

Liberating Love

Rev. Fredric Muir

Several years before I completed three decades of ministry with a congregation of more than four hundred members, one of the longtime members asked me why the Unitarian Universalist Association was abandoning what had attracted him to our faith. Specifically, he thought that we were surrendering our historic legacy of inspiring values: “The religion I joined is being taken from me,” he told an attentive audience at our annual meeting. Among those values were the Enlightenment-shaped trinity of freedom, reason, and tolerance expressed nowadays as individualism, affirming modernity, and the exceptionalist characterizing of our way of religion. I was surprised by his comments, but not alarmed; I’d heard versions of his concern from others.

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Years before this event, theologian John Cobb wrote about the tension reflected in my congregant’s question. Cobb frames the narrative of Enlightenment ideals:

Today the limitations of Enlightenment modes of thought and of social organization are becoming more and more apparent. Whereas progress in the past two centuries has meant increasing the role of Enlightenment principles in our religious life, today it means something quite different. The dualism, the individualism, the rationalism,

and the empiricism of the Enlightenment have all failed us¹ It's important to say more about these guiding faith principles.

The individualism that Cobb speaks of is an Enlightenment value that is an attracting and sustaining one for many Unitarian Universalists; it is also a value held sacred in American culture. Individualism is inscribed in our nation's foundational document as the right to pursue "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Our Transcendentalist forebears recognized these as gifts from a loving God, shaping every person's uniqueness and reflecting in us the image of God. But it wasn't Transcendentalist individuality that drove settler occupation and genocide in the American West (supported by the tenets of Manifest Destiny) followed by imperial conquests of Pacific archipelagos (in which Unitarians and Universalists played outsized roles from 1893 to 1946). These hegemonic aspirations were activated by hyper-individualism rooted in entitlement, as in the right to use power over another because, well, because one could; most especially one could if he was a White Christian man. Over the decades, Transcendentalism's (Unitarianism) and a loving God's (Universalism) gifts-based individuality became so twisted and inflated that many express their understanding of Unitarian Universalism as a rights-based religion that gives you freedom to believe anything you want. We have become the iChurch.² While some have realized not just the shortcomings of the iChurch, but its mischaracterization of Unitarian Universalism, rights-based individualism remains strong in our congregations and a cherished principle in our nation's civil religion.

Consider another Enlightenment principle: Progressive religion in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular are

¹ John Cobb, "As Others See Us: Ecumenical Perspectives on Unitarian Universalism," *The Unitarian Universalist Christian* (Winter 1987).

² Fredric Muir, "The end of iChurch: To build Beloved Community, Unitarian Universalism needs a new narrative," *UU World* (Winter 2012), uuworld.org.

eager to incorporate new ways of thinking. For example, the use of reason freed us from orthodox, literal reading of sacred scripture; reason opened us to modernity. But there have been times when we have been seduced by modernity, rushing to science for answers that faith didn't satisfy. One glaring example of this pivot away from a more cautious approach began as early as 1905, when Unitarian and Universalist laity, clergy, and their national organizations turned to eugenics as a way to sanction everything from colonization of BIPOC people to keeping a healthy home, from immigration restriction to juvenile individuation, from forced sterilization to church school curriculum development, from peace advocacy to publishing white supremacist authors. What is surprising is not that Unitarians and Universalists were among eugenics supporters; after all, we cast ourselves as a modern religion and eugenics was the epitome of modernity, but that given our size, the interest and support we showed was disproportionately large.

Combined with our version of individualism, embracing modernity shaped one more Enlightenment value, hubris. There should be little doubt as to how and why hubris is a shaping factor for Unitarian Universalists to address: Our Enlightenment principles put white, educated Unitarian Universalists on a pedestal; humility simply was never a significant part of our theology (nor is it today). Not that it couldn't be, but there has rarely been much/any consideration of it, which is to say that twenty-first-century Unitarian Universalism remains held in a faith posture shaped by exceptionalism.

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The centuries "of progress" informed by these Enlightenment principles included our nation's era of imperialism from 1893 (when the Hawai'ian monarchy was overthrown) to deep into the twentieth century (while the Philippines was given independence in 1946, Puerto Rico and Guam remain

unincorporated territories of the U.S.). How these principles informed Unitarian and Universalist support and leadership in the colonization of Pacific island nations, including justifications from the American eugenics movement, remains an unspoken history in our Association and raises a question relevant for Unitarian Universalists considering proposed Article II: Are the Enlightenment principles and values that informed Unitarian Universalist support of the imperial era still shaping us, and if so, how? John Cobb believed they do and concluded:

Can Unitarian Universalists find the resources to criticize the principles by which they have lived? If Unitarian Universalists could become self-critical in this way, you [Unitarian Universalists] could once again be in the vanguard of dealing with the most important issues of our time. I do not expect this, but I hope for it.

The proposed language in Article II calls us to “heal historic injustices” and on the Unitarian Universalist Association to “actively engage its members in the transformation of the world through liberating Love.” It further states that “Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values.” What does this love look and feel like; how might it motivate and help us address and heal the brokenness resulting from our history of injustices, especially during our nation’s imperial era? Is our imperial past still shaping us?

There appears to be no institutional legacy of love for us to reference, no sustained theological declaration of love and its transforming, liberating nature to guide us: While expressions about the power of love can be found in progressive religious writers and clergy, in few if any Unitarian or Universalist corporate documents has the singularity of love been named as a core value informing every aspect of our living tradition, as a binding inspiration or aspiration. This is important and should not be overlooked: The insertion and centrality of “love” in

proposed Article II marks a significant shift for our Association and requires further reflection. There are two interdependent defining qualities of love that inform Article II and this essay, qualities that support post-Enlightenment definition and opportunities.

Love is hope. Our Transcendentalist ancestors bequeathed us theological imagination, the idea that the future's promise is always aspirational is foundational to hope. But imagination, while necessary, is not enough alone. Yara González-Justiniano notes several additional features of hope:

Solidarity and compassion are key elements that require us to understand ourselves in relationship to others *Collective Work* generates a sustainable and liberative hope.³

Love is hospitality, which, like hope, is more than a Sunday morning expression or program. Hospitality is a posture, a way of being in the world. Radical welcoming will likely stretch many Unitarian Universalists who hold tightly to historic Enlightenment principles and values, which can have a narrowing and exclusionary nature. Peter Choi suggests that we might want to be “skeptical of aspirational language that enables us to preserve the status quo.”⁴ For example, some of us, in our eagerness to gift others with our unique way of religion, don't pause long enough to be mindful that radical hospitality also means receiving the gift of the other as they are (and not as we wish them to be), open to the way this gift might broaden and deepen us. Love as hospitality calls us to more than intellectual freedom, sharpened skills of reason, or willingness to tolerate another's views. Love is about trust, care, and respect; love is about possibility. Love as radical hospitality, and welcome is

³ Yara González-Justiniano, *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice: Esperanza en Práctica* (Lexington, 2022).

⁴ Peter Choi, “Deconstructed, reimagined faith,” *Christian Century* (June 2023), christiancentury.org.

receiving the gift of another as they are. Thank goodness there is encouraging support for those seeking a new path in the report of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Institutional Change.⁵

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Peter Choi helped me understand why, at this time, love is central to our proposed purpose and covenant. There is a broader context to our consideration that is also shaping other faith communities. The COVID pandemic caused widespread suffering and exposed long-standing and ignored marginalizations. This combined with the rise of authoritarianism and the spread of war have led Choi to conclude, "As we come to understand more deeply the histories of empire, race, and slavery, turning away from triumphalism and toward lament feels like an appropriate spiritual response."

As with lament, the value of centering also occurs in stepping back from theological exceptionalism to honoring shared curiosity. Choi warns us that exceptionalism might be felt by others as "perilously indistinguishable from theological supremacy and its close kin White supremacy."

Finally, as we learn about the shortcomings and dangers of Enlightenment certitude, we embrace the power of mystery, the power of Love, as a priority. Choi remarks, "Certitude is not faith, many are realizing, and the dogmatic imposition of a debatable interpretation is not love."

These shifts illustrate a theo-ecclesial backstory to the centering of love in proposed Article II, and understanding them encourages us to understand in their fullness the expectations and call that come with naming a foundation of love. Borrowing the words of Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg,

⁵ Commission on Institutional Change, "Hospitality and Inclusion," *Widening the Circle of Concern* (Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020), uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/cic/widening/hospitality-inclusion.

The work of [love] demands curiosity, care, and a willingness to face hard things with bravery and honesty. While we can't undo the past, we can address the present with integrity and endeavor to create a future that is much more whole than anything we can imagine from here. So let us begin.⁶

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To begin again in love requires, at the very least, a reckoning with the chaos and perils posed by Enlightenment principles. As congregations, organizations, and members learn about the ways their Unitarian/Universalist forebears and communities leveraged our faith to support our nation's imperial era (and other injustices), we must ask, *What now?*:

- Do the imperial mind and its shaping ideas still inform our Unitarian Universalist theology, our organizations, and our curricula?
- How can we—as individuals, as a congregation, as the denomination—speak truthfully about our past and then move forward on the foundation of love?
- In what ways are Enlightenment principles seemingly baked into our faith and holding us back from “the transformation of the world”?
- How can we live into a future shaped by the aspirational language proposed in Article II?

With the spirit of *tikkun olam* (Hebrew for “repairing the world” and connoting social action and the pursuit of social justice), I propose a mnemonic that reflects our intention and offers a way forward: GO REPAIR⁷:

⁶ Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Beacon, 2022).

⁷ A longer version of the GO REPAIR device/process is included in my article “Seduced By the Sound of Science: Unitarians and Universalism in the Eugenics Era,” *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist Studies*, Vol. XLV (2022).

Gather a team that is representative of your organization (as it is and what it aspires to be, which may mean partnering with the larger community). If you are following this process as an individual, family, small group, you will likely need to adapt this first step (and others) to fit your size and purpose. Consider composing a mission statement. One of the goals of a mission statement is team clarity and transparency. If you are unfamiliar with mission statements and how to compose one, here is a place to start.⁸

Organize your team so everyone understands the purpose, expectations, and likely assignments. A covenant might help, since the team will work together to live into its mission and might need guardrails. A covenant is composed of promises expected from others and promises made. If you are new to covenants, consider using the Unitarian Universalist Association's workshop on writing a covenant.⁹

Remember to keep your stakeholders informed; part of your task may be unearthing secrets, so there's a danger of your team appearing to keep secrets yourselves, sending the unintentional message that you are continuing a perceived or real legacy of opacity. Remember to share the team's mission statement and covenant; transparency with leaders and stakeholders is critical, one way to earn trust and sustain integrity.

Research the context and actions around the topic. For example, what was going on—in your family, community, state, region, nation, the world—that might have given shape to the topic or event you are addressing?

Explore beyond the traditional research sites, which might involve a field trip and/or workshop/webinar, not just for one

⁸ Douglas Zelinski, "Mission Statement Tips," *Leader Lab*, uaa.org/leaderlab/mission-statement-tips.

⁹ "Writing a Covenant Workshop," Unitarian Universalist Association, uaa.org/safe/handbook/workshops/166375.shtml.

person but for the whole team. Think broadly and deeply. For example, recording interviews with those who might hold shaping information requires the interviewer to create a context free of fear, anxiety, blame, or guilt. Those who share their stories must feel confident that the interviewer and the team will present their words accurately. Here are some suggestions for doing interviews.¹⁰

Personalize the topic. This is a story that likely has a cast of players: individuals, families, institutions. Who were they, where were they from, where did they go? What were their personalities, backgrounds, and motivations? Where was the power coming from and going? Was power shared? Dig deep to look at how concepts and identities were created and how relationships were shaped. Are these still shaping your members, leaders, and organization?

Action to be taken could involve several steps, including a report to your stakeholders, a news article, and contact with others affected by the issue(s) you are naming. A word of caution: any action taken needs contextual thinking. Depending on the action, consider all the possible outcomes and people. Speaking truth to power is important, and so is care for those who have not lived up to their aspirations.

Incarnate your learnings with a deepening spiritual experience or exercise. A painting, sculpture, song, litany as a vehicle giving expression to the work, revelations, and feelings. This is an opportunity for the team to partner with others and explore how the learnings become lessons resulting in a way forward.

¹⁰ “How to Do Oral History,” *Smithsonian Institution Archives*, siarchives.si.edu/history/how-do-oral-history.

Renew your purpose and aspiration after your group accepts the team's report. Plan for what difference your findings and reflections might make.

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The proposed Article II language speaks of engaging us “in the transformation of the world through a liberating love.” It will also mean transforming ourselves. The GO REPAIR process is one way (but certainly not the only way) to direct liberating love toward ourselves. To what end? Rabbi Ruttenberg asserts, “Addressing harm is possible only when we bravely face the gap between the story we tell about ourselves . . . and the reality of our actions . . . even if it threatens our story of ourselves.” And especially for those of us considering the love language of Article II: “Taking seriously that I might have hurt you is an act of love and care. It is an opportunity to open my heart wider than it has been . . . To let your experience matter.”

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In 1936, the American Unitarian Association's (AUA) newly established Commission of Appraisal issued its first report (a hefty book of 350 pages), *Unitarians Face a New Age*. In the report's first section, “Introduction: Re-Thinking Unitarianism,” they set the tone of their findings with a strong, frame-bending warning:

The genius of the Unitarian movement has been its power to adapt the vocabulary and practices of a religion whose roots are sunk deep into the past to new knowledge, new conditions, and new situations. If this genius should fail us now, the time will have come to write ‘finis’ to the story of Unitarianism.¹¹

¹¹ Commission of Appraisal, *Unitarians Face a New Age* (American Unitarian Association, 1936).

While the Commission's bold and sobering words could be appropriate for our deliberations, Unitarians (and Universalists) in 1936 were unaware of, oblivious to, ignoring, didn't care about, or maybe agreed with the several ways their leaders (and ancestors) leveraged their faith to support imperialism in its many hegemonic directions. The Commission reported six values with which Unitarians agreed; the value of love is not named and the absence of a theology of love or even language about love is conspicuous. Perhaps the AUA's commitment to Enlightenment principles and values left no room for naming the centrality of love. Now it feels important to ask: Might the absence of love—especially as hope and hospitality—have been a contributing factor shaping the Commission's deep concern regarding the future of our way of religion? Is it time now not only to pay close attention to this absence, but to correct it?

We recall that our Universalist tradition speaks of a God who unconditionally affirms and loves all, a faith stance rejected by many religious conservatives. Broadening his understanding of Love, Universalist minister Hosea Ballou remarked,

If we agree in brotherly love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury; but if we do not no other agreement can do us any good.¹²

As bold as Ballou's words might have been—and still may be—they fall short of what we need today. In many of our settings, we need a love that moves beyond agreement and disagreement. If as the proposed Article II language says, “We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love,” this will require a love that supports and challenges us, claims yet pushes us, centers and moves us. With a love shaped by imagination, hope, and hospitality, we can make real the promises that are ours to keep.

¹² Hosea Ballou, *A Treatise on Atonement* (1848).