

Universalist Survival: What's Love Got to Do with It?

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Abstract

When Universalists voted to consolidate with the Unitarians, many feared they might lose their identity. This paper will explore the extent to which those fears were justified by examining articulations of Universalist identity published in the *Leader* during the consolidation debate. For both sides, the essence of Universalism was love.

This session explores some of the new insights into Unitarian Universalist history available through the brand-new *Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism*. Natalie Malter's presentation, now published in the *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History (JUUH, vol XL)*, highlights the profound changes brought about as second-wave feminism transformed our ministry, our theology, and our denominational identity. The impact of feminism, we believe, is the single most important story line in the past half century of Unitarian Universalist history. In this presentation, I offer one take on a different story--the extent to which distinctively Universalist theologies, identities, and cultures lived on after consolidation.

The UU consolidation was asymmetrical--while Unitarians and Universalists had been roughly equal in number in the last decades of the nineteenth century, by 1961 there were twice as many Unitarians as Universalists. Unitarian institutions were stronger prior to consolidation, and that imbalance has increased in the years since, with a disproportionate number of heritage Universalist congregations closing their doors in addition to the heritage Universalist seminaries.

But what about the distinctive theologies that Unitarians and Universalists brought to consolidation?

In the years prior to consolidation, Unitarians debated the practical consequences of merger while Unitarians contemplated its existential implications. For Unitarians, the primary question was whether merger would accelerate or retard the numerical growth the denomination had been experiencing since the end of World War II; a secondary question was how it would affect the long-term trend from liberal Christianity toward religious humanism. Unitarians' answers to these questions determined their feelings about merger, but they rarely worried that their identity as Unitarians would be threatened. By contrast, Universalists worried primarily about Universalist identity, regardless of whether they supported consolidation. These worries have never ceased: after the closure of the historically Universalist seminaries and continuing decline in many historically Universalist congregations, many champions of Universalism regard a truly equal partnership of the two traditions as an "unfulfilled dream," as David Bumbaugh put it in his fiftieth anniversary address.

It is not easy to determine whether the worries about Universalist survival were justified, because there is no universally accepted definition of the essential Universalist identity. It is noteworthy, though, that two vocal Universalist participants in the merger debate, one strongly opposed to the merger and the other cautiously in favor, offered similar accounts in essays published in the *Universalist Leader* in 1958 and 1959. I refer to Albert Q. Perry, leader of the anti-merger campaign, and Gordon McKeeman, who would later serve Unitarian Universalism as president of Starr King School for the Ministry, a school with Unitarian roots.

Perry's article on "The Uniqueness of Universalism" identified an emphasis on love as the hallmark of Universalism. "We believe in love," he wrote, "cosmic love as the creative force and human divine love as the law of life," adding that "*the innate and historic mission of the church is to inspire love rather than to dispense truth.*" Perry also used the phrase "inclusive optimism" to describe this theology, and on this basis he claimed that "Universalists will logically concern themselves with peace before justice, with human values rather than institutionalized society, with tolerance rather than right, and with individual fulfillment rather than social change." Universalists were naturally "majority-minded," he went on, implying that Unitarians preferred churches that were instruments of "a disciplined or defined minority." Drawing the contrast even more pointedly, he said that "Universalism is not naturally a religion of reason," but of emotion: it is welcoming to well-educated

people but not to those who "evaluate life in terms of intellectual standards." And so he concluded that "the best for which we can hope is that discussions of merger will help to clarify a general awareness of our dissimilarity *and to produce a willingness on the part of each to be what it really is. If so, Universalism can face the future with confidence.*"

In his article on "The Place of Hosea Ballou in Present-Day Universalism," Gordon McKeeman offered a similar summary of Universalist theology, which he characterized as "ultimate confidence" in "*cosmic love as a metaphysic and human love as an ethic.*" McKeeman contrasted this Universalist theology with the "rational method" that was the defining feature of the Unitarian tradition and of "liberalism" more generally. Things got confused because both Hosea Ballou and a majority of subsequent Universalists had also embraced the "rational method" as "*a tool for the defense of the doctrine of Universalism.*" This made it easy for people on both sides to imagine that the traditions could comfortably merge with the rational method as its common ground. "The presumption is, that if you put these two Churches together, you will get a liberal church in which the method of discovering truth will be the binding force and the central core. Conclusions, if any, i.e. the faith, will then be sacrificed upon the altar of a common method. . . . If this is what we want, we can have it; but Universalism as it was, the institutional expression of ultimate confidence, can disappear in the process." For McKeeman, this risk was not a reason to reject consolidation; it was just a warning about what to emphasize in the process.

Both Perry and McKeeman expressed the UU difference in a nutshell: we are the love people, they are the reason people. This formulation raises two questions: first, does it accurately express divergent emphases between Unitarianism and Universalism prior to consolidation? And second, which emphasis has predominated since consolidation? In search of preliminary answers, I conducted an experiment. Since I happen to have the entire anthology as a Word document, I did a simple search for the word "love" and looked for differences between Unitarian and Universalist texts. You may be thinking that this is not an entirely scientific method, since as editor I had the final say about what selections would appear in the anthology! You'll just have to take my word for it that I did not think of this experiment until after we'd selected the texts, and that I did not cook the books. But I would also encourage you, if you are intrigued by my analysis, to develop your own experiments, perhaps using a different sample of Unitarian and Universalist texts, to test my conclusions.

I found that Perry and McKeeman were right to perceive a significant difference between the two traditions, though to say that one emphasized love while the other emphasized reason does not quite get at the crux of the difference. I did not find a dramatic difference in the overall number of uses of the word "love" between Universalist and Unitarian texts: the anthology contains rather more Unitarian than Universalist sources, and accordingly most of the uses of "love" appear in Unitarian texts. Uses of the word "love" were also spread very evenly across the full chronology of the collection. "Reason," by contrast, was somewhat concentrated in the early parts of the chronology, with about 75 percent more uses in volume one than volume two, and only 18 percent of uses occurring since consolidation, despite the fact that 29 percent of the anthology is devoted to that time period. But I did not have time to analyze uses of "reason" in depth.

One sign of denominational difference is that the texts that used the word "love" *most* frequently tended to be Universalist, with Hosea Ballou's *Treatise on Atonement* coming in first with twenty-five uses. More importantly, Universalist texts were more likely to use the word "love" in their opening or concluding paragraphs, and almost all of them had the same thing to say about love. Across the theological spectrum of Universalism, from Gerrard Winstanley to George de Benneville to Hosea Ballou to Olympia Brown to Quillen Shinn to Clarence Skinner, the affirmation was the same: God is love and love is God, and divine love triumphs over all. "God is love itself," wrote Winstanley in the first Universalist text written in English. De Benneville referred to God as "my Lord and my Love" and prayed to be "swallowed up in the ocean of love." Hosea Ballou rebutted the Anselmian theory of the atonement by insisting that God's attitude toward humanity is love from beginning to end, and that divine love always precedes human love. Lucy Barns, writing to a non-Universalist friend, began by insisting that "The scriptures declare that God is love." Thomas Whittemore called the "love of God" a "soul-inspiring theme" that was sure to make Universalists "happy." Quillen Shinn noted that "Universalism affirms a perfect God. He is perfectly good. He is love. He is perfect love." Elsewhere, he asserted that "the force behind all forces and all worlds is love." Clarence Skinner, in many respects quite different from Shinn, echoed Shinn when he asserted that "The Universalist idea of God is that of a universal,

impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known." Reflecting on recent scientific discoveries near the end of her life, Olympia Brown affirmed that "earth and air are filled with proofs of Divine love." And Japanese Universalist Sempo Ito, writing for the *Universalist Leader* in 1905, affirmed that "The goodness, wisdom, justice and power of God ought to be combined with another attribute, that is, a fatherly love, which alone satisfies the deepest want of the human heart."

The same affirmation appears in most Universalist confessional documents. The 1790 Articles of Faith began by invoking "the unchangeable, and universal love of God to mankind," and then affirmed that God is "infinite in all his perfections; and that these perfections are all modifications of infinite, adorable, incomprehensible and unchangeable love." It concluded by celebrating the freedom of "the long imprisoned truth of God's Universal Love to Mankind." The Winchester Profession, more succinct, opened by expressing its belief "that there is one God, whose nature is Love." Adin Ballou's *Standard of Practical Christianity* similarly began, "We are Christians. Our creed is the New Testament. Our religion is love."

Unitarian references to love are far more diverse. Many of the foundational thinkers in the Unitarian tradition scarcely mentioned love at all: I found one reference to love in Servetus and none in the other sixteenth-century Unitarians; two in Charles Chauncy, one in Ebenezer Gay, and none in Jonathan Mayhew or Joseph Priestley.

When Unitarians wrote about love, they typically referred not to God's love, but to *human* love, directed either to God or to other humans. In *Formation of the Christian Character*, for example, Henry Ware Jr. sought to inculcate in his readers "a warm, glowing feeling of preference and desire; a feeling, which attaches itself in love to the Father of all and to all good beings." Hajom Kissor Singh, founder of Khasi Unitarianism, mentioned love several times in his catechetical booklet, all with reference to the human duty "to love, to obey, and to fear and revere God" and to love our fellow humans. And in the middle of the twentieth century, the General Alliance of Unitarian Women, in a pamphlet describing "the liberal woman of today," asserted that "Love is at the center of her life," then spelled this out in a series of duties: "The world becomes her country; every child her responsibility; all uplifting influences to her church. To her, religion is a way of life to be lived here and now."

The idea that humans have a duty to love God and one another solidified early on into a Unitarian formula. In his "Transient and Permanent" sermon, Theodore Parker affirmed that "an undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God, and love to man." He reiterated the point several times in the sermon, defining "pure Religion" as "the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance." Parker was echoing Matthew 22:36-40, in which Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment and replied with two: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. William Channing Gannett followed Parker's model closely in the list of "Things Commonly Believed Among Us" that he prepared for the Western Unitarian Conference. He affirmed both that "Unitarianism is a religion of love to God and love to man" and that "to love the good and live the good is the supreme thing in religion." This formula was by no means uniquely Unitarian: in many ways it marks the dividing line between orthodox Protestantisms that stress divine grace and liberal Protestantisms that prioritize human action. Through a wider google search I found it in several Universalist texts from the 1830s and 1840s, including a portion of Thomas Whittemore's *Plain Guide* that we did not include in the anthology. But it didn't make its way into any confessional or tradition-defining texts, and from Gannett's time onward "love to God and love to man" was a common refrain primarily in Unitarian circles.

When Unitarians wrote about God's own love, they most typically included it in a list of more or less equal divine attributes. Henry Whitney Bellows wrote that "God's Word is God's power, God's Wisdom, God's love made known in the great language of natural and supernatural events." In the *Divinity School Address*, which also contained several references to human love, Emerson affirmed that "all things proceed out of this same spirit, which is differently named love, justice, temperance, in its different applications, just as the ocean receives different names on the several shores which it washes." When Henry Ware Jr. rebutted Emerson by insisting that only a *person* could be worthy of such names, he confirmed Emerson's assumption that love is one divine attribute among many: "Thus, for example, veracity, justice, love, are sentiments or obligations which spring up from the relations subsisting between different beings, and can exist only where there are persons."

To be fair, a few Unitarians did speak of God's love in a more or less Universalist manner. The obvious example, which has perhaps already occurred to some of you, is William Ellery Channing's Sermon on "Unitarian Christianity," in which he lays particular stress on God's fatherly and benevolent character, accepting only theological claims that portray God as consistently loving toward humanity. Even here, however, many of the actual uses of the word "love" refer to human love for God. Channing's concern was to offer a picture of God that humans would be able to love, not to persistently remind humans that God loves us. Thus, he said that the doctrine of God's unity was "most favorable to religious awe and love," that Calvinist Christologies were "unfavorable to a love of Christ," and that predestinarian doctrines turn God into "a being whom we cannot love if we would, and whom we ought not to love if we could."

I didn't find many echoes of this language in the other Channing texts included in the anthology. In "Likeness to God," it flows into the more typical Unitarian theme--the primary implication of God's love, for Channing, is not its triumph over evil, but the corresponding duty of humans to express a similar love.

James Freeman Clarke echoed Channing's stress on God's parental love in the first of his five points of the new theology, which affirmed that the "essence" of God's fatherhood is "the love of the father for his children."

But others wrote in ways that seemed to undermine any theology of love. I already mentioned Emerson's inclusion of "love" in a longer list of divine attributes, but sometimes he used these lists in a way that almost seemed to submerge all the attributes in something vaguer. Thus, in *Nature*, he invoked "the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely." And our selection from *Self Reliance* includes five uses of "love" only because it includes Emerson's notorious attack on abolitionist sentimentality: "If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbados, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.'" Rough and graceless would be such greeting, but truth is handsomer than the affectation of love. Your goodness must have some edge to it--else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pulses and whines." To be sure, this passage does not attack love, but only what Emerson regarded as a distortion of love--but its effect, I think, was to instill a certain skepticism of love talk in much of the post-Transcendentalist tradition.

Theodore Parker, always a bit more pious than his friend Emerson, expressed a mild worry about love skepticism in his ministerial memoir. When Unitarians ceased "to fear the great and dreadful God" of the Old Testament, they had not quite learned to love the All-Beautiful and Altogether Lovely of the Universe."

In the middle of the twentieth century, James Luther Adams--drawing on the work of his friend Paul Tillich--contributed a new wrinkle to the Unitarian discussion of love by linking God's love to both power and law. "Power has always a double character," he wrote, "first, as the expression of God's law and love; second, as the exercise of man's freedom. To understand power as God's law and love is to understand it as Being." This formulation, which was further developed in late 1960s discussions about power and love in the context of Black liberation, rendered the Unitarian view of love as theological and not merely ethical, but it also reinforced the longstanding Unitarian reluctance to treat love as the supreme value.

And so it happened that the word "love" scarcely appeared in the Unitarian discussions of merger that we included in the anthology. (An exception that proves the rule is that Dana Maclean Greeley mentioned "the infinite love of God" in describing Hosea Ballou's theology.) Love appeared just twice in the Constitution of the UUA, both of them in the line that generated the most debate. This was the second of the Association's six purposes: "To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man." This line generated controversy over how to refer to the source of the idea of "love to God and love to man." In the original it was identified as a "universal truth taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition." Some wanted to attribute it to "our Judeo-Christian heritage," and "the Judeo-Christian heritage" was settled upon as a compromise. What everyone seems to have forgotten was how

specifically Unitarian the phrasing was, tracing, as I have shown, to William Channing Gannett and the Western Unitarian Conference, and behind them to Theodore Parker.

In the thick of the debate over how much to emphasize continuity with the Christian past, I'm not sure how many people noticed this, but Albert Perry did. He acknowledged that the statement of purpose "was intended to be a compromise between the traditional statements of the Universalist and Unitarian denominations," and conceded that "we had no right to expect more than a compromise." "However," he went on, "it must be noted that entirely omitted was the optimistic emphasis which, to my way of thinking, was our most significant and valuable characteristic. In place of the affirmation which proclaimed that love was divine or that God was love, and that this force was 'unconquerable,' we have an exhortation to love God and man whatever we expect the results to be." This was "the least idealistic statement ever made by any organized religious movement" and "a complete and abject surrender of a great and creative faith." Interestingly, he went on to enact something like his own complete and abject surrender, conceding that consolidation was all but inevitable and urging local churches to "be far more specific" about their "nature and mission."

McKeeman, for his part, was too preoccupied by the main debate over Unitarian Universalism's relation to Christianity to notice what Perry had noticed. His response to the new Constitution was mostly positive, and he took special pains to stress that "*we have not voted Jesus out*," since "Our heritage is a part of us as much as the multiplication table and the alphabet are a part of us. *Our* heritage includes an insistence upon greater breadth, greater understanding, greater generosity of spirit. So long as we continue these things, we shall be true to our heritage *and* to the heritage of Jesus, whether we name him by name or not." Somehow, over the course of the consolidation debate, McKeeman had come to understand the Christian heritage in more Unitarian terms, as a call to certain forms of human behavior rather than as a vision of divine reality. The UUA may not have voted Jesus out, but perhaps it had voted out the "ultimate confidence" that McKeeman had once treasured.

But what happened after consolidation? Did love survive, and more specifically did "ultimate confidence" in divine or cosmic love survive? I found roughly the same proportion of references to love after consolidation as before. Some of these, of course, were references to sex, which became a much more common topic post-consolidation. Several participants in the black empowerment movement in the late 1960s reflected on the interplay between love and power, typically emphasizing the latter.

I also found a number of sources in which Universalists were still talking like Universalists and Unitarians like Unitarians. Universalist Angus MacLean affirmed that "love is the greatest thing in the world." The Constitution of the UU Church of the Philippines, which has Universalist roots, similarly affirmed that "there is only one God who is the God of love." Khazi Unitarian theologian Pearl Geen Marbaniang, speaking at an ICUU symposium, echoed the classic Unitarian position, stressing that the object of Unitarian religion "is to disseminate the religion of love and worship of the one true God and the love and service of man."

On the other hand, Transylvanian theologian Elek Rezi, speaking at the same symposium, balanced what I have identified as the Universalist and Unitarian themes by affirming first that "above all, God is LOVE," and second that love "works in us to three directions: Love to God, Love to human beings and Love to world or universe." This is all the more interesting given the lack of emphasis on love in the sixteenth-century Unitarian sources.

Beginning in the 1970s, and accelerating in the present century, several people have developed a new theology of love that integrates the Universalist and Unitarian approaches by effacing the boundary between divine and human love. Perhaps the most powerful example of this is the earliest, Carolyn McDade and Lucile Longview's liturgy for the water ritual. This goddess ritual is directed toward "she who is ourselves," and thus every reference to love can be understood as referring both to the goddess and to human beings. "It is she who gives birth to all we are and can be--to ideas, thoughts, words and songs--to foggy shaped longings and to fiery rage and to all-encompassing love."

- o "And to celebrate through new rituals, knowing that our energy and our love are transforming
- o Water, I yearn for you in some place
- o deeper than hope.

- o surer than faith.
- o some place I only know must be
- o she source of love.

The 1986 Principles and Sources, intentionally or not, balanced Universalist and Unitarian emphases by invoking "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

During her long service as president of Starr King School for the Ministry, Rebecca Parker both deepened Unitarian Universalists' connection to process theology, and expressed that theology in terms that highlighted "love" as the primary characteristic of the relatedness of humans and the divine. Parker's friend and mentor Charles Hartshorne, for example, had rarely used the word "love" himself, but Parker used it frequently in summarizing his position: "God is supreme not in knowing everything but in receiving everything, not in controlling everything but in imagining everything. God is supreme in feeling, supreme in responsiveness. God is the subjective moment that holds the whole together with the greatest love and the cosmic embrace that tenderly welcomes all. . . . In process thought, God's love is a compassionate, embracing love that receives everything. It is also an erotic, enticing love that lures. But God is not an all-determining creator. Each creature is self-creating in relationship with all other creatures, including God, so we are co-creators with the Divine. We make God, as much as God makes us." It would not, however, be correct to characterize Parker's position as a rehabilitation of Hosea Ballou's ultimate confidence, for she has also accented the process tradition's limitations on divine power, stressing that some losses, even the death of Jesus, cannot be fully repaired and must simply be mourned.

Thandeka, another theologian with roots in the process tradition, has similarly used the formula of "love beyond belief" to invite Unitarian Universalists to find a common experiential ground amidst our theological diversity. I'm not sure whether Thandeka ever says this explicitly, but it seems to me that a "love beyond belief" could be understood as either divine or human in origin, though in her emphasis on this love as primarily *experienced*, rather than *practiced*, she tilts toward the Universalist side of the scale.

A similar tilt can be found in Bill Sinkford's well-known "elevator speech" on Unitarian Universalism, included in his sermon on "The Language of Faith": "The Unitarian side of our family tree tells us that there is only one God, one Spirit of Life, one Power of Love. The Universalist side tells us that God is a loving God, condemning none of us, and valuing the spark of divinity that is in every human being. So Unitarian Universalism: one God, no one left behind." Here Sinkford actually (and, I assume, unintentionally) smuggles a rather Universalist doctrine of God into his account of the Unitarian side of our heritage. What's more, in his exposition of the personal experiences that led him back to his Unitarian Universalist roots, he comes very close to affirming Ballou's ultimate confidence: "I knew that I did not have to walk that path alone, that there is a love that has never broken faith with us and never will."

Perhaps the single most influential exposition of the contemporary Unitarian Universalist theology of love is Jason Shelton's hymn, "Standing on the Side of Love," coupled with the social justice campaigns and popular t-shirts that it has inspired. To me, this is the clearest evidence that our post-consolidation faith has tilted decisively against the rationalist method that Perry and McKeeman worried might overwhelm Universalist love. It is simply inconceivable to me that UUs today would sing or march about "standing on the side of reason." Yet Standing on the Side of Love is more in the Unitarian tradition of Parker and Gannett than the Universalist tradition of Ballou and Shinn. The hymn says nothing about what God or the cosmos is doing, or about the grounds for ultimate confidence: it is simply a rousing call to human action. But there's another twist--in response to concerns expressed by disability rights activists, Shelton is in the process of changing the hymn to "Answering the Call of Love." This tilts the emphasis away from human beings and toward a vaguely defined divine or cosmic power that calls us, and Shelton has described this change as both more sensitive and "better theology."

In sum, it is not at all clear to me where Unitarian Universalism today stands in relation to the classic Universalist affirmation of "cosmic love as the creative force" and source of "ultimate confidence." My sense is that most of us are vaguely embarrassed by the title of non-UU Universalist Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*. But I'd

like to conclude by suggesting that we should not be embarrassed. Love *does* win, in this universe in which new life continually springs not from rational reflection but from the ecstatic intermingling of bodies. Love wins in a world in which breast-feeding is far more common than child sacrifice, even if you wouldn't know it by reading history books or newspapers or scriptures. Love wins in a world where, even in the face of global warming, forests and deer and coyotes are returning to much of North America. To say that love wins does not require any particular stance about what happens after death, and it is not a covert way of reasserting Christian monotheism. There are monotheist, pantheist, humanist, and naturalist ways of saying that love wins, just as there are monotheist, pantheist, humanist, and naturalist ways of saying that reason wins or power wins or only some of us get to win.

I would not want to be part of a church that turned "love wins" into a dogma and excluded everyone who disagreed. But I would like to be part of a church where those of us who do believe this are not afraid to preach it. Please consider yourself invited to do so.

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