



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Make your own life glad

Clay Nelson © 30 May 2021

To be a Unitarian Universalist is to have a sense of humour, even about ourselves. There are so many jokes about us. Garrison Keeler, of course, teased us constantly. The comedian, Lenny Bruce, said this about us: "I know my humour is outrageous when it makes the Unitarians so mad they burn a question mark on my front lawn." Somerset Maugham in his classic "Of Human Bondage" said "A Unitarian very earnestly disbelieves in almost everything that anybody else believes, and he has a very lively sustaining faith in he doesn't quite know what." On a M.A.S.H. episode the character, Col. Sherman Potter, said: "The General answers his own phone. Must be a Unitarian."

Then there are the UU bumper stickers; there is lots of folk wisdom condensed into bumper stickers, by the way. One I saw said: "Honk If You're Not Sure". Another says: "We have questions for all your answers."

UUs consider these bumper stickers badges of honour. Our humour lifts up our sense of exceptionalism, no matter how muted we are in expressing it. We take pride in our individualism. We are not like the sheeple in other faiths mindlessly mouthing their ancient creeds. And, as a result we are dismissed by most but ourselves. Our once significant voice in the marketplace of ideas has laryngitis. It turns out we have one of our UU saints, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to thank for this development.

In his essay "Self-Reliance", he presented his view of our individuality. Benjamin Anastas critiques Emerson's imprint on American identity in general and Unitarianism in particular: "The essay's greatest virtue is it ordained [us] with an authority to speak what had been reserved for only the powerful, and bowed to no greater human laws, social customs or dictates from the pulpit." These ideas are captured in Emerson's words: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." Or: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." Or "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.... Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

In his 2012 Berry Lecture Fredrick Muir had this to say, “Emerson contributed to shaping 20th century ideology and the story Americans tell about [them]selves...about American uniqueness and individualism...When I began my preparation, I thought something on the role of technology would be of value. My interest took me to wondering what the ‘i’ means that’s placed in front of Apple products. I found two explanations: one is that the “i” means ‘internet.’ The other explained that the ‘i’ stood for “individual,” as in your own personal, individual piece of technology to be used for whatever purpose you want, to help you “Think Different” (which was Apple’s tag line). The theme of individualism was creatively and appealingly exploited in Apple’s commercial based on an adaptation of the poem ‘Here’s to the Crazy Ones by Jack Kerouac,’ which reads like a celebratory homage to Emersonian individualism: ‘Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. They push the human race forward.’

“Individualism [has] shaped Unitarian Universalism: [How could it not?] We comprise the church of Emersonian individualism; we are the iChurch. I’m not sure Emerson’s goal was for us to be “the Crazy Ones,’ but [UU historian] Conrad Wright argues that the result was ‘the disintegration of institutional religion [because] one cannot build a church on Emerson’s dicta: “humans] are less together than alone”” Wright concludes: “For Emerson, a true community is not painfully constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together, but is made up of atomic and unrelated individuals ..”

You might wonder at this point what is the difference between “individuality” and “individualism”? Individuality refers to all the characteristics that make a person unique — and refers to only one person. Individualism, on the other hand, is a set of beliefs, ideas, practices, and assumptions that emphasise the liberty and autonomy of individuals. It isn’t something that just belongs to one person. It’s a collective condition. Individualism is a pattern of living practised by entire groups of people.

It is unfair to blame Emerson for the individualism that has seeped into our religious bones. He lauded the gifts of individuality. As a faith movement we took the gift and transformed it into an ideology which began rotting our roots. There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.

In 1998 when sociologist Robert Bellah told a General Assembly audience that while he was "in solid agreement with our social witness," he stood over and against the individualism in our Principles — a belief he saw as the strongest current in Unitarian Universalist history.

Buried under the vision Bellah saw in our Principles is a sentence few ever read, but one that speaks to what will sustain and grow us. It is not the language of individualism, but of covenant: "As free congregations we, promise to one another our mutual trust and support."

We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality yes, but not individualism. When Bellah suggested starting the Principles with "the interdependent web of life" — that is, with a broader view than just the individual — well, it didn't go over well because, I suspect, people knew that living as a community in covenant is hard. Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant — creating and sustaining a community by "promising to one another our mutual trust and support" — this takes extra effort. Yes, it's hard and we all know just how hard it is.

Fortunately, Unitarian Universalism is a "living tradition" and if individualism led us to the iChurch, then covenant can reshape us into what many have told us since Thomas Jefferson, we can be the religion of the future: not that we are, but that we can be. We have what it takes to grow into what the 21st century needs. What that shape looks like is the Beloved Community, where the promise of individuality and justice inspire, empower, broaden and deepen all. Beloved Community, popularised by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., expresses the ethical embodiment of seeking the Common Good.

The Rev. Shirley Strong elaborates on Dr. King's vision: "I understand the term Beloved Community to mean an inclusive, interrelated society based on love, compassion, responsibility, shared power and a respect for all people, places, and things — a society that radically transforms individuals and restructures institutions," which is to say Beloved Community is shaped by what we know and feel as justice.

It could be argued that American exceptionalism and the ideology of individualism are not our problem in New Zealand, but the truth is that our individuality makes us vulnerable to being infected as well. In fact, I could list numerous instances where we have failed as a country to seek the common good. Much as Covid does not respect national borders, neither does

individualism. As a denomination we know how destructive it is. We also know creating a beloved community contains it.

Today we hold our Annual General Meeting. It is hardly the most exciting event on our social calendar, but it is our annual renewal of our commitment to be in covenant. We aren't just passing a budget, we are pledging to be here next year to continue our efforts to seek the common good. New Zealand needs us to exemplify a beloved community. And that's no joke but it will make our own days glad.