

“A Classless Heaven“ by Mark W Harris

March 24, 2019 - UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn

Centering quote

“A church which has any trace of class or racial segregation or supernatural deity or a personal father who will shield people from life, should be destroyed. It has not the answer for our time. It kills the human spirit, rather than helping us grow.” Charles Vickery, Universalist minister

Responsive opening words

From Leslie Takahashi

Here in thus place of peace

May we find hope.

Here in this place of connection,

May we find life-giving community.

Here in this place of rest,

Let the unrest of our hearts turn us toward justice.

Here in this space made sacred by memories of connection,

*Let us each feel ourselves part of the new that grows from the old in the spiraling
unity of years.*

Reading

“A Faith for the Few,” by Mark W. Harris, UU World, Spring 2011
(excerpt from the book *Elite: Uncovering Classism in UU History*)

When I tell fellow Unitarian Universalists that I serve as minister of the First Parish of Watertown, Massachusetts, they are sometimes surprised and generally respond incredulously, “I never knew there was a UU church there.”

Unitarian Universalists often assume that UU congregations belong in wealthy suburbs where the grass is greener and the children go to high-achieving schools. This assumption exists alongside the half-defensive, half-optimistic ideology of genuine diversity. Until recently, Watertown was urban, industrial, and populated by working class immigrants. While it is still densely populated, its proximity to Boston has helped the real estate market put a Watertown address out of the price range for most working class people today. Yet one colleague said that his parishioners would consider Watertown a ghetto. This is a minister who would preach that our faith is for all people and should appeal to diverse populations. No wonder we feel confused.

We say we aspire to be democratic and inclusive, but we are comforted by our litany of influential and prestigious forebears. Many Unitarian Universalists are torn between who is actually sitting in our pews and who we wish was sitting there.

The First Parish of Watertown is an ancient parish, one of the five oldest congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association. It was founded in 1630 by Puritans . . . A band of “white Anglo-Saxon Protestants” and their descendants [who] helped form many congregations that eventually became the nucleus of an established church, whose membership exerted enormous economic, political, social, and educational influence in Massachusetts. . . . Then, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the demographic character of Watertown, like other WASP communities, was transformed. First, the population began to swell with laborers for the Watertown Arsenal, many of whom had fled the Irish potato famine. Then Italians were added to the new ethnic mix. Soon wave after wave of Armenians fleeing the Turkish genocide found employment at the Hood Rubber factory. A substantial Greek population joined them, and Orthodox churches

started to appear on the landscape. As Watertown became more industrial and urban, its most venerable institution, the Unitarian church, began to decline. The values of diversity and inclusiveness that UUs celebrate today did not exist in the mid-twentieth century.

Unitarians led the march to the suburbs.

By 1966, when the Rev. David Rankin was called to serve his first congregation, he found an “old gray ghost” atop the rising knoll on Watertown’s Church Street, with twelve to fourteen people attending the worship services. Almost every aspect of church life had disintegrated.

In an unprecedented action by Unitarian standards, Rankin went door to door, giving literature to 6,000 families and talking to hundreds about the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism. This evangelical approach worked, at least temporarily. Former Unitarians came back to church, along with ex-Catholics and even a Muslim. Yet it was not enough to save their Gothic edifice. The walls of the meetinghouse had holes, and the floorboards gave way when walked upon. In 1975 it was torn down, and the congregation moved next door to the parish hall, where it eventually grew and today flourishes. At least for now, the congregation is assured of a continuing existence.

At the First Unitarian Church of Worcester, Massachusetts, the Rev. Tom Schade . . . delivered a [sermon](#) that proposed that every church community is “working through one central issue.” For his congregation that issue was: How should well-educated, sophisticated, and generally prosperous people conduct their religious lives in the changing circumstances of Worcester? Worcester is generally perceived as a working class, industrial city. Yet the people Schade finds at his church reflect a different

socioeconomic and educational reality. The church may be in a mixed community, but the membership is drawn largely from the upper-middle class.

Does a liberal faith only appeal to a narrow segment of the population—a liberal, economically comfortable, well-educated elite—or is that simply a self-fulfilling prophecy? Many Unitarian Universalists believe the stereotype that we are only educated suburbanites, but it is clearly not true. My wife grew up as one of six children in a family that struggled to survive economically, yet she is a born UU—and so is her mother. Many Unitarian Universalists live in marginal economic circumstances or do not have college educations. Yet looking back at the Unitarian and Universalist past, we see that the stereotype has old and very real roots. Fortunately, our history also shows us that liberal religion can reach beyond the elite.

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Sermon

A few years ago my colleague, Ken Sawyer, Minister Emeritus in Wayland, preached a sermon on what he believed was the most beautiful word in the English language. It is an intriguing exercise. What would you choose as your most beautiful word? It might be the word that holds the deepest meaning for us, and in fact, the five winners on an internet survey were mother, passion, smile, love and eternity. We might also think of those words that have the most beautiful sound, and then, serendipitous, would be one of my candidates. Ken’s answer to the question was public. He went on to say, “I want things to be public, as much as possible.” He told me he was inspired to preach on this theme after reading my book, *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian*

Universalist History. He said he wanted to sing the praises of the notion of public, such as in library, versus the idea of private, as in the Boston Atheneum, a private library for members only, which revoked the membership of Lydia Maria Child, after she published an abolitionist work, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* in 1833. Child was the sister of a predecessor in my pulpit in Watertown, Convers Francis, and is best known for her Thanksgiving song, “Over the river and through the wood.”

Child was kicked out of a private library, a few years before most public libraries were founded. The following story speaks volumes of the need for us to expand our boundaries beyond the private, and not be afraid of engaging the company of strangers who live in our communities, and may call us to reengage with the idea of going public.

Ronald McNair was one of the astronauts killed more than 30 years ago when the space shuttle Challenger exploded. As a child Ron McNair wanted to study science. But first, he needed to get his hands on some advanced books. And that was a problem. When he was 9 years old, Ron decided to take a mile walk from his home down to the library in his South Carolina hometown. The library was public, but not for black folks in 1959. When he walked in there, all the white folks were staring at him and saying, 'Who is this Negro?' He politely positioned himself in line to check out his books. The librarian was indignant, 'This library is not for coloreds.' He said, 'Well, I would like to check out these books.' She said, 'Young man, if you don't leave this library right now, I'm gonna call the police.' But he just propped himself up on the counter, and sat there, and said, 'I'll wait.' " The librarian called the police — and McNair's mother, Pearl. Fortunately the policeman convinced the librarian to give the boy the books, and he did not end up in jail. He continued to reach beyond barriers of exclusion and became an astronaut. After his tragic

death, the South Carolina library of his segregated childhood was named after him.

McNair helped transform our public life by succeeding in his own dream, and even in death, his vision lives on, in the library, where everyone is now welcome.

I want you to reflect on that word public for a moment. If I were to say the word, public, what noun would it modify? (ANSWERS) What do you associate it with?

Perhaps you went to public school or you ride to work on public transportation, you used a public restroom, or you walked in a public garden, or maybe you ran for public office, or were a public employee or even took to the public square to demand your freedom, or to protest economic injustice. Public is about everybody, access for all, equality and freedom, which might also be among the candidates for most beautiful word in the English language.

And then there is public pool. I never swam in a public pool until I was an adult. When I was in elementary school my parents built an in ground pool, almost at the same time as the Beverly Hillbillies was a smash hit on television. My parents identified with the rags to riches hicks in that show, and enjoyed their own cee-ment pond. I loved our cee-ment pond, too. It is where I learned to swim. But it was also apparent to me that it set us apart from all of my classmates in public school. The pool was a symbol of my parent's economic success, but it was also a place where we could limit the guest list. We did not have to mingle with the great unwashed masses. However, there were many family conflicts over the right to go to the nearby lake where all my friends were hanging out. "Why would I ever choose to swim in that filthy little body of water?" my overly protective mother would say. She wanted to keep me from the bad influences she imagined existing at the lake – rowdiness, liquor, drugs and girls – but it was all those

intriguing experiences that would help me engage with life, such as meeting new people, learning to make good choices, and being responsible, that were missing from my life. I loved that pool. I loved that privilege, but I also hated it because it kept me from enlarging my experience of the world.

Recently I went to Atlanta for a family wedding. On Sunday afternoon as we were riding to our destination on the subway, I noticed that we were the only white people on the train. It was clear that only poor people were riding on public transportation that day, and everyone else was driving. It is also clear to me that sometimes liberals like the idea of being public, better than the actual practice of it. Yet being public reminds us that engaging with others deepens us educationally, socially and spiritually. But where is the notion of public good instead of private gain in the political rhetoric these days? Historian Vincent Harding says, “A truly pluralistic and humane society must be undergirded by a common vision of the public good. . .”

My confession for the day is that, especially since I published my book on class, I sometimes search myself up on the web. This is how I learned that my colleague in Bedford, John Gibbons preached on my book. John called his sermon: “Would You Go to Heaven with a Prostitute?” This is a line from a question I raise in the book about universalist theology. Clearly my intent in asking this is not about getting to heaven with an escort, but rather about the structure of heaven itself - the shared space. Salvation historically had been based in the notion of who could live the most spotless life in the eyes of God. The best were saved, sometimes interpreted to mean those who had achieved the most financial or social or even educational success. Universalists believed our purpose was to become more loving, and that indeed God’s love would enfold us all,

prostitutes as well. It was a classless heaven or a public heaven, where there was a place for everyone. When someone knocked on the gates, we did not ask, what do you do for a living or do you own your home? Or even what college do your children attend? a frequent one that I encounter. Interestingly enough, I attended an exclusive college, and what diversity we achieved there was largely engineered. My sons attend state schools, and guess what? The cheaper price tag means there is more actual diversity, and an enriching of their experiences by being with other ethnic groups and classes of people. In a universalist heaven there is an assumption that you belong there, rather than a judgment or presumption, such as only an educated person would get this faith, others are too stupid. This was a lesson the Universalists tried to impart to their Unitarian siblings, but it was not easy. Together we developed a theology that calls us to live out a faith that is truly welcoming to all, but the question remained, how do we achieve that heaven on earth?

In these difficult times we look to the church as a place of refuge. We think here I can get away from the world, and bring all my troubles to lay on the altar of quiet support and understanding. Here also we sometimes refer to the community as a family, or as a place we can have intimate connections with others, and find spiritual nourishment through sharing of feelings. Yet there is something limiting about this. While we all need people with whom we share values, and who care for us, what challenges us the most is new experiences with new people. It is easier and more comfortable to be personal, but it also limits our growth as people and communities. Parker Palmer and others have suggested that our culture idealizes intimacy, and leads us to withdraw from the public life. What happens is that we end up caring for our own, but we lose all

concept of a larger beloved community. We don't learn to live in the company of strangers. Our family is people like us, and we end up not growing spiritually because we are only sharing among ourselves, and fail to offer hospitality to the stranger.

One piece of advice that is often conveyed to young couples who are about to marry is: "Don't enter this marriage thinking you are going to change your partner." We hear, "It is a mistake to say, oh, they may not want children now, but they will think differently once they are married." The perceived wisdom is that this is a false assumption because they are who they are, and will stay that way despite all their partner's efforts to change them. They are not likely to change either their unwillingness to save money or want children when they are already lavish spenders, and enjoy the childless life. This is a view of marriage that each partner will essentially stay the same person, and the person they marry won't alter that. However, different people do bring out different parts of us. If the person I love is a stickler for being on time, I can change my ways. And in fact, I did. So while I may never have been on time before I was married, I can see the error of my ways, in how that can be disrespectful of my partner, and voila – I can change. In some respects both people are right. We do remain the same person in many ways, but when we enter new relationships we are changed. In some ways we are partners who grow together, and we make compromises to find common ground. People we care deeply about make an impact on us. Change can happen. We can be changed or transformed by connecting in new and deeper ways to the relationships we have and to the life source we all share.

Historically, Universalism helped transform religion in America by teaching about a God of love who desired human happiness and everyone came to believe they

could achieve salvation. They rejected a faith that rewarded the few, and condemned everyone else. Universalism reminds us that the creation is unified and connected and whole. In response we see the holy in everything. Of course that means that I am responsible towards that whole. Everyone and everything matters, and we work to make that true. We are not tolerant when a person or the creation is hurt or demeaned. I have a faith that teaches that there is the one truth that will unite us and connect us. I know there is no greater gift we could give to the world than sharing this faith with more people, but perhaps the central challenge is actually living out that faith ourselves.

In an article in the *New Yorker* a few years ago, Adam Gopnik reminded us that the Olympics gave birth to the liberal ideal that anyone could become part of a nation simply by showing up and joining the team. It might be a good immigrant policy, too. Racial or ethnic particularity was submerged into a greater national whole. These days it is fashionable among liberals to hold up diversity and difference, but we need common ideals, too; we need to remember that our life source is one great love. We also need a faith that unites us so we feel a common understanding with those who are different from us, or those who are poor, and when we reach out to them, and come to know them, we become more than what we are, and we become closer to that one love. When Jesse Owens outran the Nazis in 1936 he showed American Racists that American blacks were just as American as anyone else.

Once upon a time segregationists believed that even heaven was segregated, so that we would not be contaminated by anyone not like us. Our faith says it would not be heaven if it were not open to all. Our faith calls us to go out into the public byways and highways, and make real the dream of universalism, of sharing heaven with a prostitute,

of sharing earth with strangers. A recent editorial in the *Globe* by Elissa Ely spoke of the “The Weight of Assumptions.” When she went to the gym, she assumed the hulking weight lifter and her lived on separate planets; she projected that he disdains her quiet softness, and she knows she feels some disdain for his apparent tough, burly hardness, and so they ignore each other. But one morning she hurried by his office and she noticed that he was laying down on a dog bed cuddling the oldest dog she had ever seen. The dog was making mournful sounds but the weightlifter was softly reminding him that he was there for him with words of love and strokes of care. It turns out, Ely discovered, that the weight lifter was not merely muscles, but soft caresses, too. Can we emerge from our liberal shell, and meet the stranger? That would be the first thing that would extend our class consciousness. Margaret Fuller was once told by her father, that her reluctance to go among strangers cannot too soon be overcome, and the way to do that is not to stay home. One continuing liberal problem is that we only talk to ourselves. In Watertown we are in the middle of our annual pledge drive. They have had a series of circle suppers in private homes. I recently received the reports from the conversations at the suppers. One read: “A discussion ensued as to why we would want to do more self-promoting in bringing attention to our church, as self-promotion is not consistent with what we perceive as our UU values.” Will we ever share our good news with others? We need to get outside our circle of relationships, our circle of friends or news group. The book of Hebrews counseled the early Christians – “Let love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Overcoming classism means really embracing Universalism, another beautiful word, then our lives become more like heaven.

Benediction from Frederick Buechner (unison)

If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors.

With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces. Here it is love that is the frame we see them in. . . .“

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