



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Revolution or Revelation

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This has been an unusual summer, to put it politely. There have been days this summer when the arc of the moral universe has felt especially long.

That phrase, often attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was actually something he borrowed from a Unitarian preacher, Theodore Parker, an early leader in our movement. Parker was a rebel against the Bible-focused, Christianity-based roots of Unitarianism and brought our faith towards the dogma-free, fiercely inclusive one we know today.

Parker became a minister in the 1830s and led his Boston-area parish in the belief that god was benevolent and all people were inherently good. To Parker, Jesus was an inspired but ordinary man and everyday people were divine (you can understand why this made him a controversial preacher). But these beliefs aligned with emerging Transcendentalism, a movement he became a leader of. He was denounced as “non-Christian” by many, including some of his fellow Unitarians.

Parker remained steadfast, and his congregants—like suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, and authors Julia Ward Howe and Louisa May Alcott—were moved by his leadership, even as he regularly infused social theory and statistics to fill his sermons.

Parker was an avid and vocal abolitionist, regularly stirring up what John Lewis might call “good trouble,” by advocating for resistance against slavery, even through violence if necessary. Yes, Parker enjoyed his second amendment rights, and he financed weapons sales for free state militias and would call on fellow abolitionists to fight back—with guns—in efforts to protect escaping slaves.

While Dr. King would not have been on board with Parker’s embrace of violence, he was inspired by his resistance to old ways of thinking. It was from one of Parker’s Ten Sermons of Religion, titled “Of Justice and the Conscience,” where King borrowed his famous phrase. Speaking about the patterns of history, Parker says in that sermon:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long.

This belief, that the world is fundamentally tilted towards the benefit of us all, captivated Dr. King as it did Barack Obama who quoted King quoting Parker often in his first campaign for President. In 2009, Parker’s words were stitched into a rug of the President’s favorite quotations that today lies in the Oval Office. It’s been a century since a Unitarian lived in the

White House but the words of one Unitarian have been there in the heart of power for the last seven and a half years.

That shouldn't surprise us. The story of Unitarian Universalism is intertwined with the story of America. Many of our Founding Fathers and often-overlooked Founding Mothers were Unitarians, including both Presidents Adams. Their descendants would go on to lead the Abolition, Transcendental, and Suffrage movements that laid the groundwork for the civil rights, feminist, and LGBT rights movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. The growing prison reform and mental health reform movements in the US today are the legacies of early movements led by Unitarians Dorothea Dix and Horace Mann.

Since the days of Parker, many Unitarians and later Unitarian Universalists have felt the call to choose our faith because of our shared belief in the universal goodness of people and our priority of life on earth over life after death. Unlike so many other faiths, ours is one chosen because of what we agree to covenant together, not because of what was written in stone, or a book, handed to us by a prophet or a guru. Our principles weren't enshrined thousands of years ago but written and re-written by people just like us.

I borrowed the title of today's sermon from a line in a song from *Hamilton*. Angelica Schuyler, sister-in-law to Alexander Hamilton and correspondent of Thomas Jefferson, says to Aaron Burr: "You want a revolution? I want a revelation. Now listen to my declaration: we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. And when I meet Thomas Jefferson I'm going to compel him to include women in the sequel."

Of course, 19th Amendment aside, there has never been a proper sequel to the Declaration of Independence or the male pronoun-heavy Constitution. But I think our Seven Principles come pretty close.

While the original principles were adopted by UUs in 1960, embarrassingly, they included somewhat sexist language—words like "mankind" and "brotherhood." More than 20 years later, a group of UU activists, mostly but not all women, began a revision process that eventually brought us the Seven Principles as we know them today.

In addition to the de-gendering of the Principles, these ardent agitators of the late 70s and early 80s also pulled our faith towards an explicit acknowledgement that Unitarian Universalism is not exclusively a derivation of Judeo-Christian traditions, but rather that what we know about ourselves, our world, the universe, or a higher power can be informed from many sources of knowing.

The idea of knowing is what prompted me to select today's reading¹ about earthquakes. It was not to scare you but to share with you what I found most fascinating about it: that as much as we know about our world, there is still so much to know, and not just for our friends in the Pacific Northwest. As summer fires blaze amid an unending drought in Southern California, we sit on land that long before it belonged to the US, the Republic of California, Mexico or

Spain, was once home to the Tongva, the Tataviam, and the Chumash people. What did we neglect to ask the original stewards of this land? What do we not know?

Even under the sun's blaze and politicians' rage this summer, there are those who say that the world isn't falling apart, it isn't getting worse, it's just that we know more than ever about what's happening now. Whether it's a terror attack across the world, a mass shooting across the country, or a raging fire in our own backyard, we know about it right away. We can hear the stories of those impacted and feel their pain in our palms as we hold our phones where we can see it all unfold. Maybe things aren't as bad as they seem. Maybe we're just better informed.

Whether that's true or not it doesn't change the fact that this is a challenging time for our nation. It certainly doesn't help that an openly bigoted person is running for the highest office in our country. This isn't about picking sides, this is about getting off the sidelines.

At a time when we face problems like we never have before, UUs are needed like we never have been before. We need to show up so that when we're asked "what did you do in 2016?" we can be proud of the answer. Not only because our neighbors will like us or because we can look our children in the eye, but because standing up with love in a time of so much hate is how each of us can live that fourth principle of a responsible search for truth and meaning, while embodying the second: justice, equity, and compassion in our relations.

There is no doubt that these have been changing times for Neighborhood Church. Change is hard and it can lull us into passivity, overwhelm us by making us uncertain of where to start. It can prompt us to question our commitment or even our faith. But change does not diminish the sound of the call to action.

This is a call UUs have always answered before. Whether it was Abigail Adams during the American Revolution, or Theodore Parker during the time of Abolition, Lucy Stone and the early movement for women's rights, James Reeb in the Civil Rights movement, or this congregation in the year of Proposition 8, UUs have always stood up for what we know is true.

I'm not just talking about taking to the streets, or hashtagging the hell out of your Facebook page, or making sure your congressperson knows your name. That's good too. It's an awkward thing to talk about but we've got to open our pockets. Even now, across the country attendance is down at UU churches and coffers are getting smaller. We see the world of politics and we know that liberal people are good at raising money, so religious liberals should be good at raising money too. Yes, it is uncomfortable to think of ourselves as a faith that tithes incomes like Evangelicals or Latter Day Saints, but there's a reason those faiths are powerful constituencies and valuable voting blocks. We might be in the Oval Office, but we're on the rug, it's been 100 years since we've been sitting behind the desk.

Imagine if every time we heard someone's inherent worth and dignity being challenged— either because their sexual orientation made them a victim of a hate crime in a state where

leaders are actively trying to take away their rights, or because their race made them a target for unlawful police violence that some still want to deny exists, or simply because they were born on the wrong side of privilege—imagine if when we heard about these things we tapped our phones to send \$27 to the UUSC, or the UUA, or Neighborhood Church.

We hold our seventh principle dear—that we are part of an interdependent web of life—but we would be naive to think that we’re a match for those interests that don’t care about our environment unless we put up some cash to back our fight. To go green, we gotta bring the green.

To be clear, I am not here to canvas you. This is not a fundraising speech. But make no mistake: this sermon is a challenge. “The arc of the moral universe is long and it may bend towards justice, but it doesn’t bend on its own.”

It may not be easy; it probably won’t be. But we know that when times are hard the only thing that hardens in us is our resolve to fight for what we believe, for what we know to be true: that there is an inherent worth and dignity of every person no matter what they look like, where they come from, what they choose to believe in, or who they love.

While that belief may have once sparked a revolution, this is not a call for a new one. As bad as things may seem, we are lucky to live in a time of the revelation that Angelica Schuyler was waiting for. Yes, all humans are created equal, and we know it to be true, not because it fell out of the sky but because we covenant together to affirm it to each other as part of our living tradition. It is a belief inextricable from our California Dream, the American Dream, the dreams we all have for ourselves and our children, shared around the world regardless of nationality or creed.

It is our principles that allow me to stand before you and say I proudly choose this faith because I know this faith loves me just as I know it loves you.

While we may be tested, we only fail if we turn our backs on our community.

This is where we start and this is the time to do it.

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-really-big-one>