

Open the Doors
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Reading from Clarence Skinner (intro from Worship Web)

Clarence R. Skinner was the pre-eminent social prophet of the Universalist Church during the first half of this century. During most of his career, Skinner was on the faculty at Tufts University. He came to this position from a career in parish ministry that had already established his political and preaching reputation. He eventually served as Dean of the Theological School at Tufts from 1938-1945, and his work influenced a generation of Universalist clergy. A pacifist during the First World War, a supporter of organized labor, a vocal defender of Sacco and Vanzetti, Skinner was frequently shunned by his colleagues because of his politics but always respected and admired for his honesty and integrity. As he approached retirement in 1945, Skinner offered his vision of the message that the Universalist Church had to present in his book, *A Religion for Greatness*. This reading comes from the chapter on racism, and it is presented as Skinner wrote it, without changing the male gender references that were common parlance at the time:

The religion of the unities and universals is (a) radical cure. It gets down to the roots out of which prejudice grows. It digs into the soil of man's selfishness, superstitions, and distortions. It destroys the vicious partialisms which would lock men into divisive cells of race, denying them the common rights of humanity. This enemy must be routed on every front—economic, social, biological, and cultural. The only way to rout it is to supplant the fears and errors of partialism by a vigorous, realistic religion of universalism. For every denial we must make an assertion. Man must enlarge the borders of his consciousness to include the human race. We must think, feel, and act in universe terms, and thus see how petty and sinful are the partialisms of our lesser selves. We must welcome differences because life in a varied world is richer than life in uniformity. We must recognize the rightful place of color, shape, and history in a syncretic culture. If we "see life steadily and see it whole," we can appreciate all the parts. The part becomes misunderstood only when we see it without relationships, as an end in itself. One race is no more necessary than one kind of tree or one kind of horse. Each has its own genius and each may contribute to a life that is "rounded, divine, complete."

It is a time for greatness. There must be a religion for greatness to meet the need of the time.

Sermon

So... It's been a heck of a couple of weeks, hasn't it? I want to be clear that I make no assumptions about the political identities and beliefs of any of us here today, *and* with national policy changing so fast, I am sure that many of us are struggling to understand what these changes mean, and what our responses should be. Three weeks ago, we had an uphill climb through our political and justice systems to work for greater justice for all. Today, we have layered on this work, a fight to *maintain* our political and justice systems. What does it mean to be Unitarian Universalist in the midst of such political and social turmoil? These are certainly

times, that we hope, we will be telling future generations about as something unique in our history that we were present for. This imagining is actually something that I find helpful, because it pushes me to consider how I will look back on my own choices, and *that* pushes me to action. It is also a time when many folks are feeling scared, sad, anxious, angry—lots of feelings, across the board. On a personal level, I know that my emotions and thoughts have been all over the map. In some moments, I have confidence in the resiliency of our political system to respond to overreach and to protest – that we will find a way forward that does not send us into authoritarianism, or chaos. In other moments, I worry that this is a time to just be always in the streets, because I don't want to ever think that I didn't do everything I could to stop the end of representative democracy. Nothing is simple, and there are very complicated social and political ideals being acted out in our government *and* in the streets. In our fear, it is easy for us to act and speak without thinking of the impact of our words and actions. We are in a time of struggle to live out our principles, beliefs and ideals, to build partnerships with people who share goals, but have different beliefs and identities. If we panic, we are in danger of solving some problems only to make others worse, and if we are complacent, people and our environment are in danger. These are complicated and troubling times.

In addition to imagining our future selves, we can look back at history for help and guidance. Our Universalist foreparents organized in the United States in the late 18th century. The Universalists were not fancy. They didn't have the political and fiscal juice that the Unitarians had and while they *were* in Boston and other cities, their congregations were more spread out into rural communities, and farther into the south and west than the Unitarians. Some of the early Universalists, including Hosea Ballou were opposed to formal theological education for ministers. This position changed over time, and the Universalists started seminaries, and universities, like Tufts in Medford, Mass., begun in part with a large gift from P.T. Barnum. In the early 19th century, some Universalist leaders got bogged down in a theological debate among themselves. Some of the big players in the debate were John Murray, often called the father of Universalism in the United States, and Hosea Ballou. What was the main theological nut of Universalism [conversation – universal salvation, love]. So what do you think the debate was about? [conversation – Murray Restorationist – there is work that happens after we die before we are in heaven, Ballou Ultra Universalist, the self and soul separate at death, so soul is instantly in heaven, no matter what we did in life, some other potential debates that came up in the service – if all are saved, why should we be good, and others]. The irony of this debate, which led some of Restorationists to break away from the Universalists for a while (then some of them came back, and some joined up with the Unitarians), was that written into the Winchester Profession, or the guiding document of faith for the Universalists was something called the “Liberty Clause,” which basically meant that individuals and congregations didn't have to agree with everything in the Profession as long as they did not act against it. One of the many periodicals that was a vehicle for this conversation was *The Universalist Magazine*, which after a variety of iterations and name changes, become our UU *World Magazine*, making it one of the oldest continuously published periodicals in the United States. Now, I *love* a good theological debate, but with the long view of history, it seems like a lot of time and anger was wasted, when in the end, they were all in the same tent.

Another debate among 19th century Universalists was the role of the church in social reform. Hosea Ballou had been against the church taking positions and wading into social and

political issues, because he believed if they were successful in sharing their understanding of God, the social change would be inevitable. At the end of *A Treatise on Atonement*, Ballou concludes:

I look with strong expectation for that period when all sin and every degree of unreconciliation will be destroyed by the divine power of that love which is stronger than death, which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown; in which alone I put my trust, and in which my hope is anchored for all [hu]mankind; earnestly praying, that the desire o the righteous may not be cut off...¹

His grandnephew, Hosea Ballou 2nd, disagreed and felt the need to push forward on justice issues in parallel with evangelism. While long before the Civil War, Universalists had believed slavery to be inconsistent with their theology, they had not been ready to take a stand as a denomination. By the 1840s, the climate had changed, and Hosea Ballou 2nd and lay leaders began a program of justice work. At the top of the list was the abolition of slavery and women's rights were a close second. In the words of historian Russell Miller they sought, "to help persuade whoever would listen and read that slavery was a great moral blot on the national [character]....Universalists eager for the abolition of slavery repeatedly insisted that...there was an even larger challenge to be met..To make really meaningful the abolition of slavery, ... [people] 'must conquer [their] miserable prejudices.' Only then could true social justice be achieved."² Because most Universalists weren't wealthy, they were not encountering some of the problems that their Unitarian neighbors were around slavery, which were that many wealthy Unitarians were deeply involved in trade and manufacturing that was fed by the triangle trade. Many Unitarian congregations in the North had bitter fights over abolition before war broke out. Almost 50 Universalist clergy signed up to be chaplains during the war, and a large number of Universalist members enlisted. Many women were involved in providing medical care, including Clara Barton, who founded the Red Cross after the war and Mary Livermore, who helped organize a massive supply chain for Union hospitals.

While many Universalist churches in the south went out of business during the war, the denomination did not split, which was rare in that time. Historian Conrad Wright surmises that this might be, in part, due to the Liberty Clause. It helped with rebuilding relationships and the church when the war was over. He suggests that it was certainly not comfortable, but that when the dust settled, the Universalists were able to move forward with some of their membership having fought fiercely because of their belief in abolition and some who disagreed.

We can see in Universalist history that particular personalities, and debate can both spur communities forward, and get them stuck. They learned that institutions need to be flexible, if people with a variety of beliefs and ideas want to participate. They learned that this variety is vital to building resilient community and to live out Universalist interpretations of scripture and tradition. It was by no means universally supported, but this push to bring more voices to the table is surely what led the Universalists to ordain more women, earlier, than any other denomination. In 1945 Universalist Clarence Skinner wrote:

"We must think, feel, and act in universe terms, and thus see how petty and sinful are the partialisms of our lesser selves. We must welcome differences because life in a varied world is richer than life in uniformity. We must recognize the rightful place of color,

1 <http://www.danielharper.org/treatise.htm>

2 Conrad Wright, *The Larger Faith*, 55.

shape, and history in a syncretic culture. If we “see life steadily and see it whole,” we can appreciate all the parts. The part becomes misunderstood only when we see it without relationships, as an end in itself.”³

Weeks ago, I called this sermon “Open the Doors” because we would be talking about Universalist history, and how its theology opened the doors of Calvinism to say that all are saved. Universalism also opened the doors to women in the ministry, and stood for a variety and diversity of belief and identity being vital to society. They put their ideas into action during the Civil War. In the last two weeks, the majority of policy changes coming from the current administration have been closing doors on mechanisms that support a diverse culture and keep people in minority populations safe, and at the same time, repealing, or seeking ways to repeal, restrictions that protect the environment, education, health care, and the financial system. When looking at the values expressed from our current president and his advisers, and our own historically and in the present—*institutionally*, we are fundamentally different in what we seek to foster, and what we seek to limit. As Universalists and as Unitarian Universalists, we have stood for greater individual freedom, and greater corporate responsibility, attention to the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and the web of life of which we are all a part. It has also been our tradition to support access to education, health care, and safety for all people, and to seek diverse community, because through diversity of thought and identity, we grow closer to beloved community.

So if you, like me, are struggling with how to absorb and understand all the changes and challenges that have been happening so quickly, we can help each other remember a few things. Though we can make choices with an eye toward the lens of history, we can’t know what will happen tomorrow or months from now. We can only move forward with the information we have, through the filter of our identities, our biases, our beliefs, our experience, our history. We can do everything in our power to point our communities toward justice and compassion. We can know that we are not alone in our struggles or our feelings. This is fundamental to inclusive community. It is easier to oppress and suppress communities who are isolated, or feel there is no way forward. In parallel with actions and organizing, some of the vital work each of us can do, is to be present for each other, and for those in our community who need to know they are not alone, that they are seen, and that there are people ready to stand up for their inherent worth and dignity.

May it be so. Amen.