



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## Why don't we talk about class in church?

Clay Nelson © 6 September 2020

Unitarians have a class problem. We don't talk about it.

While the problem requires an extended conversation, my musing today is only intended to put a crack in the wall of silence. You might ask, "Why can't I leave well enough alone? Don't we have enough on our plate supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, welcoming the LGBTQI community, promoting Women's Rights, challenging neoliberalism, demanding a Living Wage, protecting the environment, protesting the treatment of immigrants of colour and migrant labourers, nurturing progressive religious thought, safeguarding democracy, imagining a peaceful world, and building a Beloved Community?"

The reason is that class intersects with everything on the plate, be it racism, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia, authoritarianism, wealth inequality, economic injustice, colonialism, war, religious acrimony, degradation of the environment, and social division and discord.

We don't talk about the negative impact class has on achieving our Seven Principles, not because we are not aware of it, but because it cuts too close to home. UU theologian Rebecca Parker continues to push for "[broadening] Unitarian Universalist identity to include racial and cultural expressions of Unitarian and Universalist values, countering a history of Unitarian Universalist enmeshment with white privilege and economic privilege that limits Unitarian Universalism's accessibility and hospitality to many for whom its strengths could be life-giving." This vision of a democratic, open faith for all kinds of people has long been part of our expressed dreams, but we have never been able to make this vision manifest.

The movie biography, *Miss Potter*, starring Renee Zellweger as Beatrix Potter, includes a scene in which Beatrix is entertaining Norman Warne of the Frederick Warne Publishing Company. Norman is given the task of working with Beatrix on her bunny book. He eventually becomes her suitor as well, much to the dismay of Beatrix's mother, who is a social climber and a snob. She despises Norman's presence in her home and in the film remarks to her daughter, "I wish you wouldn't invite trades-people into the house. They carry dust."

A reviewer of the film, Anthony Lane, commented in the *New Yorker* that those like Mrs. Potter, who were trying to climb to the top of the social

ladder, would not wish to marry off their children to someone who was only halfway up.

Despite Mrs. Potter's craving for upper class pretensions, the Potters would never be accepted on the highest rungs. At one point in the film, Beatrix reminds her father that their family money comes from the printing factories and that they themselves are only two generations removed from being trades-people. Although the Potters' wealth qualifies them as upper-middle class, their regional background and religious affiliations exclude them from social acceptance among the most fashionable of London society. They are cut off by their faith. They are Unitarians.

Those most familiar with the history of New England Unitarianism may be surprised at the cultural snobbery towards Unitarianism in England, exemplified by the plight of the Potters. In New England, the Unitarian faith developed within the Standing Order of Congregational Churches. Many present-day Unitarian Universalist congregations at one time embodied this establishment. They were the makers of the social order. In Britain, the Unitarian faith developed outside the establishment among those led by the dissenting clergy, who refused to subscribe to the Act of Uniformity and were forced to leave the Church of England in 1662 as part of the Great Ejection.

After the Toleration Act of 1689 dissenting groups could meet legally in Britain—but not the Unitarians. That would not happen until 1813. Many of the chapels that later became Unitarian were officially Presbyterian or Congregational in the 1600s and 1700s. They were best served by not being too conspicuous as to their purpose. Graham and Judy Hague, the authors of the architectural history *The Unitarian Heritage*, tell us that “the homely, domestic architecture of these chapels reflects both the modest standing of their members and their fear of persecution.” They needed protective cover.

It is almost the opposite of New England parish churches, where Puritan forebears often chose the highest ground in town for their church, so its tall steeple would be the symbol of a shining city for all to see, the moral compass for the entire community.

Class has cut both ways for Unitarians. In America, Unitarianism was the establishment, producing four presidents. In England, Unitarians were the scourge of the higher classes that persecuted them. Our congregation was founded by British Unitarians. While not quite a scourge here (we did produce one Unitarian Prime Minister after all) the mentality of keeping a low profile came to New Zealand with them. In 1901 our church building was begun and completed. St Matthew-in-the-City, an Anglican church funded by Auckland's merchant class, began construction the same year, but took three years to complete. Even people in our neighbourhood often walk by unaware of our presence. No one who visits Auckland's CBD

is unaware of St Matthew's architectural prominence on land given by the crown in perpetuity.

Elitism, no matter what side we are on, cuts us off from the whole of society. For Unitarians that is exacerbated by our theology that for the most part only addresses the questions of the stereotypical UU: the white professional. Many of us have been able to follow our bliss, with a sense of calling and purpose. Even after we retire we may continue to dabble in our former profession. Now imagine someone from the working class. They rent out their brains, muscles and time solely to try to survive while supporting their family. When they retire, they don't dig ditches as a hobby. When they retire from Countdown, they don't set up a bar-code scanner in the shed, just to stay busy. They did that stuff for money, and when they stop being paid, they never, ever do it again.

They choose not to worship with us because they have no one to talk to. I'm not sure what the solution is besides honouring their self-discipline to do the hard things in life and to respect their survival in a world that our privilege has shielded us from. Certainly, we at the very least need to talk about the problem. Margaret Fuller has another suggestion. A contemporary of Emerson, she was a leading Transcendentalist who is sometimes called America's first feminist. She once wrote to her Unitarian father, "Your reluctance to go 'among strangers' cannot too soon be overcome; & the way to overcome it, is not to remain at home, but to go among them and resolve to deserve & obtain the love & esteem of those, who have never before known you. With them you have a fair opportunity to begin the world anew." I hear this as an admonishment to enter their world to understand the lives of those in a different class better. Yes, that will be uncomfortable, but no more uncomfortable than inviting them into our world.

Our theology says this vision to "begin the world anew" must be with all kinds of people, not just with the social circle we create or with like-minded liberals. It must be practised in an ever-intentional manner and in ever-widening circles if our faith is going to be truly transformational. Perhaps this is how Unitarian Universalism can fulfil its democratic vision, and become more than a faith for a few. It is my hope.