



**THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST  
HISTORY AND HERITAGE  
SOCIETY BULLETIN**



*Unitarian Universalists on Star Island: A Fertile History*

*Hope, Inspire, Believe:* three verbs crucial to working towards justice, equity, and compassion. In some denominations, believing in common scriptural texts, coupled with bonding to religious practices, scaffolds hope and inspiration. But for UUs, whose “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” invites divergent spiritual texts, orientations, and practices, finding a home for the complex dialogue such a search necessitates can make the difference between plodding along, despondent at the world’s condition, or igniting spirits to serve the long arc of the moral universe. Since 1897, when Thomas H. Elliott actualized the first Unitarian conference on Star Island, Unitarians and, later, Unitarian Universalists have found a home on Star’s 38 acres: drenched by storms, lifted by sunrise, starlit.

When Elliott proposed moving the North Middlesex Unitarian Conference annual meeting to the Isles of Shoals, he promised to fill the island. This required reaching beyond his own Conference to invite all of New England’s Unitarian Conferences. Those first 610 attendees set a precedent for Star Island to become a geographical-spiritual base for liberal religious seekers from far-flung places, who formed sustaining bonds and understandings that ripple back into the UUA and the world. Leaders like longtime American Unitarian Association president Frederick May Eliot, who also served as an ACLU director, attended Star Island. Dana McLean Greeley, May’s AUA successor, the first UUA president, and a peace and civil rights activist, was in his early years the president of the continental Young People’s Religious Union (YPRU) and led youth conferences on Star.

Many visitors don’t know the significance of the YPRU plaque affixed to one of Star Island’s cottages. Founded in 1896, the first Unitarian denominational youth group, its motto was, “The Spirit of Youth in the Life of the Church is the Hope of the World.” YPRU held its first Star Island meeting in 1921. As they began to have children, YPRU members also birthed Star’s family conferences to continue their beloved community.

It was, and is, a community where a mutuality of influence prevails. In *Something Like a Star*, Frederick T. McGill, Jr. wrote: “At this point I cannot tell who taught me what... But those of us who attended...pick[ed] up gleanings of theology that would give deeper meaning to later experiences...” (p.30). Sharing candlelight chapel, porch talks, hilarity, gravitas, and island traditions blurs delineations between “experts” and “learners.”

A mutuality of influence also describes the relationship between Unitarian Universalism and the nonprofit Star Island Corporation, parent to the island and its programs, whose mission is to be a “center for religious, education, and kindred purposes consistent with the principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ,” its other denomination of origin. Star Island both influences and is influenced by UU principles and emphases: examples include its Green Gosport Initiative and its new Beloved Community Project, which invited Ruth Idakula, Co-Director of the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, to lead a staff workshop in “Radical Hospitality Through an Anti-Racist Lens” this past July.

For lifelong UU Rev. Christiana McKnight, this place that’s “a little frozen in time” reveals lineage, highlighting the responsibility to live up to the great accomplishments of UU forebears without discounting their imperfections. McKnight, who attends the Lifespan Religious Education conference, says, “You can look back and see that in 1910, people came to Star to learn how to teach Sunday School in a moral way. You see these threads of care that walk through [Star Island’s historical] documents. This learning, caring community shaped thousands upon thousands of people. It’s very humbling.”

~Jennifer Whitten



**EACH ONE REACH ONE**

Your UUHHS Board has a favor to ask:

Please take a minute to think of three people you know who are interested in our Unitarian Universalist history and heritage. Or at least one. Now copy this message into an email:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I know that you are interested in our Unitarian Universalist history and heritage, as am I.

Please join me in becoming a member of the UU History and Heritage Society.

You can do so easily, simply by going to <http://uuhhs.org/join/> Individual membership is only \$50 a year, or \$125 for three years; or \$30 for students and low-income folks. Membership will bring you a copy of the UUHHS journal, with fascinating new articles about our history and reviews of current publications in the field.

In a time when it is important for us revisit our history in order to dismantle the structures of white supremacy that unconsciously block our inclusiveness and relevance, UUHHS is doing its part. Please join us!

**TREASURER'S REPORT**

Improving the financial condition of UUHHS is a priority for the current Board, and I am glad to help them in that endeavor as the new Treasurer.

There are two priorities to this end in the current year. The first one is "Each One Reach One." We very much need all existing members to recruit new members. We have a goal of adding 100 or more dues-paying members before June 30, 2019.

The second goal is to endow our annual lectureship, named in honor of the late Conrad Wright. Thus far, we have received gifts to that end of over \$12,000. The next phase will be a crowd-funding campaign, "Revisiting Our History," through [www.faithify.org](http://www.faithify.org), seeking an additional \$3000 before December 31.

Fully funding the Wright lectureship – not only with a modest honorarium, but expenses as well – will require further contributions. Should you or anyone of your acquaintance be open to discussing a gift of \$1000 or more, or a bequest to UUHHS, please do not hesitate to contact me. All who do so will receive a signed copy of my forthcoming book on the Transcendentalists.

Yours in faith,

John Buehrens  
Past President, UUA, 1993-2001  
Treasurer, UUHHS, 2018-



**PRESIDENT'S POST**

I hope you will read this issue of our Newsletter carefully.

As you will see we are making requests of our present membership to help us increase our numbers to more adequately support our ongoing programs. And also asking for your participation in our 60-day Faithify campaign, which launched on November 2 with a goal of \$3000, dedicated to endowing our annual Conrad Wright Lecture. Those of you who have already contributed more than \$12,000 for this purpose (thank you!) can also help by spreading the word about the Faithify invitation.

If we are successful in both these efforts we should be a much stronger and secure organization a year from now, which leads me to remind us all that we are now less a year away from our fourth triennial History Convocation, again jointly sponsored by Collegium and this year also a Universalist group associated with Murray Grove... We will be meeting at the Maritime Conference Center outside Baltimore, Maryland, from October 17-20, 2019. Baltimore was chosen in recognition of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the seminal sermon preached by William Ellery Channing entitled "Unitarian Christianity" (and better known as the Baltimore Sermon) on May 5, 1819.

Inspired by this, the broad theme of the Convocation will be origins:

Origins of Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism in America: Liberal Religious Thought and Practice (William Ellery Channing, John Murray and Hosea Ballou)

In November the call for papers will be circulated.

Thanks to all of you who support the work of the UU History and Heritage Society.

Earl Holt

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**\*\*HAVE AN INTERESTING HISTORIC UU FIND THAT YOU WANT TO SHARE WITH UUHHS? \*\***

**Please send any submissions about your local UU history and heritage to the UUHHS newsletter! Send all submissions to newsletter editor, Phoebe Cos at phobekates16@gmail.com by February 1<sup>st</sup>. We look forward to hearing your stories!**



## New Faithify Campaign

In our time, Unitarian Universalist congregations are challenged and called to come to terms with the white-centered culture and systems of oppression embedded in our congregational practices. Because our congregations reflect the dominant culture from which our two parent traditions emerged, it is important to revisit our history for a fuller understanding of the insights and oversights of our forebears and the cultural forces that shaped our tradition. How can we tease our liberating religious theology apart from the influence of a culture steeped in racial hierarchies and white supremacy? What little known stories of Unitarian and Universalist forebears of color can we lift up to offer both inspiration and a more complete understanding of who we have been, who we are, and who we are yet to fully become as we strive to more fully embody the promise of our radical theology? What wisdom and scholarship do historians and scholars of color have to share? How can we provide inspiration and help for congregations who seek to revisit their own histories, looking for narratives that help Unitarian Universalists meet this moment? These are but some of the questions the UU History and Heritage Society is asking as we consider why history matters and why the stories we tell about ourselves are important. One of the gifts the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society (UUHHS) offers to Unitarian Universalists and to our faith tradition is an annual lecture at General Assembly. Named in honor of Conrad Wright, the lecture provides a chance for UU religious professionals and lay leaders to hear from scholars whose work illuminates our history and sheds light on today's challenges. The UUHHS Board has established an endowment to offset the program's necessary expenses, such as honorarium, travel, lodging and General Assembly fees for the presenter. Income from the fund will allow us to continue revisiting the complexities of our history as new movements call us to live our values more completely.

The Conrad Wright Lecture was inaugurated in 2008 to honor the scholarship and influence of one of the most important historians of our liberal religious tradition. As Professor at Harvard Divinity School for decades and the author of innumerable books, papers and articles, Dr. Wright contributed significantly to the understanding of our history and heritage. Honoring Conrad Wright's work, the lecture encourages us to move further and deeper into our understanding of our own history and heritage, just as he did in his time.

Through the Faithify campaign, we offer a chance for others who believe with us that knowledge of our past helps us navigate present challenges to be part of this effort. The fund has a goal of \$20,000. To date, about \$12,000 has been raised from members of the UUHHS Board and others close to the society. We ask for your contribution to this campaign, helping UUHHS to make significant historical scholarship available to all Unitarian Universalists. Donations may be sent through:

<https://faithify.org/projects/revisiting-uu-history-a-calling-for-our-time/> .

Find out more about the UU History and Heritage Society at [www.UUHHS.org](http://www.UUHHS.org).



### Barnum in new PBS documentary: "The Circus"

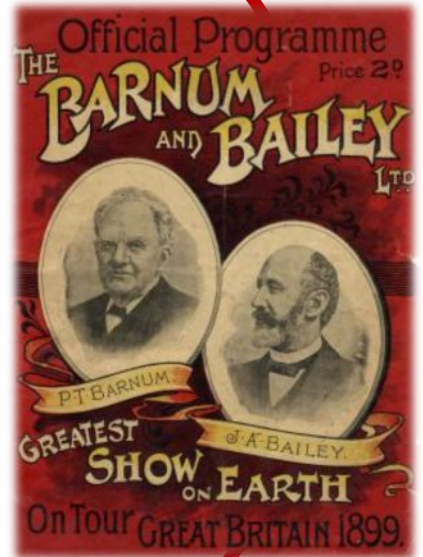
Phineas Taylor (P. T.) Barnum was central to the development of the circus, a uniquely American form of entertainment. Barnum's story is one of a half dozen covered in "The Circus" a new *American Experience* television show that aired on PBS stations on October 8 & 9, 2018. "The Circus" consists of two shows, each two hours long.

I haven't watched the second episode yet, but I found the first episode to be a fresh look at Barnum. I didn't note any reference to Barnum's Universalist leanings, but makes sense in a show about circus history. The documentary team did cover new ground, at least for me: Near the end of part one they explore Barnum's disturbing efforts in 1882 to create an "Ethnological Congress of People," an effort that very likely led to the "ethnographic villages" of the world's people at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

To learn more, go to:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/circus/>

~John Buehrens



### Featured Minister: Christopher Hudson

Christopher Hudson is the Unitarian minister at All Souls Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Before his 2005 ordination, Hudson had played a prominent role in the Irish Communication Workers Union. During the final years of "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland, Hudson served as a negotiator between the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Irish government to facilitate the Northern Irish peace process. For more on Reverend Hudson, visit: [allsoulsbelfast.org](http://allsoulsbelfast.org).

~Jim Nugent



***BACKS AGAINST THE WALL:  
THE HOWARD THURMAN STORY***  
**Upcoming on PBS television**  
**Feb. 2019**



*“Don’t ask what the world needs.  
Ask what makes you come alive,  
and go do it.  
Because what the world needs is  
people who have come alive.”*  
 Howard Thurman (1899-1981)

In an era when liberationists and liberals are often set against one another, so that racists and reactionaries prevail, Howard Thurman remains very relevant to us. Like Unitarians, he saw Jesus as human. Beacon Press offers his classic in liberationist Christology, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Like Universalists, he embraced all cultures. In 1944, in the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco, only blocks from Japan Town, he launched the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples <http://fellowshipsf.org/> along with a white colleague, in part as a protest against the racist displacement of Japanese Americans. Recognized early as an outstanding scholar among young black ministers, Thurman studied with Quaker theologian Rufus Jones and became Dean of the Chapel at Howard University in Washington, DC, 1932-1944.

He left San Francisco in 1953 for a similar role at Boston University. There he served as spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr., and to Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, who cited Thurman as the first to lead him to explore mysticism beyond Jewish tradition.

Thurman retired from BU in 1965 and then returned to San Francisco, where he died. His benediction, “The Work of Christmas,” is familiar to Unitarian Universalists:

*When the song of angels is stilled,  
When the stars in the sky are gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace among the brothers  
To make music in the heart.*

Filmmaker Martin Dobelmeier has produced a documentary trilogy, “Prophetic Voices,” using Howard Thurman, Dorothy Day, and Abraham Heschel to illustrate connections between spirituality and social justice. The Thurman film will first air on PBS stations starting in February 2019. For more info, visit [www.journeyfilms.com](http://www.journeyfilms.com)