

The Inherent Worth and Dignity of All People

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Wright wrote this paper in Spring 2004 for Starr King School's Unitarian Universalist History class.

The first Principle of our Unitarian-Universalist faith speaks to “the inherent worth and dignity of all people.” Throughout our history at least some faction of our denomination has advocated for one worthy cause or another. But at no prior time has it given such sustained and public support like that currently given to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) among us.

How did this happen? How did our denomination, which was divided even on issues like slavery in this country, manage to almost totally avoid the divisiveness seen on GLBT rights issues in other denominations, and to take an early and sustained leading role in support of these rights?

Social movements, particularly those with as important and far-reaching implications as the Gay Rights movement in our denomination, do not arrive fully conceived and “whole,” with no history or process of evolution. They are influenced by both internal and external forces which, over time, evolve into the institutions and positions we see as the “final product” (which, incidentally, it is not). This paper will be an attempt to show some of the historical influences which have brought about our denomination’s current thinking on the subject, and to show some of the concurrent historical events that were taking place as our denomination was evolving to its current position. It will seek to explore some of the contributing factors, to quickly summarize some of the key events that have gotten us to where we are, and to explore some of the current resources available to members and congregations.

Both the Unitarians and the Universalists have had a long and (sometimes undeservedly) proud history of Social Activism and progressive thinking since their inception. Many Unitarians and Universalists have been, if not pioneers, at least very strong supporters of such progressive ideas as anti-slavery, women's suffrage, public education, kindergartens, and social welfare programs of all sorts. So it is perhaps not altogether surprising that our denomination has endorsed equal rights for members of the GLBT community. Yet it has not always been so.

Until the denominations began to move away from mainstream Christianity and to a more inclusive interpretation of the Bible, there doesn't seem to have been a great deal of discussion within Unitarianism or Universalism about sexual minorities. Like their more traditional Christian brethren, the early Unitarians and Universalists seem to have taken a fairly standard view of human sexuality. It is known, for example, that Horatio Alger, who graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1860, served as a Unitarian minister for four years before being forced to resign when his homosexual experiences with some of the congregation's boys became known.(1) Since he "resigned" rather than having been fired, perhaps his resignation was prompted more by the public exposure than by the actual nature of the incident. But in any event, there is no doubt that his departure was "strongly encouraged" by his congregation.

As was true in the 19th century and is still true today, the question of the sexual orientation of almost any writer was, and of course still is, complicated by how "out" they are and how much we know of their lives. The terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" are of relatively recent coinage. They are credited to Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1869.(2) GLBT writers of the 19th century were generally forced to hide their orientation or couch it in terms so obscure as to be opaque to the general public, thereby complicating modern research.(3) Also, of course, such things were generally not considered appropriate topics of conversation in polite company.

Additionally, much of the writing of the 19th Century was, by today's standards, somewhat floral and overwritten. This leads to questions as to the definition of such terms as "intimate friendship" or "confirmed bachelor" and leads one to wonder at the true meaning of Emerson's remark "Here is love which sees through surface, and adores the gentle nature and not the costume" when applied to another man.(4)

It is my belief that the Transcendentalist movement had much to do with our denomination's current acceptance of "alternate sexuality." It opened the door for a less Bible-centered Unitarianism, one more tolerant of non-conformity. Or, as Perry Miller puts it in his introduction to *The Transcendentalists*, men (and women, presumably) in the "New World, will refuse to live by sobriety and deco-

rum alone, that there are requirements of the soul which demand satisfaction even though respectability must be defied and shocked.”(5) Ray Dubuque, on his website “Liberals Like Christ,” a Christian pro-GLBT website, lists Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson as “Famous Known Gays in History” (emphasis his).(6) Emerson, himself, spoke of the Transcendentalist as “a chartered libertine.”(7) And Thoreau, in “Sympathy,” written to the eleven-year-old Edmund Sewall, writes that Sewall was “designed for Beauty’s toy” and later, “this youth was glorious.” Unfortunately, for Thoreau, he was so taken by this youth’s beauty that:

“I quite forgot my homage to confess;
Yet now am forced to know, though hard it is,
I might have loved him, had I loved him less.”(8)

The homosexual Walt Whitman, while not a Unitarian, and not actually a part of the Transcendentalists, was a friend to both Thoreau and Emerson. Whitman’s openness about sex (though, apparently not the fact that he was homosexual) seems to have posed some problems for the Transcendentalists. However, to his credit, Emerson never withdrew his recommendation of Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass,” and even tried to help Whitman get a government job.(9)

By the turn of the century, with the “help” of the Transcendentalists, the Unitarians had moved completely away from the Bible-centered beliefs of their forefathers, asserting the importance of love for God and humanity, but without a Christian focus.(10)

The first half of the 20th century saw the emergence of humanism among religious liberals and Freud inventing sexuality generally and homosexuality as a disease.¹¹ The year 1924 saw the establishment of the Society for Human Rights, described as an advocacy group for people with “mental abnormalities” in the incorporation documents, but it was really the first formally organized homosexual rights organization in the United States. In 1941, George Henry published his study *Sex Variants*, which generally showed male homosexuals “as innately effeminate, and dismisses others as narcissists. Still others were adjudged to have acquired their ‘abnormality’ out of spite for their parents. One unfortunate lesbian was even said to have turned to her own sex at least in part because she was ugly.”(12)

It was a period of sweeping social change— two World Wars, Nazi persecutions, the Great Depression, the Roaring Twenties, the “Bomb,” and the Iron Curtain. The year 1947 saw the publishing of the first Lesbian magazine, *Vice-Versa*. And in 1948, the Kinsey Report surprised almost everyone

with its findings that 4 percent of men identified themselves as exclusively homosexual while 37 percent had had sexual relations with other men in their adult lives.(13)

Throughout the first half of the century, there doesn't appear to have been much significant progress in the area of GLBT rights within the denomination. Two direct influences which, I believe, were significant during this period, however, were the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, which called for a "non-theistic, non-supernatural religion," and the group known as the Humiliati, formed in 1946.(14) Both of these served to create within the Universalists a more "universal" approach to religion, thereby moving the Universalists further away from a strictly Christ-centered Christianity.

The 1950's saw, if anything, a general erosion of GLBT rights. McCarthyism had taken over the American psyche, and homosexuals were considered "security risks." Yet on the other hand, in 1951 the Mattachine Society was founded to help homosexuals realize their collective histories and experiences. The Mattachine Society is often considered the beginning of the contemporary organized gay-rights movement in the U.S.(15) The year 1955 saw the establishment of the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization designed to promote a sense of community, belongingness, and political unity for women.(16)

Within our churches, Unitarians and Universalists began to agree that there was much more that united them than separated them. But again, during the 50's there seems to have been little or no progress in the inclusion of GLBT persons within either Unitarianism or Universalism.

But with the beginning of the 1960's the picture began to change significantly for both the denominations and the U.S. generally. The Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated in 1961 and the Civil Rights movement began to gain momentum.

And June, 1969, was to mark the beginning of an entirely new chapter in the history of Gay Rights. While there had been clandestine bars and gathering places for members of the GLBT community, these were generally known only to the "regulars," and were often raided by the police. The Stonewall Inn was one such place. On June 27, 1969, the New York City police raided the Inn. When the crowd outside saw the police beating the unarmed patrons of the club, they began to harass the police, throwing beer bottles and trash cans. The police then took refuge in the Inn, and proceeded to ransack the place until re-enforcements could arrive. The "Stonewall Riots," as they came to be called, are considered to mark the beginning of a new "militant" approach to gay rights.

Within months the Gay Liberation Front of New York City had been formed. The Washington, D.C., Chapter of the Gay Liberation Front was formed in August of that year. The Boston chapter was formed in April, 1970, and by the end of 1970 there were GLF chapters in virtually all major cities and the U.S., and many European cities as well.(17)

The “old-guard” homophile groups such as the Mattachine Club and Daughters of Bilitis still existed, but because they were decidedly non-confrontational, gradually lost membership and effectiveness.

Of course, the Stonewall Riots and the Gay Liberation Front would not have happened were it not for the enormous social pressures of the times— the Black Power movement, the feminist movement, the anti-war movement, the youth culture, the civil rights movement, the drug culture, “the hippies, yippies, and rock and roll.”(18) Again, social movements do not exist in a vacuum.

Churches were, of course, subjected to these same social forces. As early as 1962, the Reverend Ravel Quigley, a Congregationalist pastor from New York City, began an overt ministry to gay people. On October, 6, 1968, the first service of Troy Perry’s inclusive Metropolitan Community Church was held in Los Angeles.(19)

In September, 1969, the Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. James L. Stoll, publicly declared his homosexuality at the Liberal Religious Youth Conference held in LaForet, Colorado. This public declaration led to the now famous 1970 U.U. General Assembly General Resolution urging “all people to bring an end to all discrimination against homosexuals, homosexuality, bisexuals, and bisexuality.” The passage of this resolution was quickly followed by the founding of the Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus, whose mission was to lobby for the creation of a Unitarian Universalist office of Gay affairs.(20)

Concurrently, the denomination was mounting an educational effort to foster more positive attitudes toward homosexuality and bisexuality. About Your Sexuality was published in 1971 for youth, and The Invisible Minority for adults appeared in 1972.(21)

The 1973 and 1974 Unitarian Universalist General Assemblies voted to establish and fund an “Office of Gay Affairs,” staffed by gay people, to serve as a resource for the Association. By 1986 the name

had been changed to the “Office of Gay and Lesbian Concerns.” In 1993, the Director of Office of Lesbian and Gay Concerns became a full-time position, and that same year, the name was changed to “Office of Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Concerns” to reflect a commitment to the bisexual community. In April of 1996, the name was changed again to its current title of “Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns” to reflect the denomination’s concern for transgender issues.(22)

Additionally, in 1989 the UUA launched an initiative to establish congregations as “Welcoming Congregations.” This was based on a 1987 committee report that found “many negative attitudes, deep prejudices, and profound ignorance about bisexual, gay, and lesbian people, which resulted in the exclusion of bisexual, gay, and lesbian people from” our churches.(23) This program seeks to educate with workshops such as “How Homophobia Hurts Heterosexuals” and “Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality.” At the same time, Interweave was established, whose goals are “the creation of local groups for bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender Unitarian Universalists for support, socializing, and sharing life issues” and “outreach to the larger bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender community to publicize the religious alternative offered by Unitarian Universalism.”(24) This program, in addition to being used by the Unitarian Universalists, has also been adapted by other faith traditions to fit their own contexts.(25) So the Unitarian Universalists continue to lead the way in working for GLBT rights. Our General Assemblies continue to pass resolutions condemning homophobia, AIDS discrimination and hate crimes. The UUA has fought against the Boy Scouts of America’s policy of discrimination against gay and atheist scouts and leaders, and the Helms Amendment designed to restrict the travel rights of HIV-infected people into the U.S. Most recently, of course, our denomination has been on the forefront in support of same-sex marriage.

As a society we have a very long way to go to achieve the full and equal rights for all Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and/or Transgendered people. As a denomination, I believe we have been and continue to be leaders in the struggle to achieve those rights. While our understanding and support has changed throughout the years, it has remained strong. As Mark Harris states in *The Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*, “over the last 30 years Unitarian Universalists have been consistent advocates of affirming the human worth and dignity and legal rights of every gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered person.”(26) If we truly believe in the “inherent worth and dignity of all people,” how can we fail to do otherwise?

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