

UU Lent?

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Note: this text version are notes from a sermon delivered in real time, content delivered in real time may differ from the text version

Approaching Lent for UUs

Today I want to do two things: explore how Lent may carry some messages that those here may find value in, and explore some of the ways that Lent actually has precedence as practice in the roots of our own UU tradition.

In order to do those two things I need to begin here...

Did you know that Lent was, at one time, practiced widely in Unitarian churches?

History: Unitarian Christianity & Beyond

Now let me pause there — Unitarian *Churches*.

Today we are in a place called a Unitarian Universalist *Congregation*.

We, here at UUC, are not a Church — we are a Congregation. Although some use the word *church* for a shorthand of sorts. And we are not just Unitarian, but rather *Unitarian Universalist* Congregation!

Yet, in the late 19th and early 20th century, *Unitarian churches* were certainly prominent in the east coast. They represented the “liberal edge” of Christianity.

Their hallmarks were: emphasis on the ethical example of the life of Jesus, doing good works and even what was called, by one prominent Unitarian minister, “salvation by character”.

That is, it is what you do and how you act that matter. Faith is lived out through ethical action. Actions are what, if anything “saves”.

And — because I know that word “**saves**” is a perplexing one for many of us contemporary UUs — I will go back to that part - “**salvation**” - in a moment.

Another key hallmark of those Unitarian Christians in the late 19th and early 20th century was that they also took an approach to reading the Christian

Bible based, as they argued, on an approach informed by “reason” and “logic”. When they got into rigorous debate about theology with the other Christians of their day, it was often around wanting to apply reasoned analysis to their interpretation of the Bible - which, I might add, they DID regard as a sacred scripture, not merely literature. The *Unitarian Christians* in our history at the time very much believed that Jesus was Christ — that is the son of God, in a way far more literal than, perhaps, at least many of those in Unitarian Universalism may hold today.

Now, especially those who may be visiting today or only come to UUC a few times, I want to make it clear that today I am lifting forward some of the roots of UUism. We talk about roots — and wings with our children, wanting to give them roots and wings.

What we experience in our living tradition today — for many — will seem much *unlike* the history I am speaking about today.

And that is fine.

Because the UU-Lent story *also tells the story of how we, as tradition morphed over time beyond what was called back in the day “Unitarian Christianity.”* Such that today, we have people who identify as Christians, and many many who do not. People who also identify as Jewish, and Buddhist, Pagan and Atheist, Mystic and Agnostic — and simply Unitarian Universalist. We sing “Come, Come, whoever you are...”

Today I am going back, back, back ...

In 1819, Channing delivered a seminal sermon called *Unitarian Christianity*, and while not all contemporary UUs would have complete sympathy with all of his points, our movement still retains some of them even as key parts of our UU tradition — especially, for example, his emphasis on *deeds over creeds*.

A few years later he preached another blockbuster sermon called *Likeness To God*, which actually set him as the grandfather for the Transcendentalist movement — whose later luminaries were listening and learning from Channing, the elder. One way that our tradition started to move beyond Christianity was through those Transcendentalists, who listened to Channing and, over time, were inspired to draw from broader and different wellsprings on their spiritual and religious journeys. But salient to our conversation this morning, in *Likeness to God*, Channing expands on his ideas of what it means to try to unfold on the powers of own’s own being — and grow in right living, as “likeness to God”. He talked about what people needed to do was unfold their own innate divinity.

As the saying goes, the *Unitarians tended to think they were too good to be damned to hell and the Universalists thought God was too good to damn people.*

Channing had a contemporary named Hosea Ballou — for awhile, the two even lived in the same town, and knew about each other, but they didn't socialize (a story for another time!).

Ballou was a prominent Universalist — his big break out was a sermon called *A Treatise on Atonement*. He, like Channing, was a liberal Christian. In 1805, he suggested that humanism was not eternal, and was finite. He said:

“As finite creatures.. human beings are incapable of offending an infinite God... he rejected the orthodox argument that the death of Jesus Christ was designed to appease an angry God, and replaced it with the idea that God is a being of eternal love who seeks the happiness of his human children. It is not God who must be reconciled to human beings, but human beings who must be reconciled to God. Ballou was convinced that once people realized this, they would take pleasure in living a moral life and doing good works.”

(A Treatise On Atonement, Hosea Ballou)

He argued that a God of love would not damn people to hell. He also spoke of a Love that moved beyond any one religion, or peoples or nation.

Someone recently said to me, “You know, we often talk about the Unitarians, but the Universalists seem to get short shrift.” I agree.

The Universalists were and are important — this strand sowed the seeds for today's UU embrace of a powerful ethic of responsibility based upon our *interconnections* and our celebration of a courageous love that calls us to heal pain and counter oppression in our world. The prevailing idea: whatever this is — we are in it *together!*

U and UU Lenten Manuals

After all that history, maybe this will not seem so odd:

Did you know that for 17 years, the national Unitarian, and then Unitarians and Universalists jointly, actually published **Lenten manuals**?

I know a UU minister who has collected such manuals and has drawn them out about this time of year to prove to his congregation that once upon a time there were UU Lenten manuals! I want to publicly credit my college,

Thom Belote for his research — and wonderfully nerdy minister hobby — on discovering the following, and I quote:

“From 1938 to 1955 the Unitarians and the Universalists each published an annual meditation manual. From 1956 to 1960 the two denominations jointly published one manual under the imprint of the Council of Liberal Churches. If not all, the vast majority of these collections published between 1938 and 1960 were Lenten manuals. They contained forty prayers or reflections, one for each day between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Over the past fifty years, most of the meditation manuals published by the UUA have not followed the form of the Lenten Manual, with the exception of a period from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s when there was a resurgence of the Lenten manual theme.”

(Reference: Rev. Thom Belote,
“Reading through the UUA Meditation Manuals: A Journal”
<http://revthom.blogspot.com/2010/09/reading-through-uua-meditation-manuals.html>)

Now it's time to talk about Lent!

Lent is that period which, in Christian traditions, is the weeks leading up to Easter. It is a time of preparation before Easter. 40 is a significant number — it is the number of days Jesus spent in the wilderness before his public ministry. Lent is, essentially, the 40 days leading to Easter. (Perhaps go into more nuance, perhaps not.) This year it's from February 10 (Ash Wednesday) to March 27 (Easter), 2016.

It begins on Ash Wednesday — and even if you are not a Christian, you may know it's coming because *Mardi Gras* (or *Fat Tuesday*) is the day before Lent. It is well known as a time of feasting before the intentional Lenten period of introspection, spiritual practice and fasting begins.

On Ash Wednesday, observing Christians will receive ashes on the forehead in the shape of a cross. Ashes remind people of mortality and also the notion of repentance, and beginning a journey of intentionally restoring deeper relationship to God. For Christians who receive ashes, this can be a very powerful experience. For some, it is the ashes or the cross, or both together in this sacred act, reminding people of Jesus, and the possibility of forgiveness and resurrection.

Now, there are many ways people observe this time. Some of you will remember growing up Christian and observing Lent. For some, these will be cherished memories, for others, hard ones.

Overall, Lent is a period time when people are invited to reflect upon their relationship to God or the sacred wholeness, mystery.

People do a few main spiritual practices: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, each practice is a way to deepen and restore relationship .

A few key Lenten practices are:

FASTING

Some of the most well known practices are making a sacrifice, or denying something, giving up something — fasting, for example.

Yet aside from thinking about “giving up” something, there is another way to think about this — as setting aside something, in order to deepen connection to that which matters most.

It may mean setting aside food — so that one’s relationship to appreciating nourishment, and appreciating an abundance of food, comes into sharper focus. It means bringing into sharper focus how to live a good and holy life. And not just by thinking about it, but doing practices which remind one of it.

Some folks say they are going to give up “complaining” for Lent! (I LOVE this as a spiritual practice! Try it. *It’s hard!*)

I had mentioned last month that some folks I know do a “technology fast”, intentionally stopping or holding back from time on technology, in order to dedicate oneself to what matters most — and reserving that time for choosing instead, meditation, prayer, time with family, or walking.

This setting aside that which is distracting in order to devote time to spiritual life is something that I think is relevant to Unitarian Universalists — whether you have a Lenten practice or whether you have never heard about Lent before, or whether you have Christian roots or not — or whether you don’t want very much to do at all with your own Christian roots.

Today I wonder if there is something you might practice setting aside, in order to draw more deeply into right living and in order to draw more deeply into connection with life itself..

PRAYER

During the Lenten season people are encouraged to think about what kind of person they are called to be, and about the health, wellbeing and wholeness of others.

Now, in speaking about prayer in particular, let me tell you about what happened to those Lenten manuals of yore! (This is about our wings...)

They became the **meditation manuals** that the UUA has now published for over 56 years. They are no longer short portions of Christian scripture for meditation and prayer during the period of Lent. Now they are slim, beautiful collections of musings, poetry, meditations written for reflection, on a number of themes, from a number of sources, and to be used for contemplation at any time.

[Read a selection]

So, interestingly enough. The story of the Lenten manuals is part of the story of our UU roots and wings. For, what happened to those manuals, also happened to our larger living tradition.

In 1832 Emerson essentially preached himself right out of the Christian church — questioning why his Christian office included the necessary offering of communion but not, constantly the washing of feet, for which he finds more biblically founded injunction. Six years later (Divinity School Address) he is talking about heralding a new time when people would connect with a religious sentiment, and intuition, but not necessarily the institution of the church. And by 1841 he is exploring the notion of an oversoul — a larger spiritual paradigm, apprehended by person experience in the living world of nature. And he was started to be influenced by the recently published texts coming from India.

In 1961 the Unitarians and the Universalists merged to become the Unitarian Universalists, but the movement moving pushing to move beyond *Christianity* had been underway certainly in the Unitarian side for, arguably, beginning with Emerson for over 123 years.

And maybe this is why — unless you happen to be in one of the *Unitarian Christian* congregations (of which there are some which exist, who are in the Unitarian Universalist Association) — it would be easy to forget — or never to know — that there ever were **U and UU Lenten manuals!**

Well before 1961 Unitarians and Universalists were both starting to see themselves not only as Christian, and not all as Christian, but rather drawn together for growing spiritual and moral life inspired by many sources.

In 1960 there was statement of purpose formulated which brought together the Unitarians and the Universalists, but by 1979 there was the awareness that the language and ideas no longer served well.

It took a long time of thinking about meaning, values, updating the writing to be more gender inclusive in language and explicit in the diversity of sources actively influencing UU, it took sweat and creativity and yes, arguing, but by 1985 we had the Principles and Sources we have today, with the addition of a sixth source tradition, "Earth-centered religions", which was added in 1995.

This all developed in a lengthy process I won't go into today — but developed by ministers and lay leaders sorting through what it was that indeed formed the substance of our common connection in this ever growing and embracing liberal religious tradition called Unitarian Universalism. (Some say when we have perfect vision, in the year 2020, it may be time to review this document once again!)

For a long time, given our history and movement beyond Christianity, I think that in our broader movement there was an allergy to our Christian roots — to looking there, exploring there.

Re-engaging the Christian roots

Growing up UU, I learned much about humanism in our movement, and about understanding other people's religious traditions than UUism itself! But for the past 20 years there as been a shift. In our UU religious ed programs we teach UU values clearly, we teach our history, and part of that of course includes a strong emphasis on multi-religious literacy and engagement.

And I find that there is much more willingness to know about our roots — which actually go much farther back than 19th century New England, and - as we have been exploring recently — go back to Europe.

Having said some of the reasons why I think this allergy can cut us off sometimes from knowledge about some of the sources of UU, I can also say that I think the allergy is real and I also think it is understandable — especially at the layer of our local congregations and personally, in peoples lives.

It makes sense when you realize that, personally, many (not all!) UUs are people who left the Christianity of their upbringing. For some, this has everything to do with a sacrificial theology which was experienced as painful and even traumatic. For some, a theological focus on Jesus' death on the cross as a message of vicarious atonement is a way of glorifying violence and suffering. Or, for others... the notion of the resurrection just seems baffling and perhaps, just... inconsequential. Christians of course widely interpret these elements of theology, too, — have a range in interpretation and in personal and collective meaning-making around this.

On Sacrificial Theology

I am someone who has wrestled with sacrificial theology. Troubled by it. In the UU congregation I grew up in, with a strong humanist foundation, Jesus was taught as a historical figure, a wise teacher. The emphasis was on his life — on Earth. Not his death or the idea of resurrection.

That is still my prevailing way of shaping my own UU approach to Jesus. I am not particularly partial to the cross, and I am less than partial but actively struggle with gazing at the image of Jesus nailed upon the cross. The latter tends to strike me as gruesome and cruel and very sad, and I suppose, especially if I were a child... scary.

I can be honest, I have what is called a “low” christology — my background as a Jewish person as UU who identifies deeply with the strands of religious humanism in our tradition — I think of Jesus as man, a human prophet first and foremost.

However, my agnosticism gives room to embrace other ways of understanding as well...

And this is why I want to share with you this from another UU minister, for whom Jesus is *different*. For her, it is *Jesus on the cross* that is most meaningful and powerful:

Comparing the image of the bare cross, found on and in many Protestant churches to the crucifix in Roma Catholic churches, of *Jesus on the cross*, Rev. Peggy Clarke has this to say:

“I, on the other hand love that symbol. It’s far more powerful to me than the cross. The cross is all cleaned up; its the end of the story. Easter, not Good Friday...*see everything worked out in the end. Some stuff happened, then we won. Victory. Triumph. Success.* But, that’s not my theology. My theology understands, even needs, that broken body.

I know that broken body well. I know known it in my own life and I have held that body, beaten and bleeding, for many others. In some theologies, the cross is all that matters in the story of Jesus. In the end, there is victory. In the end, there is resurrection. To me, the story of love and healing and inclusion, the story of a man who inspired his followers to give all they owned to the poor and devote themselves to radical community and preaching news of hope — that's the story of Jesus, that's the story of triumph. But that story only has a happy ending because of the risk of love so many people took. *Jesus on the cross*, becomes for me a metaphor of what it looks like when we allow our hearts to be broken, when we break ourselves open in service to the world... I believe our power comes from our brokenness. I don't think the end of the story is crucifixion. In fact, I am not sure there is an end to the story. We are still called to live our lives with our hearts wide open. A heart that has been broken is a sign of strength. It's when we allow ourselves to feel the pain of the world that we become brave... it's when our hearts break open that the world can fall in."

<http://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/brave-love-march-2016/>)

On Brokenness & On Salvation

You know, I don't read *Jesus on the cross* the same way as my colleague, Peggy Clarke. But I come around to the same place about brokenness and hope.

I, too, understand that there is an openness, strength and power that can come from brokenness, and moreover, as Leonard Cohen says

"forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything — that's how the light gets in."

As Unitarian Universalists today we understand that there are many ways the light gets in. Sometimes it's complicated, messy, a struggle, a wrestle, uneasy.

I could end right there — but I said earlier I would talk about **salvation** — many of us struggle with that word. What does it mean? What can it mean — to us?

Perhaps that word, *salvation*, doesn't mean a lot to you. If you give up or have never thought that one needs to be "saved" by God or Jesus for personal sin, and you're not particularly concerned about a place for your soul in heaven, you may think: what do we need to be saved from? And, who does the saving?

Salvation can be interpreted as a salve. And, salvation means “preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin or loss”. Taken this way, I think there is much we need to be saved from — moral ills, such as greed, gluttony, and also the social ills which obstruct the pathways for justice, fairness, equity and the flourishing of life for other human beings — and all living creatures on our precious planet.

As I said earlier, Unitarians and Universalists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, like William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou, deeply believed that Jesus was the son of God, sent by a paternal God to provide an ethical model for human life. Because of the emphasis on the ethical life of Jesus, they believed that emphasis should be on how one lived one’s life. Channing spoke about “salvation by character” — the idea of being saved by who you are and how you act. Ball offered an ethic that we are all in this together.

Put together, these have combined into the notion in UUism of personal ethical action, and responsibility for relationships in the web of life. That means we are not just about ourselves alone. Whatever this is, we are in it together, bound together in the web of life. In this manner one does not just work out their own “salvation”, but the idea is that we are in this world with others and responsible for each other. Universalist — meaning universal, all matter. Our destiny is bound up with each-others.

And it is for that reason, that I can deeply appreciate that Lenten prayer practices are not just about the self, but about others, too. This is something that I can appreciate as a Unitarian Universalist — the notion that when contemplating the good and helpful, insightful and renewing, I remember not just what benefits me, but I bring to mind all who are connected in the web of life.

As you know, I am a UU Jewish minister — and I like history, lineage, and I believe we Unitarian Universalists are strong enough to know about UU history, to learn about the history of our living tradition, and thereby come to, each one, and as congregations, know more about who we choose to be here an now.

Invitation into Lent - Opening Our Hearts and Our Doors

At UUC this is our *Year of Living Bravely* — and we have also been talking about the need to encourage multi-religious literacy, reach out, and also build bridges. For this reason, I have accepted the request that we participate at UUC this year in hosting a Lenten Service and Supper, participating with Christian neighbors in town.

And Rev. Catherine Taylor will be a guest — offering a message about the last Lenten practice I did not mention yet. I mentioned fasting (or setting aside). I mentioned prayer. She will be speaking about almsgiving. A key Lenten practice is the participating in giving alms, sharing for the good of others. This is rooted in the response of people to the blessings and gratitude for gifts of life, which some see as given by God. This is something we can get behind — a giving back, and a giving forward in service and appreciation to others and in response to the truth of the notion that we are all in this together.

Lent is derived from the Anglo- Saxon words lencten, meaning "Spring", also the word for "March", the main month of Lent. I welcome you to find, this March, a practice of setting aside what distracts you so you can tend most deeply to your spirit.

Blessed Be and Amen