

# Myths and Truths of Our Faith

A sermon by

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**H**osea Ballou, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Universalist who taught that all people (and not just an elected few) were saved, “was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills with a Baptist preacher one afternoon. They argued theology as they traveled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, “Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.” Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, “If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.””  
(told by the Rev. Elizabeth Strong)

I love stories. For me, the last few years of preparation for Unitarian Universalist ministry have been an intense time of soaking in the stories of our faith. Although I finished seminary more than five years ago, it was not until four years ago that I became Unitarian Universalist and since then have been deep in preparation to be a credentialed Unitarian Universalist minister. In the last few years, I have read all sixty-two of the readings required for those entering Unitarian Universalist ministry and have been busily reading additional texts, listening to recorded UU sermons, following our UU periodicals and attending conferences and assemblies. Last March I travelled to Boston for my credentialing interview which ultimately led to my ordination last week. Earlier in the year when I found out I would be travelling to Boston, I was very excited as much of our UU American history emerged from the Boston area. In addition it is the site of our national Association of Congregations. I planned my trip so that I could visit some of our significant historical sites.

Today the Unitarian Universalist Association is celebrating “Association Sunday” and kicking off the year-long celebration of the consolidation of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961. In honor of

this celebration, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the histories of both our Unitarian and Universalist traditions and I would like to do that by sharing some of my most favorite stories that I have picked up in the last few years.

There is another reason to lift up these stories. Many UU congregations send their youth to Boston for a tour. A self-guided walking tour is set up just for those trips. On the literature for the tour it states, “this trip is expected to provide our youth with experiences that help them find their place in our faith tradition - to help them understand what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist outside the comfort of their own youth group. They learn about their religious heritage as seekers of truth and meaning.”

I think that, in part, it was in all these readings and stories that I found *my* place in our faith tradition. And these stories also helped me to dispel many of the myths that are present in our UU religion. Some might argue that some of these stories themselves are myths. The point for me though is that all of them have truth and wisdom for us today and that is the part I would like us to remember.

During my trip to Boston, I was able to visit some very old UU churches. One of the Cape Cod churches I visited was First Parish in Brewster. They are in the midst of a significant fundraising campaign to restore their centuries old building from aging and insect damage.

First Parish Brewster has their original, handwritten church ledger that spans from 1700 to 1792. An entry from October 1730 written in the handwriting of their first pastor, reads, “*Thomas Hinkley & his wife, having made a public acknowledgement of their sin of fornication, were accepted by ye church in to ye arms of their charity on Oct. 18.*” “Why should a married couple confess the sin of fornication” you ask? A footnote from elsewhere in the ledger indicates that the church “had calculated how many days should elapse between the marriage and the birth of the first child. If the days were too few, it was obvious that there was fornication before the union and thus the need to confess their sin.” Publically. (p6 *A Legacy of Love and Survival*)

It is in these old church stories that I remember our roots in Christian Protestant religion. Our older Unitarian and Universalist churches were progressive for their time and still firmly Christian. They might have had regular communion, biblical

readings each week, recitation of familiar Christian prayers, and (it seems) public confession.

I sometimes hear the myth that as Unitarian Universalists we are distinctly different from Christians. In some ways we are. And in some ways we are theirs and they are ours. I wonder if this anti-Christian myth emerged from those among us who are healing from traumas that versions of Christianity have inflicted on us. I know that when I returned to Christianity as an adult, a sense of betrayal was felt by many of my gay and lesbian friends and a Native American friend. I know many of us are still learning to liberate Christian words from fundamentalist or hurtful associations. Yet Christianity (and all its biblical stories with it) is part of our history—even though the part where we broke from orthodoxy is significant: our Unitarian heritage which professes belief in one God and not the trinity, and our Universalist heritage that all are saved and not just an elect few.

Our American Unitarian roots are firmly grounded in the intellectualism of the Boston elite and in the academic world of Harvard in nearby Cambridge. I am afraid that we have a reputation for being overly serious, rigid and heady. Sometimes we are. But there is something I realized on my recent trip to Boston. We have two main UUA offices in Boston, one on Beacon Street and another one block up on Mt. Vernon Street. And what you need to know is that they both intersect at Joy Street. Joy Street. Come on. Even the most serious of Harvard graduates must find the joy in that.

Another myth that we hear is that Unitarian Universalists have an aversion to miracle stories. Well, maybe it is all in how one defines a “miracle” but earlier in the service we lifted up John Murray’s 1770 arrival in America from England. A New Jersey farmer is turned on to this new religious belief that all are saved and builds a church for a minister who, as far as he’s concerned, does not yet exist. But he builds this church in faith that one day, somehow, a preacher will come to preach in this church. And a decade later former Universalist preacher John Murray is accidentally stranded off the coast of New Jersey on his way to New York from England. It is a series of unlikely coincidences really. Or a miracle. I leave that up to you. But this John Murray fellow, who would be attributed to the spread of Universalism in America, seems to attract such miracles.

There is another story that surrounds this man. The story of how Universalism came to Provincetown,

MA. I visited Provincetown way out on the very tip of Cape Cod.

“Universalism came to Provincetown in 1820, when two little girls, Sylvia and Elizabeth Freeman, found a waterlogged book on the beach. They took it home and dried it out. *The Life of Rev. John Murray, Preacher of Universalist Salvation* [was the book and it] swept through the town and transformed a community weighed down with the fear of hellfire and judgment with the joyous awareness of God’s universal love for all beings.” Inspired by these teachings, the community started a Universalist meetinghouse which is thriving today.

With all this picking and choosing from different sources and reclaiming words like “miracle” and “salvation” on our own terms, it sometimes gets said that Unitarian Universalists can believe whatever we want.

Another story about early American Universalist, Hosea Ballou: “His father was a Baptist preacher and farmer, and his mother died before he was two. Hosea had very limited schooling, and learned the skills of farming in a difficult environment. After he joined his father’s church, he began to have questions of faith. This was partly brought on by the preaching in nearby Warwick, Massachusetts of the Universalist Caleb Rich. Hosea wanted to defend his faith, but found that his study of the Bible affirmed universalism. His father eventually accepted the new faith, but it took time. Once his father found him reading in the kitchen, and asked, “What is that book?” Hosea said it was a Universalist book. His father declared that he could not allow a Universalist book in his house. Hosea knew his father was watching as he hid the book in the woodpile. Later [his father] went to the woodpile, and found that the dread book was the Bible.” (<http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/universalists/Hosea-Ballou.php>)

Ballou struggled with his faith. It would have been easier to stay a Baptist, but it wasn’t working for him. One of our Unitarian Universalist principles is affirming and promoting a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Free and responsible. Ballou was searching for and finding a God of love in the bible, a God who would damn no one and save all. This is not about believing what he wanted, but engaging in deep theological study and reflection.

If we can’t believe anything we want, some will say that we don’t believe anything at all. While it is true

that we don't have corporate creeds or doctrines, we do encourage each other on this free and responsible search for truth and meaning and also encourage spiritual growth. In 19<sup>th</sup> century America, formal debates "took place between Universalist preachers and their orthodox counterparts. The Universalist preachers were skilled debaters who read their Bible carefully and knew by heart the passages that denied the concept of eternal damnation. Thomas Whittemore, the great Universalist leader of that time, took on a man named Balfour in a debate that lasted five full days...People came partly for the entertainment but partly because the theology was so important to them. The debates had no judges. People went, they listened, and then they went home and made up their minds...

But even in the days of *prearranged* debates, impromptu, and sometimes heated, debates still took place between Universalists and their theological rivals. One of the most unusual involved Noah Murray, a minister in mid-Pennsylvania, who had begun a Universalist church that was the fastest-growing congregation in the area. It finally grew so large that two of the local mainline preachers decided they had better do something about it. They kidnapped Noah Murray and took him to the basement of one of their churches, where they kept him for three days and nights, arguing theology. At the end of that time, Noah Murray was set free, having converted both of them." (—adapted from Richard Eddy, *Universalism in America* and from research by the Rev. Margaret K. Gooding and the Rev. A. Phillip Hewett)

That reminds me of another myth: that Unitarian Universalists don't evangelize. Evangelism. Is anybody in the room twitching as I say that word? As liberal religious people, we tend to lean back and let people come to us. After all, we don't want to enforce our beliefs or practices onto others, right? But I have heard it said that while most of us have a knee-jerk reaction against evangelism there are also a great many of us who would have wished we had found the UU church earlier in our lives. And that, I dare say, is the reason we should spread the message.

I have heard too that Unitarian Universalists do not pray. The last time I joined you for worship I spoke on this topic of UU prayer. Indeed some do not pray. Some do not believe in a God to whom one would pray. Some choose meditation. Some have other practices, and some do indeed pray.

Unitarian minister, reformer and author, Edward Everett Hale, helped found the Unitarian Church of America, and in 1903 was appointed Chaplain of the United States Senate. He was asked "*Do you pray for the Senators, Dr. Hale?*" to which he replied "*No, I look at the Senators, and pray for the country.*" A life-size statue memorializing Hale and his works stands in the Boston Public Garden.

That is another surprising fact for those who consider Unitarian Universalism to exist more on the fringe than in the midst of mainstream religion. There are prominent statues of Unitarians in the Public Garden next to Boston Common. William Ellery Channing, considered a Founder of Unitarianism in America, stands on the Public Garden and faces the entrance of Arlington Street Church, one of our Boston UU churches. I have been told that if the doors of the church are open and you are preaching in the pulpit you can see Channing's larger than life statue staring back at you. And from his point on public ground I think it is a great reminder of our strong call to engage public life and not to simply bury our heads in church life.

And our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, in addition to being at the intersection of Joy Street, is not out in some blissful retreat center, but next to the Massachusetts State House, facing Boston Common, in the middle of public life. While I was in Boston, I joined some UUA staff members during their lunch break in walking next door to rally for healthcare reform in front of the State House.

UU minister and Professor Mark Morrison Reed talks about the connectedness of the religious community that inspires us to act for justice. A lot of that justice work needs to happen in the public square.

I have one more story. I stopped by the UU fellowship in Falmouth, MA on the morning of my interview with the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee. I was nervous about the interview, but had some extra time and I happened to be driving by this church in Falmouth. I didn't actually expect anyone to be there on a Friday morning, but I am happy enough to admire a church from the outside. I was graciously greeted by a hard-working member of the church who was volunteering his time that day. I told him I was a nerdy UU from Texas who liked visiting other churches. He smiled and said warmly, "welcome." He showed me around, asked about Texas, empathized with how isolating it must be sometimes to be a UU in the south. As we stood in the sanctuary, he asked kind of giddy, "would you like to see our solar

panels?" I did and we stood outside and admired them.

Why do I tell you all these stories?

Because this is our religious heritage and I believe that we each need to find our place in our religious tradition.

UU minister John Buehrens points out that "Most religious groups ask the question, what do we all believe in common? That is the creedal question. The question we ask instead is the covenantal question, what are we willing to *promise* to one another, and to the world?" (John Buehrens, p161 *Salted with Fire*)

That is our question. That is always our question. What are we willing to promise to one another, and to the world?

Our religious history gives us a peek into the long journey toward religious freedom and evangelizing a Spirit of love. We are a part of that history, that living tradition. When we show up on Sunday morning we are part of that history. When we teach our children our hymns and our stories, we continue the legacy promoting the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. When we put up solar panels or commit to buying recycled paper, we do so in answer to the question about how we want to be in covenant with one another and our world. When we work for peace or extend compassion, when we say "welcome"

to a stranger, when we wonder about the universe or when we debate theology or invite a friend to church. These are the activities and promises of our tradition. These are the truths of our faith. Let us live out these truths with integrity.

"Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in the entire world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals.

Ideals that have comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message.

Rejoice that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves."

*Amen and Blessed Be*