Centennial Celebration

Following the devastating fire that demolished the Universalist church in Winchester, NH, the church in which the 1803 Profession of Belief was adopted, generous contributions from Universalists across the nation made possible the construction of a new building on this historic site. With contributions and pledges in hand, in July of 1912 the cornerstone was laid for the elegant, brick Memorial church, which stands today. The vision and commitment of the forebears who invested in this church continues in the work of the Universalist Heritage Foundation, which now owns the building.

The 100th anniversary of the laying of that cornerstone was celebrated on July 8 at the Universalist Memorial Church. The Rev. Mark Harris, minister of the First Parish Church in Watertown, Massachusetts, offered a sermon titled “A Classless Heaven.” The sermon reminded us that Universalists once believed that everyone, regardless of wealth or station in life, would be admitted to heaven because God’s love embraces the whole human race. Mr. Harris also reflected on ways that theology informs our vision of how Universalism calls us to bring heaven to earth today. This topic was particularly relevant as the Living Universalism Project of the Universalist Heritage Foundation is exploring how the Memorial Church may best be used in the years ahead.

Members of the United Church of Winchester and visitors from the area joined in this Centennial Celebration, as 100 people gathered in the historic sanctuary for worship, including a thirty-six member choir with singers from five area Unitarian Universalist congregations, as well as the United Church of Winchester. The choir was directed by Ede Thomas and accompanied by Charles Butterfield, both from All Souls Church in Brattleboro, VT.

Following the service, an anniversary cake and refreshments were served to the community on the church lawn. (More pictures, page 6)
“Applied Universalism” at Ferry Beach

In August, a weeklong conference on Applied Universalism was led by Rev. Richard Trudeau and Rev. Paul Sawyer at Ferry Beach, a camp and conference center on the southern coast of Maine, founded by Universalists in 1901.

There were twelve participants—six laypeople, five ministers, and one seminarian. The group met every day in a room named for Rev. Albert (Al) Zeigler, the principal theologian of a mid-20th-century Universalist-renewal movement. With Al Ziegler looking down from his portrait, the fourteen conferees worked toward a similar goal, using the Universalist theological insights of Ziegler and his near-contemporaries to help renew today’s Unitarian Universalism.

Most Unitarian Universalists, lay or ordained, haven't had the opportunity to study Universalist theology beyond a general introduction to the thought of its eighteenth-century pioneers. But Universalist theology, both historically and as it has developed to the present day, offers a rich and grounding wellspring of faith for modern Unitarian Universalists.

Without requiring belief in the supernatural, Universalism is a bridge connecting the mainstream Unitarian Universalist movement to the Judeo-Christian tradition from which it has become estranged. Universalism is a bridge into Unitarian Universalism for people who are dissatisfied with conventional religion. Universalism is a bridge toward provisional answers to the big religious questions — What’s it all about? What’s the meaning of life? — and so to spiritual depth. And, Universalism is a bridge providing distinctive approaches to nature-based spirituality and social justice work.

Each day of the conference was focused on one aspect of Universalist theology, applying the theology to one of these issues.

The Ferry Beach staff reports that “Applied Universalism” was the third-most popular workshop of the entire season! It will be offered again this coming summer, 2013.

Following are some reflections from Allison Palm, one of the conference participants:

“It was a week of thinking theologically, sharing stories of love and grace, pondering the fate of Universalism and Unitarian Universalism, and connecting through both our similarities and our differences.
Continued on page 8

The second Universalist Heritage Tour, which was held September 24 to September 30, 2012, re-visited the most important sites of the 2010 tour – Mt. Auburn Cemetery, the Clara Barton Homestead, the Unitarian Universalist Association, Tufts University, the First Universalist Church in Gloucester as well as the Judith Sargent Murray House there, Ferry Beach Park Conference Center, the “Ballou churches” in Vermont and the Universalist Memorial Church in Winchester.

Deepening the journey, several new stops were added, including the Adin Ballou House and other sites in Hopedale, MA, home of the famous utopian community; the Green Mountain Perkins Academy in South Woodstock, VT, one of the many educational institutions founded by Universalists; and South Strafford, VT, where the Winchester Profession of Belief was drafted in 1802. The rewards were rich, indeed, as reflected in the following comments from tour participants.

• I was familiar with Hosea Ballou but did not know of his nephew Adin Ballou and was most interested to learn of his influence on Gandhi and Martin Luther King …
• I knew that P. T. Barnum was a Universalist, but did not know of his many contributions to Tufts University.
• I knew of Olympia Brown, Judith Sargent Murray, and several others buried in Mt. Auburn Cemetery from the women’s movement … but did not know that they were Universalists.”

Other new learnings included:

• that a freed slave was a member of the Gloucester Universalist Church
• that Universalists were the first to ordain a woman to the ministry
• and were early advocates of prison reform
• and were leaders in accessible education for New Englanders.

For at least one tour participant the tour had a more personal impact as it connected her more deeply with her family’s Universalist roots in northern New England, and, at Tufts University, where she imagined her parents listening to

Participants in the 2012 Universalist Heritage Tour through Central and Northern New England. From left to right: Barbara Smith (UHF Board member and tour bus driver), Rev. Liz Strong (UHF Vice-President and primary organizer), Maxine Snyder, Bob and Lucia Heinold, Nancy Brigham (UHF Board member), Jennifer Dant and Roger Grugel.
The scholar Joanne Braxton calls organic universalism “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.”

Organic universalism is a form of 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.

The future of our Unitarian Universalist faith lies in embracing and uncovering organic universalism. . . . 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.

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 at . . . 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. . . . 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.

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. . . . But so often
we fail to recognize the slaveholders, the misogynists, the colonialists, the imperialists and even the white supremacists who share our lineage...

One of the things that needs to be acknowledged about most Unitarian Universalist theology is that it is white theology. . . . 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.

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 conzempts 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.”

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. To embrace the potential that organic universalism offers us means to embrace change and move beyond our comfort zones. . . .

Part of this change also means expanding our cloud of witness to include not just ... Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jane Adams, Ysaye Barnwell, . . . and William Ellery Channing but (also) Alice Walker, Joanne Braxton, Octavia Butler, Mother Catherine, Zora Neale Hurston, Carlton Pearson, and Alice and Patrick Magara as well.

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*** Excerpts from the entry chosen as the Universalist Heritage Foundation’s Best Sermon in the Universalist Tradition for 2012. The complete text of the sermon can be found on our website.
Combined choirs from several area congregations singing at the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Rebuilding of the Universalist Church in Winchester, New Hampshire. The Rev. Mark Harris (seated, center), Minister of the First Parish Church in Watertown, Massachusetts, gave the Anniversary Sermon.
“a fine person and a darn good secretary”

Mary Giles Edes shares this story --

Back in the early eighties, I guess it was, my Dad belonged to a regional, or maybe state wide, ham radio club. They talked regularly and met a few times a year down in Bangor over a dinner at … some local landmark restaurant. … one day my father received in the mail a letter - this is way before email - from the long time scribe or secretary of the ham club. It was a wrenchingly honest and humble document, in which the writer told his old friends that after years of struggle and sorrow, secrecy and pain, he had decided to be true to himself and to undergo a sex change procedure. He went on to say how much he had enjoyed his years with the club and cherished his friendships, but that this was something he just had to do. He said he would understand if, under the circumstances, they felt they needed or wanted to let him go, as an officer and member of the organization.

My father wrote back and said, in so many brief Mainer words, “You are a fine person and a darn good secretary. Whatever else you do is your business. Hope you’ll stay on. Sincerely …”

Applied Universalism – Continued from page 2

“My most profound memories from the week are of the times that we shared our own ‘Love Saves’ stories. In these stories about the saving power of love in our lives and in the lives of others, I discovered the deep power of the Universalist message. These were truly stories of an ‘applied Universalism’ - stories that often began at a place of deep woundedness and traced how love led to healing and wholeness. With all the brokenness in our world today, these stories gave me hope, and reminded me once again that love is indeed stronger than hatred.

“The week gave me some new insights on salvation and reconciliation. It is difficult for those of us who no longer believe in an after-life to submit to the mantra of ‘everything will be alright in the end.’ I appreciated the insight from the conference that Universalism does not try to claim that all will be well, just that whatever reconciliation and salvation there may be in this world and beyond is available to all. It is a theology of equality more than an assurance of eternal reward.”

Front Porch at the “Quillen”
Photograph courtesy Ferry Beach Park Association
Notes from the Board

The last several months have been a time of active events more than of conversation on policies and goals. You can read in these pages about three very successful events sponsored by “The Living Universalism Project” – The Centennial Celebration in July, the Applied Universalism conference at Ferry Beach in August, and the Universalist Heritage Tour in September.

Also in recent months, we again offered a series of summer services at the Universalist Memorial Church in Winchester, New Hampshire. By vote of the board, half of all the offering income from those services was shared with two local Winchester non-profit organizations – The Monadnock Family and Child Service, and the Playground Fund for the Winchester Learning Center.

We owe a major debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Strong for her continuing efforts in arranging these services, and to our summer speakers: Rev. Mark Harris, Rev. Carol Taylor, Rev. Aaron Payson, Rev. Mary Giles Edes, Rev. Douglas Taylor, Rev. Al Boyce, and Rev. Colin Bossen, whose award-winning sermon was read by UHF board president, John Sanders. Sadly, however, except for the Centennial Celebration, the services were very poorly attended. It is likely that the service series will not be continued next summer, although we may sponsor one major service each year.

In other news, we are sorry to bid farewell to Rev. Erica Baron whose many other responsibilities make it impossible for her to continue serving on our board. In her short time with us we benefited greatly from her insights and energies.

Clarence Skinner’s message in the chapel there in the 1920’s.

For others, who are preparing for their visit with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the spots visited brought what had been merely textbook history alive in a vibrant way.

Although, sadly, some of the sites visited are now museums or historical artifacts, others are still serving contemporary Unitarian Universalists in lively ways and impressed the travelers with the powerful way they are now living out their mission in the community. This is the contemporary lived reality of the Standing on the Side of Love campaign, which tour participants learned has derived directly from the Universalist tradition.

And apart from the history learned or deepened, there were accolades for planning and organization of the tour leader, Liz Strong, the ‘unflappable’ van driver, Barbara Smith, the graciousness and generosity of the local hosts and the unbeatable church potluck dinners.