



Passing the Flame

Clay Nelson © 30 July 2017

In preparation for this Sunday, when we welcome new members to our congregation, I have been reflecting on what it means to self-identify as a Unitarian and how it has changed.

At the time of Francis David, in Hungary 500 years ago, it was a willingness to declare, “God is one,” which was considered a heresy subject to persecution by the dominant Christian denominations, Catholicism and Calvinism. Being anti-Trinitarian was not good for one’s health.

If you were to become a Unitarian in England after 1660 you would not only reject the Trinity, but also the idea that Jesus had existed before his virgin birth, meaning he was not God made flesh, but born human. You would consider Jesus divine only because God had adopted him. You would not question that he had performed miracles. However, you would reject the idea of original sin or that Jesus died for your sins. You would be subject to persecution as a non-conformist by the Church of England until the late 18th century and consider exile in America a wise alternative to having your home destroyed by a mob.

If you were declaring yourself a Unitarian or a Universalist in colonial America your beliefs would vary depending on which stream of what is Unitarian Universalism today. If you were in a Unitarian church that had broken away from a Calvinist congregational church you would reject Trinitarian theology, but still hold Jesus to have been divine and to have performed miracles. If you were declaring yourself a member of one of the congregations Joseph Priestly, who discovered oxygen, founded on Socinian ideas you would believe in Jesus’ humanity. If you rejected the idea that only God’s predestined elect were saved then you would believe in universalism, which held that a loving God would save all humanity, rejecting a need for hell.

If you were becoming a member of a Unitarian congregation after William Ellery Channing’s sermon on “Unitarian Christianity” you would hold to the novel idea of human goodness and believe that theological ideas, including those in the Bible, could be subject to the light of reason.

After the Transcendentalist ideas of Emerson and Parker became the norm in Unitarian thought, you would still consider yourself a Christian but you would give reason prominence. You would not view the Bible as the Word of God or believe Jesus performed miracles. In fact, you would consider Jesus a transient idea not necessary to justify Christianity. You would find God in nature. You would strongly believe that it was up to humanity to make the world more socially just. You would oppose slavery, and support suffrage, public education, and ending poverty.

If this was Welcome New Member Sunday in 1901 when William Jellie was the new minister sent by the British to this congregation, you would be open to his theology of Christian socialism. He was a strong supporter of education, trade unions, and caring for the poor.

By the 1960s when Noel and Thelma Blyth were our lay ministers, there was a newfound openness to secular humanism in our midst. This would correspond with the merger in the US of the Unitarians and the Universalists into the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961.

During the turmoil of the 20th century, Unitarian and Universalist commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning resulted in a wide variety of often divergent theological views. It became apparent that, for the traditions to survive, our identity could not depend on sharing commonly held beliefs. They had to give way to commonly held values. With the merger, Unitarians and Universalists no longer claimed to be a branch of Christianity. While respecting their Judeo-Christian roots, they were prepared to draw from the wisdom of the world's great religions as well as from science and humanism.

So today, our newest members simply affirm their desire to promote the Seven Principles and are prepared to support our community's mission financially and with their time and energy. The beliefs they hold may be quite different from one another.

That makes us unique amongst religious institutions. New Zealand is increasingly secular and post-Christian in its outlook and we fit right in. Over half of Kiwis declare that they have no religious affiliation. This reflects more a rejection of religious institutions than a rejection of spirituality. We offer people a community that accepts them wherever they are on their spiritual journey without demanding they have to conform to us to belong.

What that means for us who welcome our new members today is that we are prepared to make space for them to be themselves. It is not unlike bringing home a newborn. No matter how much the parents and any siblings have tried to prepare for the new addition, everything changes, often unpredictably. That new child brings their individual personality, gifts, and foibles into the mix to create something new. As our new members sign the book today, who knows how they will shape who we will become? It is clear from our history that Unitarianism has never stood still. Our new members will make sure we remain a living tradition.

As we pass the flame to them, they are faced with many challenges in this era of Trump. While we have seen much progress on key issues close to a liberal's heart in my lifetime, we have seen many of those gains threatened. Other issues that have yet to be conquered such as racism, gender inequality, climate change, war, human rights, and income inequality seem to be losing ground. All of our Seven Principles call us to not only sign our names in acquiescence to them but to act to bring them into being.

The flame sheds light on the principles and on those who do not share our values. Our commitment to respect the dignity and worth of every human being inconveniently includes those who oppose our desire to transform the world into something Jesus called the kingdom of heaven—a place where love, kindness, healing and justice reign. The only response is to become our values, not just wear them. We can't just go through the motions or do the right thing, it has to become our passion.

This kind of transformation can't happen through our individual effort. It only happens in a beloved community. When that happens, the flame will be passed. That is what our new members are signing up for today.