

John Murray: Father of American Universalism

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The story of John Murray coming to America and having his boat stranded until he preached Universalism, is one of my favorite stories. It has been called the only miracle story in Unitarian Universalism. It is beloved of Sunday School teachers too, who frequently help children make little boats out of pipe cleaners and construction paper. But you know, this story has a darker side that often gets glossed over.

He was only 27 when he made that fateful trip across the pond to America. John Murray was born in England, and became a Methodist preacher and theologian like his father. But before that decision to leave his homeland came some of the worst moments of his life. As a Methodist minister Murray was an evangelist, and not unlike evangelists today, part of the job description entailed refuting the theological claims of other religions. So he and his Methodist friends spent a good deal of time studying other Christian groups trying to come up with some chink in their armor that they could exploit. Murray found himself

reading a lot about a new group of Christians in England who called themselves Universalists; particularly the writings of a fellow called Reilly.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the religious debate. Murray found that he agreed more with the Universalists that he was supposed to refute than with the Methodists that he was trying to defend. The Universalists believed that the Christian God was a God of infinite love who would not punish humanity with eternal damnation. That was too steep a price for a few misdeeds in this life. Any God worthy of worship, the Universalists claimed, would be at least as forgiving and understanding as the kindest, most loving parent we can imagine. A God that is petty and keeps score of all your karmic errors is simply looking to be appeased, and is not to be praised.

This created a huge crisis of faith for John Murray. It meant he had to leave his job as a Methodist evangelist; not easy when you have a wife and son to support. Sadly his infant son got sick and died. His wife contracted tuberculosis and eventually died as well. This was before the days of health insurance and HMOs, so Murray was hit with some high medical bills. This was also the days before credit rating, so instead of bankruptcy and debt consolidation, John Murray was thrown into debtors' prison. So on top of grieving the dual tragedy of losing his child and his wife

to a terrible illness, John Murray also went to jail. It is little wonder then that he would want a change of scenery when he got out. Get away from this life in England that treated him so badly.

It is also in this context that one can perhaps understand why he didn't want to preach Universalism anymore. Maybe he felt that, like Job, his faith was being tested. Or perhaps God really was that petty tyrant that punishes us for our sins, rather than the loving and forgiving father that he had envisioned. It probably took a miracle to convince him that in fact he was not being punished, and that Universalism needed to be spread throughout America.

It doesn't surprise me that it took a so-called miracle to convince John Murray to preach Universalism again. He was not the first person to create Universalism; not even the first to preach it in America. But he was the most effective evangelist of spreading Universalism within New England and eventually beyond. You see, Universalism is a radical idea. It is the radical idea that God is a God of infinite love and not eternal punishment. There is a kind of primal desire on the part of human beings that yearns for a just universe in which the wicked are punished and the good are rewarded. It is a simple and elegant idea; that is understandable. Of course the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, turns this on its head. Jesus preaches love and

forgiveness. Job dramatically demonstrates that just because you are a good person, doesn't mean that bad things will never happen to you. But Universalism is a radical idea. It is an assertion about God – that God loves and forgives us even when we don't deserve it. There are evil people in heaven that shouldn't be there. That is kind of a mind-blowing concept, and not just in John Murray's time. Rob Bell, the evangelical preacher and writer, wrote a book essentially saying the same thing as John Murray, and he caused quite the ruckus among the religious right a couple years ago. Because Bell, like Murray believed in the radical idea that God is a God of love and not of punishment.

These days Unitarian Universalism still has this as a strand in our living tradition. The sources mentioned in the Principles and Purposes talk about the insights of the Jewish and Christian sources from which our tradition emerges. Of course with the merger with the Unitarians, Murray's Universalism is joined together with numerous other theological ideas and traditions. But that doesn't mean we have left him behind. One of the great legacies of John Murray, and many of the other Universalists that followed him, is that they ask us to ponder the infinite in ways that force us out of our comfort zones. I think our meditation for this morning is an example of that. Yvonne Soen used to think about the stars and the universe when she was little. But then her

thinking sort of fell in to the typical categories we all have about the world. People are women, or old, or African American, or rich or what have you. Her religion becomes that thing that pushes her to imagine something beyond the typical categories; to consider the infinite again. There was a line from a popular Universalist hymn that said, “Ponder anew what the almighty can do!” Not necessarily literally, but what is that radical idea of the infinite for us today? Sure, there are plenty of Universalist Unitarians who would sit quite comfortably with John Murray’s God of infinite love and not eternal punishment. But there are also lots of us who are looking for something of that spirit or essence, but more modern for our current age.

There is a section of Martin Luther King’s letter from Birmingham Jail that captures just that essence. I am sure you know the story of Martin Luther King in the Birmingham Jail. He was minister of a church in Atlanta, and heard about the Birmingham bus boycotts. As a civil rights leader, King traveled to Birmingham Alabama because, as he wrote, “injustice anywhere is threat to justice everywhere.” He and a number of other protesters are thrown in jail as an act of civil disobedience. So often we quote the beginning of this letter where King talks about being part of a “garment of destiny.” Sort of an assertion of the web of interdependence. But late in his letter he talks about

the young people who were part of the protest that were also arrested. He praises their courage, and calls them “The disinherited children of God.”

King is quoting the African American minister, writer and mystic Howard Thurman who was King’s teacher at Boston University. Thurman’s most famous book is “Jesus and the Disinherited.” This was a highly influential book on King and the ministers of his generation who learned at Thurman’s feet. Thurman talked about the people the world despises. The least of these, as Jesus called them. Thurman’s term was the “disinherited.” Of course Howard Thurman got the idea from Gandhi who renamed India’s untouchables the “Hari-jan” – the children of God.

I believe this is radical Universalism for our time. Instead of the traditional Universalist assertion about God, this new more modern form is an assertion about humanity. The people who are despised by our culture because of their race, their gender or ambiguity around their gender, their sexual orientation, where they live, whom they love, how old they are, how they vote, what they think, how much they weigh, who their ancestors were, all of those categories get stamped onto people in our collective thinking. In most cases there is the culturally preferred race, sex, class, political affiliation, and so on. And then there is the less

than preferred end of the spectrum. Sadly the events in St. Louis this past week all too dramatically illustrate my point. But the new version of Universalism says that those people that the culture despises or marginalizes are important. They are at least as important, and maybe more so, than the people the culture values and lifts up as preferable. Universalism says that all of us, universally, are children of God. At some point all of us are the disinherited. Very, very few of us are on the culturally preferred end of the spectrum in every sense. But our religion asks us to do what Yvonne Soen does in her meditation – imagine something greater than our culturally programmed categories.

I'd like to think that Murray, if he were here in our time, would urge us out of those categories. To consider the people who are marginalized as possessing inherent worth and dignity as the First Principle states. He would probably tell us that God is bigger than our categories, and to ponder anew what infinite love would really mean if we lived it out in our world.

For that is what our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to do. It calls us to live each day with a love for our fellow human beings that makes no exceptions. Not even the exceptions we want our love to make. That is how we are called to live. There was a parable, popular for a while in UU circles although I don't know the original author. It went something like this:

Imagine that tomorrow there was a dramatic change in the government, and a reversal of the law, such that it was now illegal to be a Unitarian Universalist. Those of us who do not renounce the faith on the spot, are rounded up and placed under arrest. Surely this would be a horrific turn of events. But the parable goes on. Imagine now you are standing trial and the sole charge is that you stand accused of being a Unitarian Universalist. The question is: would there be enough evidence to convict you? Is there enough tangible evidence in your day to day life to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that you are, or have been, a Unitarian Universalist?

It's an important thought experiment isn't it? Sure we might believe in radical love that accepts all people, even the disinherited that the rest of the culture despises, but what have we done about it? Is it truly love if you get off scot free from the charges? "Your honor there is no evidence that this person cared for the homeless, the transgendered, the disfigured, or the the unpopular." Our new modern Universalism is a radical notion of love, applied not to a transcendent Being in the heavens, but rather a radical love lived out among the sinners, and undeserving here on earth.

That I think would be a faith that even John Murray could get behind. Don't wait for some miracle to happen to convince you of

it. Like I said, the story of the wind finally coming to take John Murray's boat to New England is just about the only miracle story we have in the annals of Unitarian Universalism. They don't happen to us that often. Don't wait around for one; make love real in your life now.

I think it starts with where Yvonne Soen was – look beyond our boundaries. It starts with at least conceiving of some way of breaking down the barriers of race and class or what have you that keep us safe and comfortable. And if we can imagine how to do that then we need to start with small steps. Small things that reach out toward people. Remember this is a human-focused Universalism we are talking about, so we can't practice it all by ourselves locked away in some cloister somewhere. Eventually we have to reach out to someone else. That is what love means.

This can be scary. Spiritual growth and the process of gaining spiritual maturity is rarely a picnic. It often comes about by intentionally moving into a place where we are uncomfortable. I recently heard a great line from someone in recovery. He said, "I don't know one good man who didn't have to go through something at one point in their life." That is a powerful statement. Love takes courage, but it also reaps untold rewards.

I am not sure I would urge you to believe as John Murray did, in that God of infinite love and not eternal punishment. Certainly there are worse things in the world to hold up. But I do think that regardless of our theology, we are all called to that new Universalism, a more modern interpretation that calls us to love everyone without exception. That helps us to think about the world beyond what our culture would value and ask us to love anyway. May your striving toward love be both uncomfortable and rewarding. Amen Blessed Be.