



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

I doubt Henny Penny was a Unitarian Universalist

Clay Nelson © 14 November 2021

After some of my recent musings confronting the disintegration of social cohesion due to Delta and how little COP26 in Glasgow will achieve in reducing greenhouse gases, you might think I'm channelling Henny Penny AKA Chicken Little. You remember the story. After an acorn falls on her head, she panics, running around the barnyard yelling, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling." Of course, Henny is mistaken, much to the amusement of the other farm animals as they point out the sky is fine.

In my defence, I can't be a Unitarian Universalist and channel Henny Penny.

Historically, the Unitarian view sees human beings as essentially and inherently good at heart. Not perfect, but gradually perfectible — given the right care, the right support, the right awareness, the right circumstances. Our job, then, is to cultivate the good within us and within each other, to cultivate our character.

The Universalist view sees God as essentially and inherently good at heart. Not an angry and punitive patriarch, but rather an infinitely loving presence who would sacrifice everything in order for us to realise our job is to love the "hell" out of the world.

These two ways of perceiving ourselves, our existence, and our purpose arose in and separated themselves from the dire doomsday warnings of their religious parents. They rejected the reigning message that the sky is perpetually falling, and we that we inherently flawed human beings are falling with it, helplessly, inescapably.

Unitarian Universalists are confident in themselves, in human nature and in the nature of the universe. We've fortified ourselves with the lubricant of universal love and the no. 8 fencing wire of science and human ingenuity, and we're good to go! No matter how dire things look, we expect things to turn out reasonably well in the end.

This is a product of our mostly middle class, mostly white, experience of things turning out reasonably well in the end.

The story of Henny Penny has been told for centuries around the world and there are many variations of it. Author and cartoonist James Thurber has written another version:

Once upon a time a little red hen was picking up stones and worms and seeds in the barnyard when something fell on her head. 'The heavens are falling down!' she shouted, and she began to run, still shouting, 'The heavens are falling down!' All the hens that she met and all the roosters and turkeys and ducks laughed at her, smugly, the way you laugh at one who is terrified when you aren't.

"What did you say?" they chortled.

"The heavens are falling down!" cried the little red hen.

Finally a very pompous rooster said to her, "Don't be silly my dear, it was only a pea that fell on your head." And he laughed and laughed and everybody else except the little red hen laughed. Then suddenly with an awful roar great chunks of crystallized cloud and huge blocks of icy blue sky began to drop on everybody from above... for the heavens actually were falling down.

Thurber's Moral: It wouldn't surprise me a bit if they did."

[Fables for Our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated](#)

It's interesting to consider that Thurber's fable was first published in February of 1939. In September of that year Hitler invaded Poland, and the Second World War began. ... And the heavens did fall down.

And so when things don't go as we expect, when the world comes undone we're often at a loss, not at all sure what to do. Whether we have the kind of personality that's triggered to get out there and fight, or the personality that wants to flee before the coming storm, or the personality that freezes and pulls protectively inward, suddenly it seems like the sky is falling. And since our inherited theologies rooted in an optimistic view of humans and history have not prepared us for such a calamity, we are prone to experience a crisis of faith when things aren't turning out as we hoped.

When the human cruelty of World Wars I and II challenged not only our collective confidence in human goodness but also in God's goodness, Unitarians and Universalists were led to examine the truth of their message and their expectations. That crisis of faith led many away from belief in God, giving birth to the humanist movement within our traditions in the 1930s.

What does our faith tradition offer us for resources in such a time? Well that depends on what you think the need is. Is the need to calm our fears? Or is it to help us live into and to navigate our fears?

If we are feeling so unsafe that we are trapped in a perpetual state of alarm, we will not be able to access the openness and creativity we need to see possibilities and opportunities and the paths out of the danger.

So, we need to find ways to calm ourselves enough to access higher ground, a place of more creative functioning, and we need to stay alarmed and alert enough to search for and find the road leading through this time to a future infused with more of the values of sustainability, compassion, justice, kindness and openness that we hold so dearly.

That requires taking a longer view.

George Lakey, a Quaker and sociologist points out that "*Necessary change happens during tumult,*" not during times of tranquillity — tranquillity, with its tiny, incremental, essentially insignificant changes — "*often keeps unjust conditions stuck in place.*"

Lakey uses the metaphor of a forge, in which iron is heated up in order to form it. When a society heats up, as painful and as dangerous as that can be, it becomes much more pliable than when everything's calm. And being pliable opens the possibility for a society to bend — to bend in very scary direction, yes, OR at long last, in the direction that people have been longing for.

Times such as we are enduring frustrate and sadden us, but Lakey empathises: relationships fracture, racism becomes more overt, violence more frequent, the earth gets hotter. However, the volatility also makes positive change easier to get. In the polarized 1930s, progressive movements got changes they could only dream of in the '20s. New Zealand's first Labour government began in 1935 and lasted until 1949. Voters rejected the coalition government in protest at its harsh policies, and in response to the grave economic and social impact

of the depression. Labour promised social and economic security and presented a more benign image under leader Michael Joseph Savage.

In the pre-war period Labour was openly socialist in its political aims. It began to nationalise large sections of the economy, including the Bank of New Zealand, coal mines and domestic air services. Broadcasting and transport were brought under the control of government ministers. To stimulate New Zealand's depressed economy, Labour increased wage rates, launched a programme of public works and state-housing construction, and introduced a guaranteed price for dairy products. The Social Security Act 1938 greatly expanded the scope of the welfare state, introducing universal free health services and extending benefits for the aged, sick and unemployed.

Lahey doesn't know if genuine change will result, but goes on to say, *"I feel lucky to be alive now because this is the best chance in my lifetime to make really big progressive change."* He calls the powerful conditions emerging under the surface and opening new possibilities, *"signals of emergence."* *"I see evidence, right now, that these trends will give us a chance to gain victories we've never been able to reach before."*

"Progressives need to breathe deeply," he writes, *"and to make our peace with the reality."*

To that end, [UUA staff member Sue Phillips](#) wrote:

It will be tempting to hunker down, to retreat into spaces where we might be soothed; our realities affirmed and unchallenged.

Those of us who are mourning must, of course, grieve. But in our grieving we must not hide, or we risk being unfaithful to the call at the very centre of Unitarian Universalism: to co-create a world of love and justice....

Creating beloved community is messy, gritty, fearsome, and hard. This is the time we have been practicing for.

The only faithful response to this moment of extraordinary division is to show ourselves and our communities that another way is possible....

My friends, we were made for this work. And now we have to actually do it.

The very same UU optimism that can get in our way can also allow us to look for opportunity in the chaos.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

How are you dealing with what may be the world coming undone?