

## “Faith of Our Fathers – and Mothers”

by Rev. Dr. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.

*9 October 2005*

*All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church – Shreveport, LA 71106*

A young man stopped by the church one afternoon last week. He'd been riding by on his bike, and had seen our sign. When I learned that he was there and that he was interested in finding out about Unitarian Universalism. I finished my phone call and went out to greet a tall, smiley young man who had without a doubt been engaging in some kind of strenuous exercise. We strolled down into this sanctuary. I told him the story of the chalice, and was beginning to give him a brief rundown of our principles and history, when he stopped me and asked, “But isn't your name contradictory? Unitarian means one, and Universal means everybody. I don't get it.” Loving his sincere curiosity, I agreed that it did indeed appear to be a contradictory term, that it is indeed cumbersome and awkward to enunciate, and then I launched into an explanation of how and why the Unitarians and Universalists had merged in 1961. He listened politely and intently. But I could tell that my historical synopsis hadn't convinced him that we didn't need a marketing consultant to fix us up with a name that has only a few syllables, a name that is self-explanatory to the uninitiated. I liked him a lot, and found myself wishing he weren't completing his thesis and moving back to California.

Very few of our congregations express much interest in learning about our Unitarian Universalist history, in spite of the fact that, except for some of the New England churches, most of our members have come to us from other denominations, or with no previous religious affiliation. Now, I promise not to overdose you with history today. But learning about extraordinary contemporary and historical people helps me to realize how courageous people can be and how their courageous actions have contributed to freedom of thought, learning, and to the growth of democracy through questioning the ideas and the power of authoritarian churches and authoritarian governments.

Our faith grew out of the traditions of the great prophets in the Hebrew Bible – Abraham, Moses, Amos, Micah and others.

Our faith grew out of the ideas and examples of that great prophet, Jesus, who transformed the world by insisting that everyone, including the poor, children, the handicapped, and women were all equal in the eyes of God.

Our faith grew out of great struggles to understand the nature of God, and the nature of Jesus. During the time that Constantine united the Christian church with acceptance of a common creed, in 325 of the Common Era, a man called Arius had argued that Jesus was not equal to God. Arius lost the argument, and so the Nicene Creed, or Apostles Creed, is recited in many Christian churches today. Those who agreed with Arius were branded as heretics. They are the spiritual ancestors of modern Unitarianism.

About a thousand years later, Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. Luther asserted that anybody could communicate with God directly, without a priest as an intermediary. He called this “the priesthood of all believers” and it is one of the cornerstones of Unitarian and Universalist faith. Each person can decide for himself about the truth or falsehood of doctrines and prophets, and whether the authority of the Church is divine. Michael Servetus, in 1531, argued that Church doctrines were inconsistent with the historical Jesus. Servetus was burned at the stake in 1553, by followers of John Calvin, at Calvin’s instigation, but that’s another story.

In Poland during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Faustus Socinus posited that “Jesus saved men not by dying for them, but by setting an example for them to follow,” and that reason should be used to interpret the Bible instead of dogma. Socinus and his followers rejected the Deity of Jesus, the Trinity, the total depravity of man, and they argued that everlasting punishment for sins was invalid and untrue.

Francis David, was the leader of the first church to use the Unitarian name, in Kolosvar, Transylvania. David said, “We need not think alike to love alike.” He convinced his king to issue an edict in 1568 that “No one shall be made to suffer on

account of his religion, since faith is the gift of God.” No persecutions. In England, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Locke, John Milton, and Isaac Newton all opposed religious intolerance and argued for diversity of opinions.

When different religious groups came to America, the Pilgrims established their church in Plymouth in 1620 – the oldest Protestant church in North America. It was a Congregationalist Church, and in 1802, the members voted to become Unitarian. Joseph Priestley, the minister and scientist who discovered oxygen, founded the first church to use the Unitarian name...and you can visit his home in Northumberland Pennsylvania, where he conducted worship services.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, people of all denominations and persuasions – and many Unitarians (who consisted mostly of liberal Congregationalists) -- argued vehemently about the nature of God, Jesus, sin redemption, salvation, heaven, hell and who got to go there. The Calvinists said that each person’s salvation was determined by God before birth. These people were called the “elect” and guess who they were--the Calvinists. Some people in England and America protested “predestination” and emphasized the higher qualities of human nature and the loving rather than the punishing attributes of God. One of these “Universalists,” Dr. George DeBenneville, came to Pennsylvania in 1741 and preached that “the promise of universal Christianity is that all men will finally be redeemed by the love of God.” Another Universalist, John Murray, landed on the New Jersey shore some years later, and formed another Universalist church. Murray led a group of Universalists to contest the right of the state to raise taxes to benefit the established Church of England. The Universalists won, and struck a blow for religious liberty.

One of my favorite Universalists was Hoseah Ballou, a self-educated man who wrote a long essay – the Treatise on Atonement, in which he rejected the Trinity, the fall of man, the depravity of the human race, salvation by faith alone (you had to work for it), and everlasting punishment. Ballou also emphasized Christianity as a rational religion that allowed people to think freely.

Theodore Parker was one of our finest preachers, and he was active in the anti-slavery movement. So was Horace Mann, who spearheaded nonsectarian public education in the United States, and founded one of the first asylums for the mentally ill.

As for the women -- our spiritual mothers -- Olympia Brown was the first woman ordained by the Universalists in 1863, and Celia Burleigh by the Unitarians in 1871. Most of the men didn't want to leave the comfort and culture of the big eastern cities, New England, and the northeast, so a number of Unitarian women ministers struck out for the mid-western frontier. They formed churches and preached for small congregations like circuit riders. They worked for little or nothing. They became known as "the Iowa Sisterhood" and to them goes the credit for the spread of Unitarianism on the frontier and west of the Mississippi River. *Eleven of these women organized or founded fifty-five parishes in ten states.* A lot of them were active in the women's suffrage movement.

These are some of the superheroes who paved the way for us to worship in this beautiful church. These are some of the more significant fathers and mothers of our Unitarian Universalist movement. They have a number of things in common:

- they thought for themselves and valued freedom for others to think
- they questioned traditional explanations of the Bible
- they questioned the authority of established churches and religions
- they worked hard and studied hard
- they followed Jesus rather than the church
- they took risks
- they were committed and dedicated to reasonable explanations
- they cared deeply about their faiths, their God and what it meant to practice any religion
- they practiced what they preached.
- they made a difference
- and they wrestled with the sacred

We are always wrestling with the sacred when we are here. We are always wrestling with important moral issues when we are here.

We come to church here for many reasons –

- to get in touch with our hearts and our inner spirits,
- to provide moral and ethical grounding for our children, and for ourselves
- to learn to forgive, and to be forgiven
- to transform hurt and pain and anger
- to separate the important things in life from the unimportant
- to inspire one another to live more lovingly, more caringly

Take just a few moments to close your eyes and consider why *you* come to church, and what *you* want to experience when you are here...

These are the reasons we have church. And these are the reasons it is important to sustain and expand the work of our church. We realize that we can never do it all. There is always more to do than we can humanly do. But here we have a base for living thoughtfully, spiritually, and lovingly.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism is absolutely necessary to the sustenance and growth of liberal religion. Liberal religion is the kind of religion that our Unitarian Universalist fathers and mothers practiced...Unitarian Universalism is not a static religion. Unitarian Universalism is a faith that *we continue to transform and develop by our own wrestling matches with the sacred*, nurturing the spiritual life, and promoting social justice. I hate to think that there might be no alternative to fundamentalist and evangelical religion in Shreveport.

At the moment, *we* are that alternative – and there are many opportunities to let people know about us. Wouldn't it be wonderful All Souls to set the standard in Shreveport for free thinking, free speech, and development of the spiritual life. I would

like for us to expand programs that teach morals and values along with free thinking and free speech and development of the spiritual life. We can't reach hearts and minds if we don't produce beautiful, sensitive, thoughtful worship services that include a wide variety of music and the arts. We can't reach hearts and minds if we aren't even here. Which brings me to the question – why church? What is the purpose of the church? Why do we come to church? Take a moment and think about it.

It has taken a lot of generosity for you to bring a fulltime minister here. I want to do the very best I can for this congregation. The next few years may not be easy but I am confident that we can let more people know about our liberal religion, our congregation, and this amazing faith that excludes no one, and includes everyone. I believe in this congregation, and I want your participation here to be meaningful to you, and to fill your heart and to inspire you to spiritual growth. Your Board is intelligent, creative, frugal and judicious. They have confidence in you. And although I have been in Shreveport only seven weeks today, I have such confidence and faith in you that I am not at all reluctant or shy about asking for your financial support to operate the church.

I can imagine RE programs filled to capacity, activities and programs that attract new members, and a building that is in good shape to house all those learning adventures. We can keep the faith of liberal religion. We can create our own version of liberal religion. We can move beyond what those superheroes of the past gave to us. We can become superheroes of a faith that is compassionate and strong, caring and practical, inquiring and sharing, a faith that moves beyond reaction to proactive work in this community. We are here because we choose to be here, not because we fear some kind of earthly or unearthly punishment if we don't come to church, or believe the correct thing or follow some creed. When we come here, we create within ourselves an expanded way of viewing the world. I want to see you fulfill your dreams for yourselves and for this church we love so much, and that we will carry the flag of social justice along with us.

For if we do not, who will?

**Benediction**

Let us go from this place

With love in our hearts

With a spring in our step

and with faith in our future

**Go in Peace**