

**Our Universalist Mission:  
Proclaiming a Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Forrest Church**

I've got some good news for you. It is the Universalist gospel.

In fact, from both doctrinal parents, we Unitarian Universalists have inherited a magnificent theological legacy. In sweeping answer to creeds that divide the human family, Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny. That we are brothers and sisters by nature, our Unitarian and especially our Universalist forbears affirmed as a matter of faith, Unitarianism by positing a single creator, Universalism by offering the promise of a shared salvation.

With this life-affirming legacy comes an attendant responsibility, especially today on a shrinking globe where togetherness is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. With a global economy, global communications system, and global nuclear and environmental threats, discrete backyards are a thing of the past. The old idealism is now the new realism. Not that people have caught up with this. Even as we are thrown together by realities that shape our common destiny, centrifugal forces spin us faster and further from one another, fracturing the one world we now experience and jeopardizing our common welfare as never before. By retrenching in old, familiar ground, many religions offer a temporary, idealized refuge from this new reality. This partially explains the appeal of competing fundamentalisms. Yet fundamentalism countermands the requirements of living together in this promising, dangerous new world. To

contend with the forces of fractionalization, 21<sup>st</sup> century theology needs nothing more and requires nothing less than the redemptive carapace of a new Universalism.

The problem is this. Without a cadre of unabashedly evangelical Universalists, the Universalist gospel will languish. This would constitute not only a private sorrow for those of us who call ourselves Unitarian Universalists; it would also represent a shared loss for all who might “serve” (both “receive” and “give”) by founding their lives on Universalist principles. To make good on our theological inheritance, we must somehow find a way to come together and proclaim a Universalism fit for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Two obstacles thwart our fulfillment of this mission. First, Universalism is an exacting gospel. Taken seriously, no theology is more challenging, morally, spiritually or intellectually. Actually to love your enemy as yourself; to see your tears in another’s eyes; to respect, even embrace, otherness, rather than merely to tolerate or, worse, to dismiss it: none of this comes naturally to us. We are weaned on the rational presumption that if two people disagree, only one can be right. This works better in mathematics than it does in theology; Universalism reminds us of that. Yet, even to approximate the Universalist ideal remains devilishly difficult in actual practice. Given the natural human tendency toward division, Universalists run the constant temptation to backslide in their faith. One can lapse and become a bad or lazy Universalist as effortlessly as others become ice-cream social Presbyterians or nominal Catholics.

The second obstacle is intrinsic to Unitarian Universalism itself. Though named after two doctrines, ours is a non-doctrinal faith. By definition, we don't even have to believe in our own name. We can be free from, for, or against whatever we choose. We should be thankful for that. But we also must remember that when others are shouting fire in a crowded theater, freedom alone won't put it out. Only a respect for the worth and dignity of every human being and a shared commitment to the interdependent web of being of which we are a part—each among our guiding principles—present a saving alternative to the perils of internecine division in an ever more fractious world.

Given our commitment to pluralism, Unitarian Universalism should represent the perfect laboratory for modeling amity in a world rife with passions that stem from inevitable differences of belief. Often, however, we too muster more passion for that which divides us than we do for all that unites us. We must ask ourselves this. If, in our communities of faith, we find it difficult to unite under the banner of one over-arching sympathy, how can we hope effectively to counter fundamentalisms of the right and left? How can we presume to contest theologies that divide, not unite, the human family, without a unifying passion of our own, without a deep, shared commitment to our own first principles?

Since to proclaim these principles we must be able to articulate them, tonight I present for your consideration a possible foundation for contemporary Universalist theology, one designed to underpin our diversity in a more intelligible and practicable manner. Though I place my full emphasis here on

theology, everything I say has implications for our commitment to justice as well. Unless we put its implications into practice, Universalism is frivolous, self-denying and moot. That said, what follows is as close to being a formal theological address as I know how to deliver. I shall frame it with two brief personal anecdotes, each of which grounds my Universalism in experience. Between them, the substance of my presentation includes: first, my own particular understanding of religion; second, a critique of the Protestant principle and of the Unitarian tendency to idolize rationalism; third, a brief history of the idea of God; and, finally (and most importantly), as clear a statement as I can make of the elements that might constitute an encompassing Universalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (In the true 21<sup>st</sup> century spirit, at this point I should ask you to take a couple of deep cleansing breaths. Instead, I simply apologize in advance for being a little more serious and long-winded than is my wont on such occasions).

## 1

Three weeks before he died, my father chose the words for his tombstone. Knowing that a slab of solid granite would long outlast living memory, he weighed what message to post for strangers who might visit his neighborhood some century hence. I wasn't privy to his thoughts, but the words he chose give an inkling of what he had in mind. When we wander through graveyards, we weigh our own mortality. Reflecting on this, rather than filling the space on his little pyramid with vainglorious information, my father thought to strike a more

universal chord. As “final instructions,” the words Frank Church left for future generations to ponder are humble words, yet more than worthy of the splendid stone into which we carved them.

I never knew [anyone] who felt self-important in the morning  
after spending the night in the open on an Idaho mountainside  
under a star-studded summer sky.

Don't forget to spend some time in nature,  
where you can bear witness to the wonder of God.

I never thought of my father as a religious man. He quit the Catholic Church when he was fourteen. I sensed that for him the Catholic Church was the one true church; it just happened to be false. Yet, the words on my father's tombstone witness eloquently to the Universalist spirit. By definition, Universalism is not the province of any one sect. In fact, at the root of *all* direct human experience of the Holy are the two essentials for a true Universalist faith: humility and awe.

The word human has a telling etymology, my very favorite. All the words that relate to it are illuminating: *Human; humane; humanitarian; humor; humility; humble;* and, *humus*. From dust to dust, we live and move and have our being. Our kinship is a mortal kinship; the mortar of mortality binds us fast to one another. We may be “valiant dust” as Shakespeare puts it, but whether we perceive ourselves as being spun of stardust or fashioned from earthly clay,

though the human pilgrimage may wind down a million paths, all roads alike lead to the grave. In the temple of Universalism, two great pillars—awe and humility—flank the doors. The doors themselves are birth and death.

I define religion more inclusively than many others do. *Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.* We are not the animal with tools or the animal with advanced language; we are the religious animal. Because we know that we are going to die, we question what life means. Death also throws meaning itself into question, for some people rendering it moot. Yet, for most of us, knowing that we are mortal inspires a search for answers that will remain valid in spite of our mortality. If religion is our response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, *the purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.*

In its original expression (as a development of Christian theology), Universalism advanced the radical notion that all of God's children receive salvation after they die. Interpreted more broadly, Universalism is an inclusive faith, rejecting the divisive notion that people fit into two separate categories: sheep and goats; the saved and the damned. To help shape a Universalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I shall invoke this broader spirit, not the original letter, of our Universalist forbears.

I don't disbelieve in an afterlife; I simply have yet to experience an afterlife and therefore have little to say concerning one. All I know is this. First, nothing (including any imaginable afterlife) could be more amazing than life itself is. Second, life as we know it is impossible without death. And finally, though

theology may begin at the tomb's door—the specter of death prompting reflection on what life means—surely no revelation is more compelling or worth pondering than that of a new-born child emerging from its mother's womb. When “doing theology” I try to remind myself of what my father reminded all of us.

Theologians are wise to close their learned tomes at times and re-open the book of nature. Theology is a human construct. It begins with the miracle of our own existence. If awe and humility are the principal handmaidens of Universalism, beyond all other distinction birth and death remain the sacraments that unite us in a shared mystery.

## 2

This said, though the limitations and intrinsic wonder of human nature may each recommend Universalism as the most overarching and inclusive approach to theology, our many differences in human nurture (in experience and training) mitigate effectively against it. Since the questions we ask of the creation are life-and-death questions, our answers are emotionally charged. It is hard to accept that, if we are right, those who differ from our views can be anything but wrong. In this respect, many contemporary Unitarian Universalists are as culpable as are our more orthodox cousins. We too forget that *we are more alike in our ignorance than we differ in our knowledge*. Before pronouncing our fidelity to Universalism, we must therefore take our own theological inventory.

Let me do this quickly, yet bluntly. In the United States, both Unitarianism and Universalism grew out of the Protestant traditions. Theologian Paul Tillich

defines the Protestant principle as follows: “The first word of religion must be spoken against religion.” This principle serves us well in the necessary work of reforming corrupt religious institutions. Nonetheless, it remains primarily a negative not an affirmative theological impulse. One need only contrast Catholic and Protestant church history to perceive that Protestants are forever cutting themselves into pieces, like cells dividing in exponential fashion, with each division prompted by genetic mutation in the name of evolution, while purporting to advance the cause of higher life.

Theologically, the Universalist principle is precisely the opposite: to unite the many into one. Being Protestant by heritage, we Unitarian Universalists are forever tempted to betray our own first principle.

As long as a century and a half ago, observing the sectarian and spiritually pallid corrosion of a recently minted Unitarianism, Henry Whitney Bellows (my predecessor in the All Souls pulpit) called for a new, more “catholic” (with a small “c”) church, a church animated by the spirit of union rather than driven by the eccentricities of individualism. He published this call in his great address, “The Suspense of Faith.” As you can imagine, his choice of the word “catholic” rose more than a few Unitarian hackles. Yet Bellows was attempting only to call us home to a larger residence. He too was proclaiming a “new Universalism,” a more inclusive, more affirmative, and less Protestant faith.

In recent years, Unitarian Universalism (after the two liberal churches joined together in a “catholic” act of sorts) has remained riven by the Protestant temptation to divide. In fascinating rotation, one group or another among us has

attempted to purify itself from possible contagion or embarrassment by distancing itself from the whole. Witnessing this phenomenon again today, my call this evening is for us to resist this temptation, to instead beat our Protestant swords into Universalist plowshares.

I know that this challenge will prove daunting. After all, by embracing the Protestant principle in its purest form, ever since the Reformation we on the far left wing of the reform movement have been conducting a theological search-and-destroy mission, its purpose being to strip away the trappings of religion in an attempt to restore to faith its intellectual and spiritual integrity. This has been a noble and often salutary effort. But when all is said and done, it remains a little like trying to find the seed of an onion by peeling away its layers. Eventually, nothing is left but our tears.

In Unitarian circles, the Protestant principle may manifest itself in the creation of modern Gnostic—or knowledge-based—religious movements (from Christian Science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to certain of today’s New Age conventicles). It also periodically prompts calls for a retrenchment in 18<sup>th</sup> century Deism or early 20<sup>th</sup> century Humanism. Yet, in almost every instance (howsoever various in expression or form), Unitarian implementation of the Protestant principle comes wrapped in the guise of a more dedicated, if often truncated, rationalism. In marked contrast, Universalism (and indeed Unitarian Transcendentalism) suggests that, by dint of sheer rationality, we cannot come close to apprehending the mystery of being alive and having to die. *Life is a miracle that can’t be explained*

*without explaining it away.* Our most profound encounters lead inexorably from the rational to the transrational realm.

Many leading scientists are far ahead of us in this regard. Some recent discoveries in physics and cosmology make no apparent sense according to known canons of rationality. Probing the mysteries of the universe and the mind, researchers on the cutting edge of knowledge find themselves moving freely between the rational and transrational realms. Where does that leave the poor camp followers, who believe in science but don't embrace mystery? Having traded God for truth, they are left with neither.

Reason and rationality are entirely different things. Drawing from experience, reason dares us to imagine beyond what mere rationality excludes. Rationality excludes only the irrational. There is gain in this exclusion, for much religion today continues to be irrational. That is to say, it bases its rational claims on the evidence of a privileged revelation. Claims of scriptural inerrancy, virgin birth, and creation science with the scriptures, not the cosmos, as primary evidence, limit their rational activity to so closed a circle as to be indeed irrational. But an equally serious charge can be leveled at rational religion, especially in its most radical (almost always reactionary) form. In a principled flight from irrationality, rationalists betray reason by losing sight of the transrational realm, where rationalism is not rejected but transcended. This is the realm of myth and parable, of poetry and paradox. Wholeness cannot be achieved until the two realms—of sign and symbol, of fact and fancy—are explored as one.

The danger of excluding the transrational realm from our field of contemplation is that, by sophisticating our minds against mystery, each irrational Strawman we kill may clear a place for an equally insidious self-delusion. Presuming to understand, even to control, powers so beyond our control and understanding as to be in fact unimaginable, we lose our sense of humility and awe. We take the creation for granted, rather than receiving it with fitting gratitude as an undeserved, unfathomable gift. When rationalism supplants mystery, our imagination and sense of wonder are just as likely to die as are the gods we pride ourselves for having killed.

I confess to having participated in this slaughter myself. At the outset of my ministry, I found confirmation for my own beliefs more in Jefferson's rational, than in Emerson's mystical, Unitarianism. I believed most avidly only in that which I could parse and thereby comprehend. For instance, the ethics of Jesus moved me; the Oversoul did not. I approached the creation as a taxidermist not a worshipper. Even the most fragile and beautiful manifestations of the creation, I examined as a blindered lepidopterist might a butterfly. I netted, chloroformed and mounted them for observation. After long study of my favorite specimens, I could only conclude that butterflies don't fly.

Over the years, I have slowly discovered that the self-confident posture of enlightenment philosophy did not serve me as well as it appears to have served Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and the French philosophes who inspired him brought God home by clipping God's wings, by domesticating mystery and caging it. I know that there are many fine ways to interpret God (or to interpret

the creation without benefit of God); the one that finally worked for me is clearly not for everyone. But to give my Universalism full play, I had to make room in my theology for a more capacious, if unfathomable, power. I had to clear a place for mystery on the altar of my hearth, which before I had crowded with icons to knowledge. As for the walls of my study, the eighteenth century classical lithographs of architectural drawings that I favored while at Divinity School could no longer divert my awareness from the cracking plaster behind them and between. I needed something far more arresting and humbling, something more like Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night."

As a parish minister, this should have come naturally, but it didn't. In some respects, I know religion too well to be anything but suspicious of its answers. God is on the label of every bottle of religious snake oil I have ever tasted. Before I could animate my own Universalism, I therefore had to re-imagine God.

### 3

It is impossible to speak of Universalism without addressing the subject of God. Early Universalists believed that everyone was born to be saved only because they believed that God was too good to damn his own children. To practice and proclaim a 21<sup>st</sup> century Universalism, we need not believe in the old Universalist God—or even employ the word God—but we must have an equally

affectionate relationship with the ground of our being. Otherwise, we will succumb to the temptation to divide it between our own and others' feet.

Today, when people boast to me that they don't believe in God, I ask them to tell me a little about the God they don't believe in. Almost surely, I don't believe in "Him" either. As the ancient Hebrews recognized, God is not even God's name. God is our name for a power that is greater than all and yet present in each: the life force; the Holy; Being itself. God doesn't exist only because we need God; we exist because the universe was pregnant with us when it was born. In miracle and fact, our gestation traces to the beginning of time. Accidents abound, of course. One amino lapse or missed coupling and we would not be in the position to wonder why we are here. Yet, in my experience, only by positing the existence of a power beyond our comprehension can we begin to account for the miracle of being with an appropriate measure of humility and awe.

I recognize that for many people the word "God" has shrunk from repeated use, but we can always re-stretch it. If you can't manage to do this—the "G word" fitting your mind more like a straightjacket than a divine garment—simply substitute another. "Spirit" may work for you, or "the Sacred" or your "Higher Power." So long as the object of your reverence is large enough, it doesn't really matter, not at all.

I will say, however, that in my experience Universalist evangelism may be ill served by the creation of more private and thereby exclusive theological vocabulary. Especially in a country where more than 90% of the people claim to believe in God, it may prove easier to inculcate faith in a larger God than to

displace familiar affections. This aside, there is nothing novel, and certainly nothing blasphemous, about redesigning or renaming God. Responding to life and death questions, seekers have reinvented and thereby rediscovered the Holy throughout the centuries.

Consider our ancestors, the searchers who came before us. Begin with cave dwellers—hunters and gatherers—for whom the greatest imaginable powers were forces of nature. “God” is manifest in fire, therefore, in lightening and in thunder, perhaps even in the game they hunt to provide sustenance. When agriculture replaces hunting and gathering, these Gods turn into Goddesses. Power now lies in reaping and sowing, in the turning of the seasons. Fecundity determines survival, “God” becomes “Goddess;” procreation, creation; birth, life.

Later, with the city-state, power comes wrapped in the robes of authority. God is now Lord or King, protector, enforcer, and judge. A breakthrough in this view of the divine nature comes with the Hebrews, who believe that their God and King is the only God and King. Less an imperialistic than an ethical development, this leads them to attribute their failures not to another stronger God but to their own shortcomings. With Jesus, God becomes Father (in fact, Daddy, or “Abba”), a far more intimate authority figure.

In Western society, the God most unbelievers reject is the traditional Judeo-Christian God: omniscient, omnipotent, just, demanding, capricious on occasion, sometimes even cruel. Yet, aided by the Copernican revolution, for many thoughtful people this God was overthrown centuries ago. As has

happened many times before, God was not therefore dead; God was re-imagined. For instance, when Copernicus displaced us from the center of the universe, in re-imagining God one group of scientists and theologians seized upon a metaphor better suited to their new worldview. Enter God the Watchmaker, who created the world, set it ticking, and then withdrew to another corner of the cosmos. This is the God of the Deists, a God icy and remote, still transcendent but no longer personal.

Today, we are witness to a further scientific revolution, one as profound as that initiated by Copernicus and Galileo half a millennium ago. Having moved from one transcendent God to another (first Lord and Judge, then absentee architect), as a possible focus for 21<sup>st</sup> century theology we now encounter what might best be called a reflexive God, co-creator with us in an unfolding, intricate drama of hitherto unimaginable complexity. This God is not immutable, but ever changing, reaching and growing, even as we change, reach and grow. No longer merely actors on God's stage, we may also be participants in the scripting of God's drama.

Among the metaphors most promising to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Universalist theology is the holograph, which offers both a reflexive and a transcendent image for God. The holograph works in conjunction with a laser, which records images on a photo-plate made up of thousands of tiny lenses. The result is a three-dimensional hologram, like those you have seen in the Haunted House at Disneyland or on your charge card. Mysteriously, if the photo-plate is broken to

bits and only a single shard of the original is employed for projection, the entire image, howsoever faint, will be replicated.

Our bodies too are holographic. Each of our cells contains the full genetic coding or DNA for our whole being, an even more telling metaphor perhaps for the reflexive nature of divinity. Far from unknown to past theologies, the same idea echoes throughout ancient scriptures. *The Realm of God is in a mustard seed. The Father and I are one. Atman (individual consciousness) and Brahman (universal consciousness) are one. The realm of God is within you.* As with Paul's image of the cosmic Christ (one body, many members, each with the same signature of divinity), the holograph suggests God's reflexive nature in a way that transforms our relationship not only with the divine, but with one another as well. Spun with star-stuff, illumined by God, we participate in the miracle we ponder.

A like image from contemporary theology underlies the Gaia hypothesis, with Mother Earth reprising the Goddess in a new way. Even as each organism is a colony of cells and organs that each are marked with the same DNA, might not everything that lives be said to create a larger organism marked with the DNA of God? Another approach, Process theology, responds to such horrors as the Holocaust by tempering the claims of God's omnipotence and omniscience. By this reading—as co-creator of a reality we share—God suffers with us when we suffer and rejoices when we experience honest joy (a view shared by many Liberation theologians as well).

As for the discovery of God, we find evidence for the divine first within ordinary things and in daily encounters. The surest way to find God (the Sacred or the Holy) is to decode our own experiences, not only of beauty (“heaven in a wildflower”) but also in sacraments of pain by which we commune with one another. This represents a third pillar for Universalism. We all suffer. We are broken and in need of healing. We struggle to accept ourselves and forgive others. To adopt the old language, we are all sinners. Aware of our imperfections, we seek more perfect faith, hope, love and justice. At our best, we empathize with one another’s pain and rise together in answer to a higher law. Illumination shines from heart to heart. The Holy—its healing and saving power—we discover within the ordinary. For instance, anyone who embraces the most familiar Universalist definition, namely that “God is love,” discovers God’s nature in his or her own experience of love. This may not mean God is actually love, but it certainly suggests that love is divine.

#### 4

By whatever name one chooses to call “the One,” Universalism offers a clear epistemology for reconciling the One and the many. With this in mind, let me turn to the elements that might constitute a Universalist theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Regardless of the specifics of our various beliefs (both within and

beyond the Unitarian Universalist circle), to proclaim Universalism more persuasively we must strive to establish a firmer platform for our theological claims, one we can affirm with shared clarity and conviction. In this spirit, I offer the following thoughts for your consideration.

To the Universalist, truth in religion is like truth in poetry. Our common text is the creation. Though limited by the depth and field of our vision, we are driven to make sense of it as best we can. So we tell stories, formulate hypotheses, develop schools of thought and worship, and pass our partial wisdom down from generation to generation. Not only every religion, but every philosophy, ideology, and scientific worldview is a critical school with the creation as its text. By whatever name we call its author or co-creator, we are all interpreters of the poetry of God.

Compare this with literary criticism. How various are the ways in which we read a masterpiece. A great piece of literature admits to many levels of interpretation: literal, metaphorical, symbolic, political, structural, moral. Two critics may arrive at radically different interpretations of the same passage, both founding their views on carefully reasoned logic and demonstrating impressive erudition in the course of their proof. Within any given school of criticism, a continuing discussion takes place, sharpening perspectives, issuing in new and relevant discoveries, all of which help to illuminate the nature of the masterpiece. Between schools as well, there exists the possibility of dialogue occasionally promoting a new, more dynamic view from each of two distinctive perspectives.

The same thing holds for competing theologies. Compounding the level of difficulty, here our common text is the creation, the greatest masterpiece of them all. Interpreters with differing approaches, methodologies, and tools struggle to discover who we are, where we have come from, how we got here, where we are heading, and why and how. All work from a set of basic presuppositions. Each has its trusted tools, such as scientific method, dialectic, or revelation. As among literary critics, there is an ongoing discussion within each school and occasional dialogue between schools. Religions adapt to new discoveries in science. Scientists sometimes reach the point of furthest penetration and adopt the mystical language of reverence and adoration. The stakes are high. Of all intellectual contests, none is more charged or dangerous. Each side reckons the score in a different fashion, and there is no mutually accepted guideline for who is winning, even for how to play. Viewed as competition, the only way to secure a final victory is to discount or eliminate one's opponents.

And yet, if there can be many arguable interpretations of a poem, what should this tell us about the cosmos itself? Nothing is more mysterious or more veiled than is the secret of creation. No dogma can begin to comprehend it. Even as a scientific investigator cannot measure the velocity and position of a particle at the same time, the moment we begin to parse the creation we change its apparent nature. Gestalt psychology suggests a like point in object-and-field studies such as that well-known optical illusion of two faces in profile that also outline the shape of a vase. It is possible to go back and forth from one focus to

another, but—though both are before our very eyes—we can't see the faces and the vase at once. In each instance, the investigator becomes part of the experiment, affecting the very data he or she is attempting objectively to collect. Not only are we the interpreters of God's poetry, we are the poem itself.

This doesn't mean that the search for truth or knowledge is in vain. In fact, discoveries such as the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle—pointing out that the experimenter affects the data—are breakthroughs in knowledge. Nor does it mean that all truths are relative (and therefore functionally interchangeable), only that no truth within the compass of human knowledge is absolute or final. That ultimate Truth is not privileged to any one particular religious, philosophical, or scientific system in no way rules out the possible existence of such a Truth (or God). It simply underscores the natural limitations of every human truth claim.

History and our neighbors teach that there are many ways to write and a myriad more to interpret the masterpiece of the creation. This too is a principle of Universalism, indeed its guiding principle: to affirm the discrete beauty of many windows even as Unitarianism (as a doctrine, not a sect) proclaims the one Light. In this spirit—and to assist in constructing a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Universalist Theology—let me suggest a metaphor that helps me to understand and proclaim my Universalist faith, one I introduced in [A Chosen Faith](#) and develop in my most recent book, [Lifecraft](#).

Imagine the world as a vast cathedral. This cathedral is as ancient as is humankind; its cornerstone is the first altar, marked with the tincture of blood and blessed by tears. Search for a lifetime—which is all we are surely given—

and we shall never know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with our gaze.

The builders have labored in this cathedral from time immemorial. Daily, work begins that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who construct it, or the expectant worshipers. Nonetheless, throughout human history, one generation after another has labored lovingly, sometimes fearfully, crafting memorials and consecrating shrines. Untold numbers of these today collect dust in long-undisturbed chambers; others (cast centuries or millennia ago from their once respected places) lie shattered in shards or ground into dust on the cathedral floor. Not a moment passes without the dreams of long-dead dreamers being outstripped, crushed, or abandoned, giving way to new visions, each immortal in reach, ephemeral in grasp.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational, some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the Light shines through.

As with all extended metaphors, this one is imperfect. The Light of God (or Truth or Being Itself) shines not only upon us, but out from within us as well.

Together with the windows, we are *part of* the cathedral, not *apart from* it.

Together we comprise an interdependent web of being. The cathedral is constructed out of star stuff and so are we. We are that part (or known part) of the creation that contemplates itself. Because the cathedral is so vast, our life so short and vision so dim, we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the whole creation. We can explore but a handful of its many chambers. Our allotted span permits us to reflect on the play of darkness and light through remarkably few of its myriad windows. Yet, since the whole is contained in each of its parts, as we ponder and act on insights derived from even a single reflection, we may experience self-illumination. We may also discover or invent meanings that invest both the creation and our lives with coherence and meaning.

A 21<sup>st</sup> century theology based on the concept of one light (Unitarianism) and many windows (Universalism) offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring many different religious approaches, it excludes only the truth-claims of absolutists. This is because fundamentalists—whether on the right or left—claim that the light shines through their window only. Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshipers, they conclude that there is no Light. But the windows are not the Light, only where the light shines through.

One cautionary note. Universalism itself can be perverted in two ways. One is to elevate one truth into a universal truth (“My church is the one true church”); the other is to reduce distinctive truths to a lowest common denominator (“All religion is merely a set of variations upon the golden rule”).

The Universalism I embrace does neither. It holds that the same Light shines through all our windows, but that each window is different. The windows modify the Light, refracting it in various patterns that suggest discrete meanings. Even as one cannot believe usefully in “everything,” to find meaningful expression Universalism must be modified or refracted through the glass of individual and group experience (which by definition will be less than universal). One can be a Buddhist Universalist, a Pagan Universalist, a Humanist Universalist, a Jewish Universalist. On the other hand, one cannot in any meaningful sense be a Universalist Universalist; it is impossible to look out every window. Neither can one be, say, a Universalist Christian; when the modifier of one’s faith becomes its nominative, primary allegiance is relegated to but one part of the whole that encompasses it.

Religion can be dangerous, of course, especially on a shrinking globe where, with discrete backyards a thing of the past, conflicting faith positions contest one another in almost every human precinct. Yet every generation has had its holy warriors, hard-bitten zealots for whom the world is large enough for only one true faith. Terrorists for “Truth” and “God,” not only have they been taught to worship at a single window; they also are incited to demonstrate their faith by throwing stones through other peoples’ windows. Tightly drawn, their logic makes a demonic kind of sense.

- 1) Religious answers respond to life and death questions, which happen to be the most important questions of all.

- 2) You and I may come up with different answers.
- 3) If you are right, I must be wrong.
- 4) But I can't be wrong, because my salvation hinges on being right.
- 5) Therefore, short of abandoning my faith and embracing yours, in order to secure my salvation I am driven to ignore, convert, or destroy you.

Aristotle coined something called the Law of the Excluded Middle. As a logical certainty, he asserted that “A” and “not-A” cannot both be true at one and the same time. By the light of my cathedral metaphor (and also by that of quantum uncertainty), Aristotle is wrong, at least with respect to theology. His logical certitude oversteps the law of experience. Contrast one stained-glass window (its dark center bordered by more translucent panes) with another (configured in the opposite fashion). Though the same light shines through both, they will cast diametrically opposite shadow images on the cathedral floor (“A” and “not-A,” if you will). Even as we cannot gaze directly at the sun, we cannot stare directly into the light of God. All the great world scriptures make this point. No one can look God in the eye. Truth therefore emerges only indirectly, as refracted through the windows of tradition and experience. To a modern Universalist such as myself, this suggests that—since the same light can be refracted in many different ways (even “A” and “not-A”)—the only religious truth claims we can discount completely are those that dismiss all other claims for failing to conform to their own understanding of the creation.

One presumably impartial response to the war of conflicting theological passions is to reject religion entirely, to distance ourselves from those who attempt—always imperfectly—to interpret the Light’s meaning. There are two problems with this approach. One is that such a rejection deprives us of a potentially deep encounter with the mysterious forces that impel our being, thereby limiting our ability to invent and discover meaning. The second is that none of us actually is able to resist interpreting the Light. Whether we choose the windows that enlighten existence for us or inherit them, for each individual the light and darkness mingle more or less persuasively as refracted through one set of windows or another. Attracted to the partial clarification of reality that emerges in patterns of light and the playing of shadows, even people who reject religion are worshipers of Truth as they perceive it. Their windows too become shrines.

Because none of us is able fully to comprehend the truth that shines through another person’s window, nor to apprehend the falsehood that we ourselves may perceive as truth, we can easily mistake another’s good for evil, and our own evil for good. A Universalist theology tempers the consequences of our inevitable ignorance, while addressing the overarching crisis of our times: dogmatic division in an ever more intimate, fractious, and yet interdependent world. It posits the following fundamental principles:

1. There is one Power, one Truth, one God, one Light.
2. This Light shines through every window in the cathedral.

3. No one can perceive it directly, the mystery being forever veiled.
4. Yet, on the cathedral floor and in the eyes of each beholder, refracted and reflected through different windows in differing ways, it plays in patterns that suggest meanings, challenging us to interpret and live by these meanings as best we can.
5. Each window illumines Truth (with a large T) in a unique way, leading to various truths (with a small t), and these in differing measure according to the insight, receptivity and behavior of the beholder.

I am certain that others will refine and improve upon these principles. I offer them as much to promote an ongoing dialogue about the integrity and intelligibility of Universalism for our time as I do to answer the many questions Universalism poses to the inquiring mind. Yet I offer them with complete conviction. If we Unitarian Universalists are unable to recognize the ground that we share, we shall remain only marginally effectual in helping to articulate grounds whereupon all together might stand as children of a mystery that unites far more profoundly than it distinguishes one child of life from any other. To the extent that we fail in this mission, we betray our Universalist inheritance.

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Let me close on a personal note. I remember sitting with my wife, Carolyn, late one evening, the two of us in a hospital reception area, awaiting

word from the doctor concerning whether the surgery to remove a rare cancerous tumor from our son Jacob's leg had been successful. Jacob had spent the better part of sixth through eighth grade either in a wheel chair or a body cast. This was his fourth operation in half as many years. Three times the tumor had returned.

The operation went on longer than we anticipated. By now even the last attendant had left the waiting room. Carolyn and I were alone. There was nothing more to say that we hadn't said to one another a hundred times already, so we sat in silence as the minutes passed. Then Carolyn reached out her hand to me. "We're so lucky," she said. "Life is such a gift."

Whenever someone asks me (or I ask myself), "What have I done to deserve this?" the larger answer is always, "Nothing." We did nothing to deserve being born. We did nothing to earn life's privileges of joy and pain. And on the day we die, we still will know almost nothing about what life was all about. Life on this planet is billions of years old. Our span of three score years and ten (give or take score or two) is barely time enough to get our minds wet.

By cosmologists' latest reckoning, there are some 100 billion stars in our galaxy and ours is one of perhaps 100 billion galaxies. And that is only our cosmos. There could be others. Think about it for a moment. If the stars were divided among us, in our galaxy alone every individual alive on earth today would be the proud possessor of fifteen personal stars. If you choose to name yours (actually a fun thing to do), you can't start too soon. Naming one's own stars is more than a lifelong project. By my reckoning, the cosmic star to person ratio is

1.5 trillion stars to one. Even a minimalist approach to humility should teach us that we are far more alike in our ignorance than we differ in our knowledge.

So what do we do? Do we name our stars and shake our heads in humility and wonder? No. We sit on a single grain of sand on this vast cosmic beach and argue over who has the goods on God. Is it the atheist or the theist? The Christian or the Buddhist? The Catholic or the Protestant? The Muslim or the Jew? We argue (even kill one another) over which religious teacher has the best insider information on God and the afterlife. Is it Jesus? Is it the Buddha? Is it Mohammed? How about Nietzsche, Gandhi, or Freud? All I know is this. Billions of accidents conspired to give each one of these compelling teachers the opportunity even to teach. Knowing this—pondering numbers beyond reckoning—doesn't strip me of my faith. It inspires my faith. It makes me humble. It fills me with awe.

That's the baseline for me. If our religion doesn't inspire in us a humble affection for one another and a profound sense of awe at the wonder of being, one of two things has happened. Either it has failed us or we have failed it. Should either be the case, we must go back to the beginning and start all over again. We must re-boot our lives until the wonder we experience proves itself authentic by the quality of our response to it.

In this spirit, the principle challenge of theology today is to provide symbols and metaphors that will bring us, in all our glorious diversity, into closer and more celebratory kinship with one another as sons and daughters of life and death. Good old-fashioned Universalism, that's all this is. But it's worth every

ounce of energy we can invest in it. Remember, by definition and in growing fact, not only our own salvation, but the salvation of everyone, even our enemies, hinges on its incarnation.

Jacob is fine, by the way. His tumor is in full remission. He even placed fourth for his weight class in the State wrestling tournament. This aside—in fact, everything aside—Carolyn is still right. We are so very lucky. Life is an amazing gift, ours to consecrate in one another, ours to celebrate and bless.

Thank you for listening. Amen.