

Handout

A Community for All Souls

I grew up in the Washington, D.C., metro area, and as a child I always heard a lot about our mother church, All Souls Unitarian, in the District. I remember finding the name very appealing even as a youngster and wondered why more of our congregations were not called by that felicitous name.

Many years later, when I was the minister of a new congregation in the Seattle area, I preached a sermon as we were settling on our permanent name about why I thought that church should take on the mantle of "All Souls Church." I felt that name said so much about what we stand for and who we are. They chose not to follow my advice, but I still think the name "All Souls" is a good one.

Over the years I have continued to reflect on what it would mean for a church to really be a church for all souls:

to be a church where the door was open wide enough to include people of many different beliefs and backgrounds;

to be a church where being in community meant more than just getting along, where it meant deepening our relationship with each other to a profound level, where real transformation takes place.

Are Unitarian Universalist churches in a unique position to fully live out this ideal? I keep asking myself that question.

Unitarian Universalist ministers generally like talking about our history. This is often because so many marvelous figures from the past are a part of our religious heritage. Many individuals made important contributions to American (and other) history, and we are proud to claim them, yet how many can you name?

Let me ask an even harder question. Can you name any of the congregations, groups, or communities that were historically notable and Unitarian or Universalist? For most of us, when we think about history—particularly UU history—we remember the famous individuals who preached or talked or lived the doctrines of liberal religion. Few of us know of the communities that over time have made a difference in the lives of these same individuals.

There are, of course, reasons for this. History is always more stimulating when we tell the tales of individuals living out their lives in exciting and intriguing ways. Few groups or communities are as interesting as the individuals within them. Yet most, if not all, of the individuals that we cherish so much in our history were nurtured and sustained by the groups and institutions that were their communities.

If you walk down the main streets of many of the most prominent New England towns today, you discover church after church called First Parish, Unitarian Universalist. These congregations—ranging from large churches like the one in Concord, Massachusetts, to small village churches like the one in Petersham, Massachusetts—have served the needs of Americans, some quite famous, for over

two hundred years. Yet we usually hear little about them and the role they played in shaping the individuals we hold up as great models to our children.

Take, for example, one of the most famous writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who grew up in a church community as the son of a Unitarian minister. As a young minister himself, he served a church in Boston for a few years, though it is said he did not find the politics of church life much to his liking. But after he quit the formal ministry to establish a career as a writer and lecturer, he continued to preach in a small church in East Lexington (Massachusetts) for many years. In later life he also attended services at the church in Concord. These congregations, seldom if ever mentioned in Emerson's writings, were nonetheless instrumental in his religious and cultural awakening.

Yes, Emerson found the politics of church life difficult to bear. He also believed that the individual is paramount and that God should and could be approached directly, not through the auspices of a minister or the church. This Transcendentalist perspective—that an individual can have a direct relationship to the holy—has become an essential element in Unitarian Universalist theology. We love to quote Emerson, holding up his doctrine of self-reliance as one of the most important concepts of Unitarian Universalism.

But I think we may have missed something here. Despite Emerson's vaunted individualism, his life was lived deep in the middle of community. The town of Concord, his group of friends, even the church that he sometimes scorned were important communities of people to whom he remained attached and committed throughout his life. He may have thought he didn't need community, but he nonetheless lived his life in the midst of it.

Emerson died over one hundred years ago. Yet each of the congregations he touched is still going strong. That's one of the most important things about religious communities. Every one of us will die, but our values and principles can continue on if we sustain them through the institutions we create and support.

None of the churches in Emerson's life were called "All Souls," but throughout their histories they sought to be inclusive communities, or at least as inclusive as they could be, given their era. They are also all historically Unitarian congregations. But our Universalist forebears also tried to create communities that lived out their belief in God's love for all people. Universalism, as it has evolved over the past three centuries, is a doctrine that says that true community is made up of people who come from many different walks of life, all with something to offer. Historically, the Universalists were among the first to try to create communities in which all people were welcome.

One such community was the radical experiment called Hopedale, outside Boston. In the mid-1800s, America was a place where the ideals of freedom and liberty were often talked about more than lived. For instance, women could not vote, people in the South still owned slaves, and the resident population generally despised the waves of immigrants coming from Ireland and other parts of Europe.

Into this milieu came the radical Universalist, Adin Ballou. Ballou became a Universalist in 1823, and he was, in his day, an important social critic. Ballou was convinced that Universalism was a doctrine that needed to be lived as well as believed, and so he imagined a place in which Universalist ideals would be put into practice. His dream was also inspiring to others, and in 1841 the community of Hopedale was formed.

Hopedale was not a church, but a religious community where people lived together following the principles of what Ballou called “practical Christianity.” Ballou’s vision for Hopedale was that

the community would not only afford a haven and a refuge from a corrupt church and an oppressive world, but would be a basis for missionary activity. If such communities could be multiplied indefinitely, the reign of ignorance, selfishness, pride and violence would be terminated . . . and the whole great Brotherhood [sic] of our race dwell together in unspeakable peace.

When the community was founded in 1841, Ballou’s Universalist idealism led him to insist that its members make very deep commitments to Hopedale. They could not drink alcohol or gamble, had to commit to nonviolence, and were to refuse to participate in the government except to pay taxes. Hopedale grew and, over the course of its fifteen-year life span, reached a peak of three hundred residents.

But it did not last. When two brothers who owned the largest portion of Hopedale shares pulled out, the community collapsed and ultimately became a part of the town of Hopedale, which still exists today. (There is also a Unitarian Parish Church in the town, organized in 1868.)

Perhaps such utopian settings are unrealistic in any generation, but the vision that Ballou held in his heart reached far beyond that small group of people in Massachusetts. Ballou really believed that religious community could be a place where all souls are welcome. At Hopedale, women, African Americans, and others on the margins of society were—at least in theory—welcome to participate at an equal level. (For instance, Ballou said that while women could hold leadership positions, they probably wouldn’t want to!) Hopedale attempted to model an environment in which the ideals of Universalism were acted upon—a worthy goal, even if it did not last forever.

Does the Hopedale experiment have any bearing on our UU communities today? Most of our groups are not residential communities of people who come together to live and work in the same place sharing goods and livelihood. Thus, in many ways, we are very different from our Hopedale ancestors.

But I think it’s important for us to remember that what happened at Hopedale was valuable if for no other reason than that it showed the world that people could live together in a radically inclusive fashion, even if only for a few years. Our congregations and other UU-related groups generally still uphold that ideal and seek to be places where people of all ages, races, gender, and beliefs can be together in a community of all souls.

A UU church member once suggested to me that one of the most important things he found when he first came to his church ten years earlier was a place where he could be himself with others. He explained how at his work there was a very strict hierarchy, but at church he felt such relief to be in a place where people came together without worrying about where they stood in a pecking order. While he might not have identified it as such, he saw the doctrine of Universalism being lived out, and it made him want to return and become a part of the congregation.

But there are also great challenges inherent in trying to create community in a church with a diverse and inclusive approach to religion. Is significant unity

possible where people conceivably can disagree about almost everything? (Don't you imagine that disagreements also happened at Hopedale?)

How many of my own individual beliefs or attitudes may I need to release in order to be in a deeper relationship with people who are very different from me? This gets to the heart of what I see as the challenge embedded in our history. For many of us, what makes being a Unitarian Universalist so appealing is our religious tradition's emphasis on the value of the individual. For most UUs, particularly if we were raised in a more traditional religion, to be given the freedom to think for ourselves religiously is powerful medicine. The ideals of liberal religion also influenced in profound ways the American culture.

But those early liberal thinkers and leaders—such as Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Adin Ballou—lived in a time very different from our own. They lived in a land with far fewer people than we do today. They lived in a nation where the nearby frontier with all its freedom beckoned constantly. And they lived in a religious world in which the hidebound traditions of the past still held sway even as they were being threatened.

For people like Jefferson and Emerson to hold up individualism as paramount was so liberating that it led to many of the freedoms we now enjoy. It was a very important piece of human progress at that time. But it did not come without a cost. I do not think that Jefferson or Emerson would ever have thought that their beliefs would lead to the kind of rampant individualism bordering on selfishness and isolation that many of us experience today. Certainly Adin Ballou would be appalled. Community, for them, was built into their very lives.

For us now community is not a given. Often our lives are lived in neighborhoods where we know few people in a deep way, in workplaces where the environment may keep us from strengthening relationships, and in families where we might live thousands of miles apart from those we love. For Jefferson and Emerson and others then, traditional communities were assumed. For us they are something we have to work for and create together.

So how do we do that? How do we build community when our religious tradition encourages us to be individuals? Clearly, many people today come to church and church-related groups for "community." We hear that repeatedly from people arriving at services and events. While our liberal theology is certainly an essential piece of why people come here, for many people the community is equally if not more important.

But the kind of people who find Unitarian Universalism appealing are generally people with a strong sense of their rights and responsibilities as individuals. In other words, people come to Unitarian Universalist congregations and groups with strong opinions. When those strong opinions clash, our hope for community may be challenged. We could, like Thomas Jefferson, decide to be "unitarian alone." It isn't hard to be alone these days. We could just as easily sit in front of our computer reading up on all the great Unitarian and Universalist thinkers without ever coming into contact with someone who might challenge or change us.

But for many of us, the pull to be in community is greater than the desire to be alone. And so we come together, giving up a little bit of our individualism in order to be in a deeper relationship with others. It isn't always easy. It never has

been, as the Hopedale story reminds us. But no one said the creation of community would be or should be easy! For while a congregation or group may not ask as much of you as Adin Ballou did of his Hopedale members, we can still ask of each other some important things.

In a Community of All Souls, we might ask of each other the following four aspects (among others):

The first aspect is *acceptance*. If a church or group is to be open to all people, we must learn to accept each other in our wholeness. This is the element of individuality that none of us would ever want to lose. Every person is a unique spirit. For us to truly accept one another is to see that uniqueness as a gift even when at times it may drive us crazy. But in our acceptance, we also have the opportunity to expand our horizons about what is acceptable. A church of all souls will be by definition open to new ways of looking at and accepting each other.

The second aspect we must ask of each other is related to the first: *authenticity*. In a true community we have the opportunity to be authentic and real. Our religious forebears fought long and hard to be able to speak the truth as they understood it. In their time, most religious groups told only one truth. But today I suggest that an authentic religious community is one in which we acknowledge one another's differences honestly and lovingly.

In such a place we encourage and support one another as we struggle and work to become more fully who we are. I like to think this is one reason that people in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities generally feel comfortable among us. A church that accepts people in their authenticity is bound to be a place where many people feel welcome.

The third aspect is even more challenging than acceptance and authenticity: *ambiguity*. No liberal religious community is ever going to have all the answers. If we did, there wouldn't be any need for questions, and questions are how we learn and grow. In our various UU configurations, I hope we can be places that accept the ambiguity inherent in life. I hope we can be open to wrestling with the questions life brings. And I hope that we will want to do that wrestling together, for we can learn more by sharing our questions than by just insisting that our answers are correct.

Finally, I hope that we can be a community that has high *aspirations*. We may not want to be a community like Hopedale. Yet what I like about the story of that historical endeavor is that its founders had a dream of being more than they already were. They aspired to be a truly loving and peaceful model for the world. They chose to do it in a way that was perhaps unrealistic and utopian. But just because creating a perfect community may be beyond our grasp doesn't mean we should give up our aspirations to be more than we already are.

Can your congregation or group aspire to be a religious community where all souls searching for authenticity and acceptance are welcomed to walk their path, even amid the struggle with life's ambiguities?

I believe in this vision, but it won't happen without some hard work. It is mighty hard to learn to let go of our prejudices and expectations as we learn to live together in the shared life we call modern community. Yet many good folk seem willing, even eager to make it work. Maybe we recognize that community is worth the price we pay for it. Okay, we can't always have it our way (despite what

the advertising jingles would have us believe), but would we rather sit alone in our rightness or be together in a loving (and at times challenging) compromise we call community?

Emerson scoffed at the church and convinced generations of his followers that religion is best experienced alone. Today we've seen the limitations of this approach to the spirit even as we celebrate the ability we have been given to walk our unique spiritual paths. Perhaps what we are finally learning is the balance that enables us to walk together, sharing the journey while carrying our own packs. I like to think that UU settings can be places where all of us backpackers on the journey through life share the path together. That's what I want to be a part of—a community of all souls. I hope you'll join me on the journey.

Barbara Wells