Three Universalist Reflections

1. “A Lady’s Soliloquy” from *A Defence of Truth*  by Rev. Jacob Chase (1841)

“Well, really, I have been to a Universalist meeting. I wonder what people will say about it. I hope there are not many who know that I have been there, for I shall be almost despised by all my present associates. They have often spoken of that meeting in terms of the utmost contempt; yes, and I have joined with them too. But I have been there and heard for myself. I don’t believe the doctrine, but I see nothing in the preaching that looks to me unreasonable; and certainly the preacher fully proved what he preached, from Scripture. I never heard so much of the Bible quoted in a sermon in all my life before.—But, O, I dread to see anyone—I shall feel so *sheepish*. Well, I don’t think I shall be seen there again; though, if it were not for the speech of people, and the overwhelming contempt which it would bring upon me from Mr. Parker’s church, I should really take pleasure in dropping in once in a while and hearing what appears to me reasonable and consistent, though I do not believe it.

“O, there comes Mrs. H[olden]; she has found out where I’ve been; she will feel very much disappointed and grieved, for she has frequently said that she would as soon go into a *den of thieves* as to such a meeting. (Jane, put that Universalist Hymn Book out of sight.) How shall I apologize? O, I will tell her that my husband had the curiosity to go *once*, and insisted upon my going with him; and out of respect to *him*, I *reluctantly* consented to go, but don’t think I shall do so much *violence* to my own *conscience* and *character* as to comply with his wishes again. I think, under these circumstances, I shall be forgiven for *this* time, at least; and *if* I go again, it shall be in the *evening*, and I will be careful to slip in unobserved and get a seat in some place where I shall not be recognized—for it is very painful to my feelings to be so *hatchelled* and *hammered* as I must be in the present instance, by all my friends and *respectable* associates.

“Why, she has really gone by! I am heartily glad—for I have this time, at least, got rid of telling about a dozen *lies*, as an *apology* for doing no *harm*! But I want to be *respected*, and in order for this I must be a little *hypocritical*. Mrs. H[olden] told me the other day, that she had much rather *sacrifice* her moral *principle* than her *popularity*—and she said, that she thought it was much better to be a *hypocrite*, respected by the popular classes, than to be a sincere *Christian*, disrespected, persecuted and despised. And she is not the *only* one that has intimated as much. And I suppose that I shall have to follow their rule. But I shall never forget the Universalist sermon. And the sermon was in perfect accordance with the principles laid down in the text which the preacher read, from Job xx.5: ‘The joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment.’ O, I wish I was as far from the besetting and widely prevailing sin of *hypocrisy* as I believe I ought to be, to be a good Christian. At all events, if I don’t go to that *meeting* any more, my neighbors can’t prevent me from *thinking* upon what I *have* heard. And if I am careful to keep my thoughts to myself, they will forgive me for the *past*, and honor me as usual, for the *future*. Yes, I *must* be a *hypocrite*, *or lose my good name and my popularity*—there is no alternative.”

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2. From “Reminiscences of Universalism in Western New-York”

by Lasira Imogene Torrey (1861)

In 1828 for the first time I attended a Universalist meeting in the city (then village) of Rochester, N.Y. Rev. A[lfred] Peck preached in the old Court House. There was a small congregation, comparatively. Only four women were present, including my aunt (a Methodist) my mother, and myself. At the intermission, I took occasion to enter into a conversation with the only woman who attended, aside from our company. She said, “I am not a Universalist, but I do like to hear them preach,” adding, “I shall receive a severe reproof, if my friends learn that I have been to this meeting…” On returning (at that time) from meeting, I said to my cousin, a young man, “Why did you not go to our meeting to-day?” “O,” said he, “people in this place, think there are none who attend the Universalist meeting, but the very refuse of society.”

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3. from *A Vanished World* by Gertrude Sneller

[written about Cicero, Onondaga County, perhaps abt. 1870s]

On a Sunday morning the bells of the three churches in the village called to all to come to meeting… The bells did not interfere with one another; whichever bell started ringing first would pause after two or three minutes and let the others take up the summons. All three bells had individual tones easily identified. The loungers on the hotel steps, who never went to church, not only recognized the notes of each, but were able to interpret what they said. According to their insight, the Methodist bell shouted “Repent! Repent!” The Presbyterian bell urged “Church time! Church time!” Only the Universalist bell held out a cheerful promise. “No hell! No hell!” it said. The loungers felt safe in staying where they were…

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Let’s start our search for the story of “olde Universalism” in Cattaraugus County with an introduction to John Murray, the first founder of Universalism as a denomination in this country. Murray was a native of Alton, England and was born there in 1741, the oldest of nine children. When he was ten the family moved to a village in Ireland near Cork, where they converted to Methodism from a strict Anglican background. After the death of his father, Murray lived with a family whose home contained a large library, and new chances for education along with it. A little later he moved to London and accepted employment in a cloth mill, where he met Eliza Neale, whose grandfather detested Methodists. Defying his opposition, Eliza left his home and married John Murray.

As a leader in the Methodist church, Murray was requested to call on a woman from his congregation who had been converted to Universalism by a preacher named James Relly. The visit upset Murray enough that he decided to read Relly’s tract, *Union*, and go hear a sermon. Afterward, as he tried to continue serving the Methodist congregation, it became clear to him—and them—that he had become a believer in Universalism.

But tragically Murray’s new religion quickly received a severe testing in the death of his and Eliza’s baby at the age of one and the death of Eliza not long afterward. On top of this tragedy Murray was sent to prison, in the cruel custom of the time, because he could not pay his debts. After he had served his sentence, Relly encouraged him to continue preaching, but Murray was too heartbroken for this effort, and he determined to start his life over in the American colonies.

In July of 1770, on his way to New York, his ship grounded on a sandbar on the southern coast of New Jersey, at a place that later on was called Good Luck and is now Lanoka Harbor. On shore Murray met a man named Thomas Potter, who showed Murray a meeting house he had built because he believed that a preacher would eventually come who would bring a message of salvation for all people. Murray admitted being a preacher of universal salvation but refused Potter’s urgent entreaties to deliver a sermon in the chapel. At last, though, Potter extracted an agreement: if the winds rose and dislodged the ship, Murray was free to go. But if the winds stayed calm and the ship remained stuck on the sandbar, it would be a sign from God that Murray was called to speak. By Sunday morning, September 30, 1770, the ship was still grounded and Murray, keeping his word, delivered a sermon on Universalism. He later settled in Gloucester, MA and founded the Universalist denomination. The teachings of this new faith began to spread during the agonies of revolution and the founding of a new country, the United States of America.

Now let’s travel westward to the wilderness of upstate New York during the decades following this War of the Revolution. As compensation for their service in this war, large numbers of former New England soldiers were receiving bounty land grants and were moving their families onto their new acreage. Many of these land grants were in the vast wild forests of upstate New York, inhabited if at all by First Nation Americans who had not yet been driven out of their homelands.

Life was hard for these pioneer families, struggling to settle and often just survive the hardships of their new life: the brutal landscape, killer wolf packs, a chronic lack of passable roads, endless backbreaking labor, bitter winters and stifling summers, deadly illnesses, and a shortage of just about everything except the trees that had to be cleared to make the land livable.

The early years of this movement westward, and the massive increase of population that resulted, took place during a time of religious fervor in American society known as the Second Great Awakening. Against a religious background of unpardonable sin, a wrathful God, and endless hellfire, the main thrust of this Awakening was waves of revivals that offered salvation only to sinners who repented and surrendered to God. There were so many successions of these salvation events in upstate New York that it came to be called “the burnt district” as early as 1845, and in 1950 as “The Burned Over District,” when the late Syracuse history professor Whitney R. Cross published a book with that title.

Believers in Universalism were also among the settlers in this primitive upstate area with its culture of fervent revivalism. It was in the year 1802 when a preacher named Edwin Ferriss first brought Universalism to upstate New York in the village of Butternuts, Otsego County. Here as in New England this upstart faith was widely despised from the beginning. Just by their existence Universalists everywhere posed a serious threat to a society that used the fear of God as a primary method of social control. As individuals, known Universalists—or even suspected ones—might experience anything from rare tolerance to subtle shunning to outright persecution. Sometimes known Universalist men were barred from employment by their religious opposers. Sometimes Universalist women, who like other females had little or nothing of their own beyond their reputations, were subjected to slander and false accusations, for which they had no legal recourse. Even children were vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks, by other children and by adults as well. On their part, Universalists did not hesitate to publish some spectacularly dreadful accounts of suicide, and the maiming and murder of spouses and children, committed by those in the throes of spiritual despondence, and to call out and lament the orthodox theology and revivalist practices leading to such horrors. Still, they were a detested minority, with only Catholics below them on the scale of religious oppression.

Even in the face of such opposition, a devoted band of pioneer preachers was determined to bring this revolutionary new gospel of salvation for all to the entire state, and the entire country as well. Their theology did not require anyone to repent in order to be saved. Their promise of God’s unconditional love, with redemption and reconciliation available to everyone, offered a radical and life-changing alternative to cosmic hopelessness and the social and personal tragedies it brought about. I was brought up in a progressive Methodist congregation, but even so I can remember sometimes being terrorized about the prospect of ending up in hell, and in that sense I can appreciate what a potent message those old-time Universalists had to offer.

As this movement continued to attract and keep large numbers of converts, its phenomenal growth in the first half of the 19th century propelled it from a small cult to an influential American denomination. And it seems clear that much of its widespread growth in New York state during the “Burned-Over” decades was in part a consequence of having been in the right place at the right time. Universalism also helped stimulate the growth of other denominations, especially the Latter Day Saints, better known as the Mormons—and by the way, their founder Joseph Smith was a birthright Universalist originally from Vermont. No comprehensive story of Universalism in the Burned-Over District has ever been told, and until it is, the state of New York is missing a crucial piece of its religious history.

Now let’s head south to Cattaraugus County. I knew even before starting to prepare this presentation that much of the Southern Tier was hardscrabble ground for the development of Universalism, but I had a particularly difficult time finding articles about this county in my 19th century sources.

The earliest known establishment of Universalism here that I can find on record occurred in Sandusky, where the First Universalist Society in the Town of Freedom had been founded by October of 1830, but was not incorporated until 1845. They had a church building by June of 1846. The congregation was declared legally extinct in September of 1908 and the building sold around the same time.

On April 19, 1834 the First Universal Society in the Town of Mansfield was granted incorporation. But apparently it was short-lived, and was reorganized as The Unaversalist Church of Eddyville, spelled with an “e” instead of an “i,” and incorporated on May 20, 1873. This congregation was declared legally extinct in May of 1899.

Next was a society in Ashford, which was in existence by March of 1835. I didn’t find any incorporation record, or any further information about it. Following closely time-wise was a society in Ellicottville, which was in existence by July of 1836. They had a church under construction in August that year which tragically burned down on December 7th.

In 1842 the Universalist Society in the Town of Yorkshire, having its home in what is now Delevan, was incorporated on January 22nd. It was reorganized on January 3, 1856 but doesn’t seem to have been re-incorporated. By 1851 they owned a meeting house which the New York State Convention of Universalists acquired in August of 1916.

By June of 1848 there was a society in Gowanda which was reorganized in March of 1867. The Mansfield and Otto Universalist Society was founded in 1850, and by May of 1851 a new church was under construction at an eventual cost of about $1,000. A new society was in existence at Franklinville by June of 1854.

Universalism remained largely but not exclusively a rural and small-town denomination, and St. Lawrence County in the north country wins the prize for the greatest number of societies created up to the time of the Unitarian-Universalist merger in 1961. Of course there were larger proportions of Universalists living in places along the Erie Canal than in this area. Yet given all the hardships here, Cattaraugus County certainly had a respectable contingent of congregations within its borders. I doubt if it was ever an easy thing to carry the banner of old-time Universalism here. And I wonder if perhaps even now being a UU here is not exactly a cakewalk.

I don’t want to leave you with just a history lesson, so I will close with a few observations about the role of history as a spiritual guide. The primary reason for looking back into the past is that where we came from serves as a guide for where we are going. We can use the lessons from old times to perpetuate old wrongs, or we can use them to help create a better world for ourselves and those who follow. As modern UUs we may scoff and snicker among ourselves about the notions of hell and redemption, but you know as well as I do that hell is still very much a living issue in American society. I think it behooves us to know and understand what Olde Universalism meant in its time and why its perspective still matters in our present day world.

And we are not alone in carrying its banner forward. There is a growing list of doctrinal Universalist-centered websites on the internet, all of them outside of our UU tradition, including True Grace Ministries, Tentmaker Ministries, Destined for Salvation Ministries, the Gospel of Inclusion, and the Christian Universalist Association. And they turn to many of the very same historical sources that UU historians do! Even though the Universalist Church of America merged with the American Unitarian Association in 1961, Universalism as a religion still lives, in the modern-day UUA and beyond.

As the heirs of people who refused to preach about eternal damnation, we are in the best possible position to proclaim a promise beyond cosmic terror—the same promise that they proclaimed—and that promise is hope. Here is what Emily Dickinson called it.

Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune—without the words,

And never stops at all…

Hope is our core heritage from old-time Universalism. Hope is one crucial promise that our modern-day UU existence needs to be all about. Hope is a promise we can offer to a hurting world in desperate need. Hope is a promise that never stops at all. So let us go forward from today and live out our heritage: give them not hell, but hope! Thank you.