

ROOTS AND WINGS: OUR UU HERITAGE

by Rev. Kit Ketcham

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One of the aphorisms of our times is “there are two things we can give our children-----one is roots, the other is wings”. So I’d like to ask you this afternoon, “what are your roots?” What are your family roots, to begin with? And what are your religious roots?

Many of you have heard me tell stories of my own roots, both my family and religious origins. I was born a Baptist preacher’s kid. My dad was a pretty conservative guy theologically, though he chose the American Baptist branch of Baptists because the Southern Baptists had not yet repudiated their ties to slavery.

I was born here in Washington State and consider my physical roots to be deep in this soil, even though I spent 34 years in Colorado before returning home to this part of the country.

And I was raised in the Baptist tradition, that Christian denomination which specializes in emotional gospel songs, full immersion baptism, and a firm belief in “soul liberty”, the idea that every person must decide for himself or herself what is the truth that underlies human life.

I married into Unitarian Universalism in 1966, drawn by its emphasis on social action and the application of reason and logic and science to religious ideas.

I personally had little trouble making this transition. I wasn’t angry about my Baptist upbringing; I had always figured that the stories I learned were just that, stories, and that, like all stories, they were more metaphorical than factual. Many of your experiences may be similar.

So.....Where did our faith tradition begin? What are its roots? Let's take it one strand at a time.

The earliest roots of our Unitarian beliefs reach way down to the third century of the common era or, A.D. if you use the older way of denoting time. At that time in history, the Christian church as an institution was struggling to find a common doctrine which would enable it to develop as a religion in an era when so-called pagan religions were dominant.

In accomplishing this, Christian leaders from all corners of the known world found a common enemy in religious dissenters and united to create a theology that would establish once and for all what Christianity's message would be, banishing those who disagreed.

The early Christian fathers (and they were male) did not appreciate heretics! And you know us, we are a bit rebellious, freethinkers, questioners of authority! So we can look back to the third century and notice that one of our spiritual ancestors was a guy named Arius, a Christian priest, who believed and preached that God was One, that Jesus might be God's son, but that didn't make him God.

Well, Arius and his followers became heretics, in the eyes of the newly forming Church, and they were anathematized, kicked out, disparaged, even persecuted.

To subdue the heretic threat, the Christian church called for a council, a meeting of church leaders, and in the year 325, the Council of Nicaea ruled that henceforth, Christianity would proclaim God as being a Trinity---the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost or Spirit.

At that time, our heretical belief was termed anti-Trinitarianism. It wasn't until many centuries later that the word Unitarian, meaning the Unity of God, was used. And orthodox Christianity ruled the roost for all those centuries.

But the belief in God as One persisted, despite the authority of the developing church and despite persecution of dissenters. Challenges arose and were squelched; anti-Trinitarianism wasn't the only heresy out there, either, and church leaders were busy pursuing and even killing dissenters.

In the 16th century, a young Spanish physician named Michael Servetus wrote a scholarly thesis entitled "On the Errors of the Trinity". As a scientist, he was sure that, once church leaders could see for themselves the scriptures which indicated that God was One, they would immediately change direction and admit their mistake.

Unfortunately for Servetus, this was not the case. John Calvin, a prominent Christian leader of the time and founder of what is today called Presbyterianism, ordered that Servetus be burned at the stake for his heretical ideas. Michael Servetus was Unitarianism's first martyr. His death had the effect of galvanizing protest across Christendom and the persecution of heretics paused for a long time.

In seminary I had the experience of defending Michael Servetus in my Christian history class one day when my professor implied that Servetus was responsible for his own death, stating that he was crazy to confront Calvin with his evidence. In true Unitarian rebel form, I raised my hand and objected in no uncertain terms! And the professor apologized!

The other strand of our faith tradition, Universalism, has similarly heretical roots. Universalism was originally the belief that a loving God would not consign his children to eternal damnation. This idea was proposed strongly, again in the early centuries of Christianity, by a heretic scholar and theologian named Origen in the second century, and condemned as heresy by a church council in the sixth century.

That's where the earliest roots of Unitarian Universalism are placed. Since those early days, Unitarian and Universalist thought have changed and morphed into the Unitarian Universalism of today, a religious faith that places its trust in reason, science, and the ability of humans to find spiritual truth in many ways.

The emergence of Unitarian thought in the United States came largely through the noted scientist Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, who came to America in 1794 after being harassed out of England because of his Unitarian thinking.

Priestley was also a Unitarian minister and preached his radical views to many eager listeners in Philadelphia, which was at that time the capitol city of the country. His audience included Thomas Jefferson, who declared himself a Unitarian and predicted that all citizens of the young nation would become Unitarian eventually, though we are still awaiting that particular moment in time!

Several of the founders of our country were Unitarian or Universalist. Thomas Jefferson is one notable example. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a Universalist, was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence and described Universalism as a “belief in God’s universal love to all his creatures”, a radical viewpoint in an age when eternal hellfire and damnation were the theme of most church services.

You’ve probably noted by now that one primary characteristic of our heritage is the compulsion to speak our minds, to question authority, to differ markedly from the religious party line. In fact, if we had a primary mythological figure, it would probably be HereticWoman!

The roots of American Unitarian Universalism are also tightly intertwined with the roots of American democracy, with the American Revolution, the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

There has been a lot of rhetoric from the Religious Right about how the United States was founded as a Christian nation, a God-fearing, God-worshipping nation, and how we all ought to go back to those roots.

You might be surprised to hear me say that I agree that we ought to return to those roots! But the truth of our American religious roots is that they bear very little resemblance to the picture in the minds of people like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

In his book “American Gospel”, author Jon Meacham describes the origins of our country and its reliance on belief in God in quite different ways than the religious right might expect.

Thomas Jefferson, one of the main figures in the early years of our country, was not a simple man; he was neither conventionally devout nor completely disbelieving. Jefferson staked out an American middle ground between the rabid fervor of evangelizing Christians on the one hand and secular philosophy on the other.

Jefferson was confident that human beings could figure out natural and moral truths on their own, and he once spent a few evenings cutting and pasting his copy of the Gospels, taking out the parts he thought were unlikely to have occurred and arranging his own version of Jesus' teachings in a book still published in this country called The Jefferson Bible.

Jefferson was a man of science who believed in the primacy of rational observation, dismissing much of the supernatural as superstition. He denied the Trinity on the basis of its indistinct ideas, calling it mere abracadabra on the part of impostors who called themselves priests of Jesus.

According to Meacham, the great good news about America is that religion has shaped the life of the nation without strangling it. Our Founding Fathers and Mothers believed themselves at work in the service of both God and Humankind, not just one or the other.

The founding documents of this nation, forged by men of faith whose religion was civic in nature, set forth a diverse nation which will survive and thrive by cherishing freedom and protecting faith.

The God of our Unitarian Universalist ancestors in this country was not an old man on a throne. It was a Creator who had birthed Nature and Natural Law, whose grace had allowed the new nation to survive.

The God of our Unitarian Universalist ancestors in this country was not a Triune being who demanded belief in a particular doctrine. It was a providential force which offered opportunity and moral wisdom to the new nation.

We know, of course, that our ancestors in the growing democracy were often slow to use their moral wisdom; Thomas Jefferson and other heroes of that time had not yet found the moral courage to denounce slavery and release their own slaves. That is a blot on history, but it does not make meaningless the concept of democracy and the support of both freedom and faith by our Unitarian Universalist ancestors.

Our religious faith developed further throughout the ensuing years, transformed by the work of the poets and essayists who called themselves Transcendentalists. Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman-----all these men and women infused Unitarian Universalism with a sense of the physical world and a growing respect for nature and natural law.

Our religious faith grew alongside the efforts of the anti-slavery movement, the women's rights movement and advocates for the mentally ill, for prison reform, for public education. Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Louisa May Alcott, Dorothea Dix, Horace Greeley-----these men and women infused Unitarian Universalism with a sense of justice and altruism and the conviction that what we did for others really mattered.

Our religious faith grew and grew until its two threads---the Unitarian thread and the Universalist thread, both rooted in the soil of democracy and justice---came together in a merger in 1961, becoming the Unitarian Universalist Association, with congregations all over the United States and Canada, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia and New Zealand as well.

We can look back at the centuries and be proud of what our religious faith has accomplished as it developed and what it has become today. We have the respect of many other religious denominations because of our interfaith work and our respect for other religious paths.

At the same time, we need to ask ourselves “what good are our roots, impressive as they are, if we don’t use the wings they support?”

Yes, we have roots, good solid roots, roots that go back far into history, roots that have loosened the tight bonds of orthodoxy and caused any number of hide-bound institutions to change, roots from which democracy and religious freedom have sprung.

We also have wings. What good are they doing us? Where are we flying to as Unitarian Universalists? Are we flying anywhere? Are we taking our message of religious freedom and justice anywhere? Have we rested on our laurels as the descendants of prophets of justice, content to let others do the work we started?

Where are we in the social justice causes of our time? Are we doing real work, hands-on, face to face, showing up where it matters? Are we building on the work of the abolitionists, the civil rights activists, those who stuck their necks out for unpopular but just causes?

Where are we in the religious causes of our time? Are we content to fuss about other religious paths which to us seem superstitious or cruel? Or are we working side by side with those we don't understand, in an effort to change our perceptions and fears, standing on the shoulders of men and women who are willing to look beyond religious differences to forge interfaith understanding?

How are we using our wings to create this community of love and justice for ourselves? How are we reaching out to others, to invite them to join us in our work, our community, our efforts to change the world? Are we willing to tell others about a faith that is more than just a bunch of nice people getting together on Sundays? Are we willing to take that risk?

How are we using our wings to add to the work of the Transcendentalist poets and writers to create a theology of nature and environment based on their radical thinking and moving beyond it to address the natural world and overcome the destruction of the natural world?

Our roots are great. We can be proud of them. But we also need to exercise and use our wings. Our UU principles and purposes are the wind beneath our wings, but if we don't use those wings, we are not fulfilling the promise of our faith. It doesn't do us much good to brag about our roots if we aren't willing to use the wings they gave us.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to tell me about your roots. Now I ask you, "tell me about your wings."

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN #121 "WE'LL BUILD A LAND"

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we have solid, deep roots in our faith tradition of Unitarian Universalist. May we depend on those roots to give us strength to use the wings they support, acting on our values, inviting others to share the journey, and making this world a better place.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.