

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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The Rev. McKeeman served as Starr King School's president from 1983 to 1988 and remains an honored supporter. He delivered the following SKSM President's Lecture on June 27, 2004, for the UUA General Assembly in Long Beach, Calif.

I am grateful for the invitation to speak to an audience about matters near to my heart. Especially I am grateful to be a part of this auspicious occasion, the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of what is now called the Starr King School for the Ministry, an institution devoted to the education of religious leaders. It is an institution which has proceeded under serious difficulties throughout much of its history. Its achievements have been made possible by the sacrificial commitments of those who believed in its importance, and who applied themselves to imagining and creating radically innovative ways of realizing its potential. It is probably impossible to assess its impact. I am proud to have played a small role in one segment of its history. I am also profoundly grateful for all those who have participated and are now engaged in its ongoing mission. Many have done so at considerable personal sacrifice.

I feel the need to make some preliminary comments. "Lecture" is not my accustomed form of discourse. Therefore, I begin with a poem from the pen of Stephen Crane:

"There was a man with a tongue of wood
 Who essayed to sing,
And in truth it was lamentable.
But there was one who heard
The clip-clapper of this tongue of wood
 And knew what the man
 Wished to sing,
And with that the singer was content.

A prose version of the same theme is found in Emerson's Divinity School Address: "There is poetic truth concealed in all the commonplaces of prayer and of sermon and, though foolishly spoken, they may be wisely heard." Needless to say, I solicit your wise hearing of what may be foolishly spoken.

A word now about the title, "Looking Backward, Moving Forward." It sounds foolish, and perilous. It probably is. But some months ago, the cover of the order of worship of the church of which Phyllis and I are members was adorned with an image from Ghana of a Sankofa bird. "Sankofa" means to turn back and get what you have left behind. That is my intention.

So we begin with a look backward, as I reflect on a history, in most of which I was a participant. In 1947, at the biennial General Assembly of the Universalist Church of America, held at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y, Frederick May Eliot, at that time President of the American Unitarian Association, appealed to the Universalist Church of America to enter into conversations with the American Unitarian Association with the objective of merging the two into a single body. So began the process that resulted in the consolidation in 1960 that became the Unitarian Universalist Association.

However, the road thereto was not a smooth highway. Like wary suitors, we first tried to do it gradually. We created a third entity, the Council of Liberal Churches - Unitarian Universalist - which was given the responsibility of work in three areas, education, publications and public relations. The Education Departments of the two denominations had an extended history of intimate association, and that work moved ahead immediately and effectively.

With the other two, publications and public relations, a different story unfolded. Despite earnest endeavors, the results were, at best, disappointing. A fatal flaw in the Council's founding appears to have hamstrung its efforts. That fatal flaw was money. The Council had only two sources of financial support, namely the two denominations. The Council itself was forbidden to raise funds to underwrite its plans. Thus it had to go, hat in hand as it were, to the Boards of the Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church. To its dismay, it discovered itself to be an orphan child, without parents willing to support sufficiently, its elaborate plans.

So it became apparent quite soon, that gradualism as a method for effecting a merger was not going to work. At that juncture, the options seemed limited to two: either return to status quo ante, which meant abandoning the merger effort, or to forge or plunge ahead "at all deliberate speed" to a complete merger. While a few might have preferred the former option, the latter course seemed best to the significant majority in both denominations. So we tried, under the pressure of an unworkable plan that had to be set to rights as soon as possible — to resolve the issues that the Council had avoided. These were two in number but comprehensive in scope. One was theological, the other

was ecclesial. One was about our message, the other about our method.

It is my purpose now to look more closely at these two issues. In the theological or doctrinal realm, both the Unitarians and the Universalists had long histories. Both had arisen as varieties of Christianity. During the formative stage of Christianity, a variety of notions regarding it were put forward, without much regard to their fitting together into a coherent body of doctrine or belief. Shortly after the year 300 of the Common Era, Christianity organized, regularized and institutionalized. In the process, it developed its own cosmic story, and began to declare heretical some of the early Christian ideas that did not fit with its story. Among these were Unitarian and Universalist Christianities. The Unitarian position focussed in particular on the nature of Jesus. The emerging Christian orthodoxy considered Jesus to be a unique figure in human history, both human and divine, God's only son. Unitarian Christians insisted that Jesus was fully human and not divine in any unique sense. Indeed, Unitarian Christians considered Jesus a paradigm of human possibility.

The Universalist position addressed another part of the orthodox Christian story. It did not share fully the Unitarian position. There were both Unitarian and Trinitarian Universalists. The Universalist position embraced universal salvation, characterized in a later Universalist statement of faith as "the final harmony of all souls with God." For early Universalists, the description of God as love persuaded them that the Christian belief in partial salvation, the salvation of the "saved" and the damnation to eternal punishment of the unregenerate, did not square with the image of God as love. This, too, was heresy. Heresies, of course, do not simply disappear when so labelled. They simply go underground, only to reappear in new forms in new places and under different circumstances. So, the two heretical groups, Unitarian and Universalist, some still believing themselves to be Christians, but with a "difference", were attempting to address the doctrinal issue. What we might have done, had we not been so pressured by the urgency to get the merger completed, was to have a theological discussion with the end in view of melding these two heresies into a cosmic story to which we might give common consent. It would also undergird our organizational efforts, and our desires to make an impact on the cultures in which we live. Such a liberal doctrine; position, or faith if you would, that combined the theological insights of Unitarianism regarding Jesus as an exemplar of human possibilities and potential and the Universalist insights that we are all members of one human family and share a common destiny. Such a faith would be an alternative to orthodox and evangelical Christianities, and would, in addition, not alienate us from adherents to other world faiths.

Almost 50 years later we are struggling to resolve the questions about our foundational faith, our "cosmic story." the cosmic story is a vital element in all religions. It tells us, who, what and where we are, giving meaning to our existence, a shared mission to our institution, and a common purpose to our programs. Unitarians and Universalists centuries ago rejected central elements of the Christian story. Rejecting one story does not eliminate the desirability or the importance of having a

story. Seeking to discover what we did have to offer, we offered what we appeared to have in common — freedom of belief. Over and over people come asking for some help in developing a mature and modern faith. The freedom of belief that we do offer might be helpful to those in an adolescent stage, struggling with establishing an independent selfhood. But beyond freedom are many more stages to be attained in the quest for an effective faith, steps leading to unity of purpose, disciplines, a sense of vocation. Currently, the Commission on Appraisal is struggling with this problem and its consequences. I wish them well in their vital mission, and eagerly await their conclusions.

The other comprehensive problem is one of method. In this, too, Unitarians and Universalists had important differences. One partner in the consolidation effort was the American Unitarian Association. Its counterpart was the Universalist Church of America. There were and are differences between an association and a church. Recently, the “new” Unitarian Universalist Voice published a quotation from Frederick May Eliot, from a sermon he delivered in May of 1941:

“The day has come for the Unitarian Church of America to cease being merely an aggregation of separate and highly individualist units, with no clear and definite sense of unity, no central purpose that compels obedience and loyalty, no common faith that creates a living fellowship of believers, no discipline that makes common action possible, no sense of holy vocation so that God’s own purposes and grace may become incarnate once again in human lives and transform the face of the earth.

“We must be done with all that theorizing and temporizing which, in the name of freedom, will leave open the gates of the citadel to the church’s bitterest enemies. The time has come to create a Unitarian Church as a close-knit working and fighting fellowship of men and women who would serve God in the present world at any cost to themselves, and who are not afraid to speak and act as though they knew themselves to be servants of the Most High.”

This was spoken 20 years before consolidation. He clearly preferred a church to an association. He points to some of the characteristics of a church, a clear sense of unity, a central purpose, a common faith, discipline and a sense of a holy vocation. Lord Acton, perhaps most famous for saying that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, also said that institutions fail of an excess of their primary values. In our passion for freedom, we have accepted the association of independent units, a kind of institutionalized individualism, and we attempt to confront the excesses of a society which has placed individual freedom, individual initiative, individual responsibility at the top of its hierarchy of values, and are puzzled at the impotence of such arrangements to encourage group activity on behalf of the entire human family. We tout freedom of belief, and then try to encourage our aggregation to be multicultural, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and so on, as though such efforts can be effective, lacking the group discipline, esprit de corps, a holy purpose, etc. We might, even at this late hour, consider moving toward becoming a church, one body committed to a cosmic story,

understood as a body of committed believers, a gathered community with an educational task which, by example and by curriculum is devoted to teaching people how to be consciously and ever more maturely religious. The curriculum is addressed to teaching the components of a mature religious faith. The community seeks to model the behaviors it teaches, both among its members and with the whole human family. People learn how to be religious in a religious community.

I have made numerous references to a “cosmic story.” I seek now to offer you some sense of what that might mean. Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, in his critique of mainstream Christianity, suggests that its cosmology is many centuries out of date. We are still arguing about Creationism versus Evolution. We know much more about the nature and origin of the universe than we did centuries ago. We are still learning. Most astronomers agree that the universe as it now is began many billions of years ago with a “big bang.” Knowing more about cosmic processes that resulted in galaxies, (perhaps as many as 2 billion) has not settled the controversies regarding a “Creator” (choose whatever name you will) or the source and operation of natural law. The process, however visualized or imagined, is clearly transcendent. What is clear also is that we are a resident species on a modest-sized planet, that we are the most complex of the species on this planet to date, that all human beings comprise a single species. The world in which we live continually reminds us that the barriers that separate us — nationalisms, regionalisms, colors, creeds, sexual orientations, gender, language, cultures — are the sources of our richness but also of our pain, frustration, cruelty, oppression and violence. Diversity is a given. Oneness (community) is an achievement.

We believe this to be the real world. We do not think of it as a kind of foyer, through which we must pass and in which we must do something to gain admission to another (and fairer) world and to escape punishment for our misdeeds and mistakes, whether trivial or heinous. Albet Camus said it more poetically in the address he delivered on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature: “For if there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life.”

It appears that an inescapable globalism is fast giving the lie to our parochial and partial views and actions. Economics, ecology and political life are all leading us toward internationalism, globalism, universalism. It is the innate and inescapable urgency for wholeness that lies at our hearts, the Holy Spirit in Christian language, that motivates all human activity and that our fixation at puerile and adolescent levels of growth, believing them to be the last stop on the railroad, frustrate our growth toward religious maturity, toward meaning, toward peace, toward plenty, toward happiness. It was an amazing insight into the nature of the human situation that led Universalists in the dawning years of the 19th Century to include in the Winchester Profession of Faith (1803): “We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected...” What each one of us does to spread this understanding of confidence in human nature, of the importance of each person’s worth and value

and the oneness of human destiny will move us forward toward the promised land. It was a person of very profound understanding of life who assured his followers: “inasmuch as you have done this unto one of the least of these, my brethren (or sisters), you have done it unto me.” That’s a mature response of one who identifies his own wellbeing with that of all others in the world. That’s at the heart of our cosmic story.

So now we turn to ecclesiology. The roots of our quandary about our religious institution are very deep. A look backward to our ancestors gives us a clue. Early in the 17th century, there was a deep division over the nature of the Church. The dream of a single, undivided Christian Church which began with the Church Councils in the 4th and 5th centuries died with schism about the year 1000 of the common era with the division of Eastern and Western Christianity, and the establishment of two power centers, in Rome and Constantinople. The Western realm was further torn asunder in the movement called the Reformation. The central argument of the Reformation revolved around the question of authority. The Church claimed for itself the role of authority. It was the custodian of the cosmic story, the central doctrines and the interpretations thereof. Luther, and many others, contended that the final authority was the individual, who, enlightened by familiarity with the Scripture, that is, the repository of the delivered faith, made his/her own decision regarding its meaning. The inability to compromise this core disagreement gave rise to the plethora of sects, each centered upon what each insisted was an authentic interpretation of the delivered truth. Protestantism, and its proliferation of sects is the result of belief in the primacy of individual authority over the interpretation of the church. The Church of England, in the early 1600’s, was surrounded by nonconformists, pietists, puritans, Unitarians, Universalists, Quakers. The situation was fraught with tensions and with violence, as the Church sought to discourage, stifle and/or eliminate the dissenters. Eventually an uneasy compromise was effected, and resulted in the Edict of Toleration in the latter part of the 17th century. By that time, the irreconcilables had left England, tried the Netherlands for a while, and then departed for the New World. There they established a Church suited to their own tastes, and drove out some of the dissenters, such as Roger Williams, executed a number of Quakers, and within a century were being challenged by Unitarians and Universalists for whom the “established” church was not a viable alternative. Many of these folk were our forbears, and much of our passion for religious freedom has grown from these ancient roots. And its organizational pattern, an association of independent local congregations, maintaining local autonomy and presumably neighborly cooperation now has the flavor of the “gospel once delivered to the saints”, never to be changed. But here the Unitarians and the Universalists parted company. Under the leadership of Robert Cummins, the Universalist General Convention changed its name to the Universalist Church of America, and began to act more like a church than an association. The differences are interesting to contemplate. A Church has a generally accepted doctrinal basis, its cosmic story. For Universalists it was universal salvation. There was an allegiance to a body larger than a local society. Local units thought of themselves as units of one religious body. This might be clearly seen in the matter of

ordination. The Unitarian associational practice continued the tradition of local congregational ordination. Some gesture in the direction of quality control was exercised by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Universalists did not have any provision for congregational ordination. It had a Central Fellowship Committee which supervised the work of the Fellowship Committees of the State Conventions. My ordination was authorized by the Fellowship Committee of the Massachusetts Universalist Convention, and approved by the Central Fellowship Committee. I was not ordained to the ministry of All Souls Universalist Church in Worcester, Mass. to whose ministry I had been called. This is the oath of ordination that was administered to me by the Chair of the Central Fellowship Committee as follows: “In the presence of almighty God and this congregation, I pledge my service to the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed by the Universalist Church of America, and I promise a cheerful support of its laws and constituted authorities.” What this meant to me was that I was a Universalist minister, and wherever I was serving, I was pledged to be a minister of the Universalist gospel. Frederick May Eliot, in the passage I quoted earlier, pointed to commitments that characterize a church: a clear and definite sense of unity; a central purpose that compels obedience and loyalty; a common faith that creates a living fellowship of believers; discipline that makes common action possible; a sense of holy vocation. It is possible that we still might not wish to be a church. But we ought to make the decision in a conscious way, and not by acquiescence or inattention.

It probably has come to your attention that we are apprehensive, suspicious, even hostile to being an institution. We speak proudly of being “free churches.” But there are costs. Growth is problematic for “free” churches. We like our groups to be not too big, because then we will be tempted to become institutions, meaning, I suppose, that we will not be friendly, close-knit, and that we won’t know every member. Perhaps it means that it will get out of control, or do things we don’t particularly enjoy. Unity is sometimes seen as oppressive, but it is not on our list of “antis.” We are expected to be anti-racist, anti-oppression, multi-cultural. We may sometimes feel restless about institutions because institutions have a conservative purpose. Unless you have something to conserve, you have no need of an institution. And sometimes we fear institutions because they are conservative, and are reluctant to change. The truth appears to lie in another direction.

Institutions, in order to perform their conserving function must change. If they do not manage to change, they will die. All things that do not change die. It is widely thought that Pope John XXIII saved the Catholic Church by calling the Second Vatican Council to examine propositions about changing the church. Changes have been very slow in coming. Religious institutions are among the most conservative of institutions. But change will come. The paradox of institutional life is to distinguish between things which need to change and things which need to remain unchanged. It is my view that the Unitarian Universalists have developed a most interesting way to address the matter of needing an institution, and at the same time being suspicious of it and fearful of its power. Our strategy seems to be to keep the institution as weak as we can possibly make it, without actually

killing it. I think it fascinating that we fear our institution's power. Actually, its central problem is a lack of power. Witness the responses to President Sinkford's request that we consider a "language of reverence."

So now over half a century after Frederick May Eliot invited us into a conversation about merger — here we are. We are a religion without a doctrine or a cosmic story, and a church without an ecclesiology, or a sense of institutional purpose and vitality. Lord Acton's admonition has been illustrated once again: Institutions die from an excess of their primary values. What are our present primary values? Freedom and individualism. The question is whether or not these values by themselves are sufficient underpinning for a religious faith that can transform individual lives and create the beloved community that we long for in our heart of hearts. I recall that my doubts were echoed in a landmark address delivered by Dr. Robert N. Bellah to the General Assembly in 1998 in Rochester, N.Y. In rereading it recently, I was impressed by the range and depth of Dr. Bellah's view of the current state of Unitarian Universalism. In it he points out that "in your social witness you are strong dissenters, especially in terms of economic trends in today's America; but religiously and therefore culturally, you are mainstream, right at the American center." He goes on to say that what appears to be lacking is the very element that the Universalists brought to the consolidation, a passion for human solidarity. This is the concluding paragraph of that remarkable address:

"Beneath the surface glitter of American culture there is a deep inner core, which, I have argued, is ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every single individual. Nothing I have said tonight takes away from the enormous power for good of that idea. It is responsible for the best in our culture. But, by the very weakness of any idea of human solidarity associated with it in a culture dominated by the dissenting Protestant tradition, it opens the door to the worst in our culture. It easily leads to the idea that humans are nothing but self-interest maximizers, and devil take the hindmost. It is that version that we see all around us. I don't think we can challenge that version until we come to see that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all being, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves. You face in your very denomination the most basic conundrum of American life. If you can solve it you may help lead the larger society out of the wilderness into which it has wandered."

Moving forward, where do we go from here? I resist the conclusion that we can't get there from here. Being a Universalist, I cannot but believe that even the most meandering trail will eventually lead us home. And I know that on the cosmic time scale, we've only barely begun. We've only been at it for ten thousand years or so. But it would, I believe, help us greatly to stop wandering in the wilderness. By some strange cosmic coincidence, we have in our possession a saving gospel, though we are loathe to put it together. It's an encompassing vision for the human future. It would be tragic if, in the face of the long-term trend toward a peaceful, universal and singular goal, we missed the

opportunity to be a powerful voice for it. But, if it is to become that powerful voice, we will have to undertake some serious thinking about what our most promising possibilities are, and to recognize that toying with religion will not get us to the wholeness our innermost impulse seeks.

We will need to work at understanding that our individualism will continue to render us too impotent if we emphasize it to the extent we have in our recent history. The associational model encourages isolation, excessive parochialism, and decreases our ability to marshal our faith forces toward universal salvation — which is the only possible salvation. We do not have any current venues that offer opportunities for the kind of conversation we did not have back in the early 60's and which, I believe, we need so urgently now. We spend millions each year now on General Assemblies, which have become seductive carnivals, but do precious little to help us consider the core issues before us. We seem to focus on straightening out the world. Our own house, however, is in serious need of remedial attention. I applaud what the Commission on Appraisal is trying to do now. Some of its past work has been laudable — in particular its report entitled “Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity.” My fear is that its conclusions will be issued, printed, distributed and filed without more than a casual glance.

We need to work at understanding that our local units, large and small, have as a central purpose teaching the people who come how to become mature religious adults. This means making the unconscious impulse toward wholeness into a conscious effort to widen and deepen our religious life. Helping to save our human family will require sacrifices and discipline. These are words not often enough heard in Unitarian Universalist precincts. Personal freedom and individualism are not the last stops on the railroad, - or the religious journey.

I thank Rebecca Parker for the invitation to present this address, and all of you for your patience in listening wisely to what may have been foolishly spoken.

In conclusion, I want to share with you the cosmic story I learned by heart by repeating it each Sunday in the First Universalist Church of Lynn, Massachusetts.

The minister asks, “What gives a special character to your Christian faith?”

The congregation responds in unison: ” Its universality. I believe in God as the universal Father, in Christ as the universal Savior, and in the Holy Spirit as the divine and conquering energy through which all evil will at last be overcome and God be all-in-all.”

The minister says: "Believing then that all evil can be overcome, what ought to be the fixed purpose of your soul?"

The congregation responds: "To be a worker together with God toward so great a good with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, with all my strength; to follow loyally that son of God who has declared everlasting war upon ignorance, disease, sin, death, and all that makes man miserable; to fight against all evil in myself and in others; to take the side of the oppressed against the oppressor; to stand for righteousness and never give up; to do justly; to love mercy and to walk humbly with my God.

The minister concludes: As believers in such noble doctrines, let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who art in heaven.

Amen and Amen