brother, and we are all sons of God."

We are all children of God, we are all members of the same human family, a message at the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition and organic universalism wherever it appears. I find organic universalism to be powerful because it offers a vision of what our movement might yet be.

Rob Hardies, the senior minister of All Souls, Unitarian, in Washington, DC likes to say that vision of his congregation is to embody the dream of the human family, reconciled and whole, not sundered by divisions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation or other divisor. Organic universalism suggests that such a vision is possible. It is possible because organic universalism demonstrates that our religious values have a reach far beyond their current limits.

Recognizing this truth and living into it are different things. The world of fiction and poetry stimulates my imagination of the possible. In some ways, the arts are better than reality because instead of starting from the place of what is, they begin with what might be. As Aristotle wrote, "Poetry... is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."

There are numerous examples of organic universalism in works of literature. Joanne Braxton identifies Zora Neale Hurston as an organic universalist. For my part, I see organic universalism at work within the writing of Alice Walker and Octavia Butler. In her novel, "The Color Purple," Walker writes: "Here's the thing... The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everyone else." Such words are surely an expression of organic universalism.

Butler's pair of novels "The Parable of the Sower" and "The Parable of the Talents" imagine the transformative power of organic universalism to change our planet and our species for the better. Set in the not too distant dystopian future, Butler tells the story of Lauren Oya Olamina, the community she founds and the religion she creates to help humanity move towards a cooperative and vibrant future.

Olamina teaches that humanity's destiny is to take root amongst the stars. Rather than focus on competing over Earth's resources people should work together to colonize other worlds. She believes, humanity will achieve immortality not by clinging to superstitious beliefs about the afterlife but by extending its reach beyond our solar system.

Olamina preaches about God, a God who is change. God shapes and is shaped by humanity. We are part of God and God is part of us. Olamina's organic universalism expresses itself in her belief that "We are born / Not with purpose / But with potential."

The community she builds is multiracial and multigenerational. It shares many values with contemporary Unitarian Universalism. It draws upon many sources. It is ecologically minded. It values cooperation over competition and affirms the worth and dignity of each individual. Most of all, it pushes its members to accept "God is change." As Butler writes and Olamina preaches, "God is change. / Past is past. / What was / Cannot / Come again. / To survive, / Know the past. Let it touch you, / Then let / The past / Go."

To embrace the potential that organic universalism offers us means to embrace change and move beyond our comfort zones. It is to have the opposite reaction of my colleague when confronted with another culture. Instead of complaining about how the culture detracts from one's experience, embrace it and seek to understand it.

Part of this change also means expanding our cloud of witness to include not just the Unitarians, the Universalists and the Unitarian Universalists who preceded us but the organic universalists as well. It means saying that as members of this community we stand not just with Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jane Adams, Ysaye Barnwell, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller, James Luther Adams and William Ellery Channing but with Alice Walker, Joanne Braxton, Octavia Butler, Mother Catherine, Zora Neale Hurston, Carlton Pearson, and Alice and Patrick Magara as well.

May it be so. Amen. Blessed Be and Ashe'.