

## **A Faith with Aspiration**

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When I was candidating at the First Universalist Church of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, the entertainment at one of the dinners laid on for the occasion was a slide show on the story of the city. The church members, most of whom had lived through a great deal of the history being portrayed, watched with me in the dark and provided additional running commentary. They remembered when the textile mills, which once dominated the economic and social landscape of Woonsocket, were going concerns. Many of them had worked in the mills. They had fond memories.

“Remember the explosion in 1935 at the Social Mill? Horace Miller was blown to bits.”

“They never did find his head.”

That was my introduction to the Universalists with whom I settled. Ghoulishly sentimental perhaps, and blue collar to the core. They were not your ordinary proletarians, however. Unlike the tens of thousands of mill-hands who made up the greater part of the city, who were content, or at least resigned, to their status, Woonsocket Universalists never doubted that they had, or soon would, transcend their working-class or agricultural origins. These Universalists were ambitious and worked with a purpose in mind. They moved up the ladder. Many rose to be shop stewards and foremen. Some came to own businesses of their own, such as a lumber yard or a funeral home, or else made the transition into executive positions in manufacturing or banking. Successful as they might have been, they did not pretend to be educated or leisured; they were intelligent, proud working folk.

One of the defining features of Universalists is their class location. Universalism was largely created by people who emerged from the lower-middle and working classes. This is different from Unitarians, who tended to come from the upper-middle and educated classes. It is not that Universalists were never learned or rich. They often became so. While an intelligent Unitarian went to Harvard or some other prestigious school, by right of birth, a bright Universalist, through luck and hard work, might get into a more modest educational institution. More often, the bulk of a Universalist's culture was achieved almost entirely through his or her own effort. Unitarians, at least in New England, inherited their churches from generations past. With very few exceptions Universalists created their own societies and built their own meetinghouses.

In a city dominated by people of French-Canadian extraction, Woonsocket Universalists were mostly of old Yankee stock. They reflected the ethnic composition, and the surnames, of the people who had been settled northern Rhode Island a hundred and fifty years previously. In 1834 some of their ancestors had gathered together and formed “The Woonsocket Universalist Society of Young Men.” By 1840 the young men (and, presumably, a lot of young women as well) had succeeded in building a meetinghouse. They called John Boyden, a promising young minister with a decade of experience in small New England towns. Boyden, a farm-boy from Sturbridge, Massachusetts, had gathered enough fragments of education in local academies to become a schoolteacher himself, before going off to Boston to apprentice for a year with the celebrated Universalist preacher, Hosea Ballou.

I found John Boyden's diary in the church basement, tucked away in a bomb-proof safe behind a bronzed shovel. The diary recorded the first half of 1847. Apparently Boyden had trouble keeping on at this task, and gave up part way through August. Reading his thoughts, and transcribing his words from fading ink to my computer, I entered a world of the past, when Universalists had to

battle with other Christians to maintain the respectability of their faith. Boyden confided to me outlines of his sermons.

On February 14 “I attempted to show that Universalism was the only form of Christianity which could safely be practiced in community, and this alone demonstrated its divine origin.” In his argument Boyden conceded that “Partialism” (i.e. non-Universalism) did help to control people’s actions somewhat through fear, but “contended that it was far from drawing the soul to the love of virtue and God.” He compared Partialism to a prison guard. “The prison convict walks in an orderly manner under the eye of the sentinel who stands upon the wall with powder and ball; and who shall say that his virtue is more questionable than this virtue of that man whose dread prison is hell and whose sentinels are devils. What mean they, who say they would sin if this fear were removed?—but to confirm the rottenness of their conversion and their inward opposition to God?”

Rev. Boyden thought as little of prisons as he did of hell. He was actively opposed to capital punishment. He thought revenge anti-Christian “whether practiced by the man, the juror, the judge, the legislator, or the governor.” While hanging “may deter a few,” it “corrupts the many,” with its “unnecessary severity.”

Boyden was a reformer in many areas. A colleague of the educational pioneer, Henry Barnard, in the effort to establish a public school system in Rhode Island, Boyden worked for two and a half decades to raise standards of teaching and to provide children with a basic curriculum. He, and the Woonsocket Universalist church, were for temperance. The church still disallows alcohol on its property, though most now drink it at home. Boyden was also a local champion of abolition, labor reform, and animal rights. And, reading a surprising series of articles in the old local newspaper, the *Woonsocket Patriot*, I found that he was also a medical quack.

Working with a homeopathic physician, Boyden dispensed little pills on his pastoral rounds. He endorsed a patent medicine. In 1848 he was attacked in the newspaper by an allopathic physician, who claimed that Boyden, and other Universalist clergy, were encroaching upon his professional territory. “What is the origin of ‘quackery among the clergy,’” Boyden responded, “if it is not quackery among the physicians? . . . Your failures have driven the people to try experiments.” A true Universalist, he could not resist a dig at the privileges and pretensions of an old professional class. “We need no diplomas to enable us to judge of the results.” Reading this unexpected debate, I began to suspect that early Universalists had even more interesting depths than I had at first been led to believe.

Boyden practiced his medicine on his closest friend, the Sunday School superintendent, Latimer W. Ballou. The diary records how Boyden nursed Ballou and prescribed for him. Ballou did not suffer as a result, but outlived his friend by decades. There were many Ballous around Woonsocket in those days. Many of their descendants still attended the Universalist church when I was there. I once did a family tree of the Ballou family, showing how church members were related to celebrated Ballous, like Hosea, Adin, or Sullivan Ballou. There were few church members that could not be placed on that chart.

The Ballou family came to Providence Plantations, in the person of Maturin Ballou, in 1646. Later in that century members of the Ballou family carved out for themselves modest farms in central and northern Rhode Island. Forbears of Hosea Ballou settled in Smithfield, south of Woonsocket. The ancestors of Adin Ballou colonized an area in northeastern Rhode Island, on the edge of what is now Woonsocket, which was then called “the Ballou Neighborhood.” There, as Six-Principal Baptists, they built the Elder Ballou Meetinghouse and laid out the Ballou cemetery. The cemetery was overgrown in Adin Ballou’s time; it has changed little since. The Meetinghouse, like many old Woonsocket mills, burned down a few decades ago. Now it is a landmark only of the

imagination. These landmarks are so vivid in the memories of old residents that they still use them for directions: “Drive north three miles and turn left where the Shell station used to be.”

In his diary Boyden several times mentions Adin Ballou, who was at that time the leader of the utopian community in Hopedale, Massachusetts, just north of Woonsocket. Boyden records attending several debates in which Ballou took part. The two sometimes exchanged pastoral services. I was led to read the *Autobiography* of Adin Ballou, at first to see if Boyden was mentioned—I found his name, once, in passing—then, because Ballou was so fascinating in himself.

Ballou provides a portrait in himself of the Universalist type. He was the son of a well-to-do, but not rich, farmer. Designated for the agricultural life, Adin wanted, more than anything to go to Brown University in order to become a lawyer. His father would not provide the funds to educate him for “idleness.” When he stood up at their Christian Connexion meeting one day and announced that the next Sunday he would preach, he had it in the back of his mind a plan to set out on his own as a minister. His father was only modified his fate slightly. Adin could run the family farm during the week and preach at the Elder Ballou Meetinghouse on Sundays. It was not until he converted to Universalism, and was disinherited by his father, that Adin was able to get off the farm. Although he never got much formal education, his writing reflects a extensive reading, in the Bible, and also in Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More.

The nature of Ballou’s call to the ministry gives us something of an idea of the distinctiveness of the folk who became Universalists. The spirit of his deceased brother Cyrus drifted through Adin’s closed window one night and told him, “Adin, God commands you to preach the Gospel of Christ to your fellow-men; obey his voice or the blood of their souls will be required at your hands.” Ballou was part of a culture that accepted such ecstatic experiences. Later in life, like many other mid-nineteenth century Universalists, he became a Spiritualist.

Universalism was one of a set of new exotic faiths that sprouted during the era of the Revolutionary War. The historian, Stephen Marini, in his *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*, classifies Universalists with two other exotic faiths, the Free-Will Baptists and Shakers. The soon-to-be-Mormon Smith family went through a Universalist period. One of the strange activities of the Smiths was treasure hunting. They used special stones and magical devices to help them look for valuable minerals and caches of buried coins. This same theme pops up, several times, in Universalist history. Abner Kneeland was one of several Universalist ministers and laymen to engage in such a project. Other Universalists, it is true, were scandalized by such behavior. In their search for respectability, they hoped to cover the trail leading to their “less presentable” sibling faiths.

One of the founders of Universalism was a visionary, Caleb Rich. Universalists searched the scriptures, but did not always find what they were searching for until they had some direct religious experience. What the earliest Universalists discovered was the love of God. And the idea that God’s love could neither be restricted or thwarted. It was a simple faith, not loaded down with complicated doctrine. It was not so much transmitted by theological discourse, as by plain and uneducated conversation amongst family and friends. It was a religion made for those who would rise in the world: there was room waiting for them at the top, in the world as well as heaven.

A few years ago I was led to make an interesting discovery about the geography of early Universalism. John Murray’s branch of Universalism, established on the eastern coast of Massachusetts, was actually the smaller part. The larger part, that which I have been describing, started in southern Worcester County, Massachusetts, around Milford and Oxford. I studied the membership list of the Oxford society and found that it was, at the core, a family affair. The Oxford

church, at the beginning of Universalism, was the creation of the Davis family. An ambitious people, these self-made and Universalist Davises tried to stretch beyond their family farming enterprises to embrace early forms of capitalism. Some became rich, others did not. One of the leading members of the church, Samuel Davis, known as junior, was first cousin, and brother-in-law, to Caleb Rich. I now like to think that Universalism was founded by Sammy Davis, Jr.

Just past Oxford to the west is Sturbridge. Some of the members of the Oxford Society came from Sturbridge. Visiting Old Sturbridge Village, a restored museum community, we can experience what life was like for the first Universalists, who hoped, like Adin Ballou, to get off the farm. John Boyden came from Sturbridge. So did Edward Turner, who married into the Davis family.

Young Edward Turner was swayed by visiting Universalist evangelists and, in the 1790s, became a close friend of Hosea Ballou. The two covered the Oxford-Charlton-Sturbridge circuit together until Ballou left for Vermont in 1803. Turner's family had come to Sturbridge from eastern Massachusetts, bringing with them a tradition of book-learning and education. Turner, who had some academy training, brought an intellectual counterpoint to his relationship with the self-educated genius of Ballou. The tragedy of this story is that the two friends eventually fell out with each other, then fought a bitter battle that was part of the Restorationist controversy.

Early in my Woonsocket ministry, I once impersonated Hosea Ballou in a reenactment of a debate between Ballou and Turner about whether there would or would not be a limited period of punishment in the afterlife. The spirit of Ballou took possession of me, and I was surprised how strongly I attacked the Turner's doctrine. Ballou was constitutionally incapable of holding back. No wonder his old friend ended up feeling so bruised and betrayed. Turner just didn't understand the Ballou's power, even though he had seen it used against the foes of Universalism, until it was turned against him.

I approached the Restorationist controversy also through Adin Ballou, who took part in it at a later stage. Adin didn't think much of his cousin Hosea who had gotten used to a large salary and had begun to develop a rather professional attitude towards ministry. Adin, on the other hand, his Baptist roots still showing, thought that preachers should accept whatever was offered, no questions asked, however little it might be. If the minister was doing God's work, and God would provide.

Negotiating my salary with the Woonsocket church finance committee always made me nervous. We were living off a dwindling endowment. The dead people contributed much more to my upkeep than the living. So I didn't make any demands, as Hosea Ballou might have done, but, ruled by cousin Adin, took what I was offered. It wasn't a great deal for a professional salary, but it was more than they could afford. In keeping with who paid me, I devoted my pastoral attentions to both the living and the dead. During my time in Woonsocket, sorrowfully, not a few went from one category to the other. They are all alive in my memory, even those whom I met only in my research.

The Woonsocket Universalist church is now changing. The history-ridden minister has retired, and is now himself history. Those who first welcomed me are now mostly gone. The Ballou strain has finally ceased to dominate. The money donated by generations past has been spent. The church may, or may not, survive. If it does, it will be transformed into something different. A few years ago, the living members decided that the dead people ought to stop paying for a church that was a pale mirror of its old history. Instead they financed a new venture, a community outreach that is attracting a new kind of membership, mostly drawn from Catholic families. What is being

presented to them is Unitarian Universalism, in all of its modern varieties. To the few remaining long-term members there appears to be a break with the past in the making.

When, I visit, however, I realize that the continuity of Universalist history is not entirely lost. The new members are precisely those independent, ambitious blue-collar types that created the church in the past. They are not well-educated, but they read a lot. Some of them, in their spiritual style, hearken back even further, to the strange religious ferment that form Universalism and other sects in late eighteenth-century New England. They include ecstasies and visionaries. And there is something strangely evangelical about their demeanor. How they learned it, I haven't a clue. Maybe they breathe it in the atmosphere of old mill towns. Perhaps there is something in the mystery of the name, Universalism, that has the power to engender a kind of religion that is a strange combination of traditional and radical, mystical and rational. The forms of worship may change, ideas may develop, but there is something eternal in the rough and ready, make-it-up yourself Universalist attitude. They are people grown out of the muck, by native strength and ingenuity, reaching to embrace the stars. Their attitude is humble—with a chip on its shoulder— aspiring to be proud. Egalitarian levelers, Universalists would make all worthy of the friendship of God.

Some may say that Universalism is now only history. But the history helped make modern Unitarian Universalists, and continues to shape the future. The Universalist forbears were struggling farmers, tradespeople, and mechanics. They were rational, in a down-to-earth way, but also ecstatic and enthusiastic for the new and the wonderful. They challenged the old ways, made home remedies, sought old treasures, and talked with spirits of the dead. To remember how close a kinship Universalism had to Mormon Joseph Smith, Shaker Mother Ann Lee, and the Spiritualist Fox sisters, is to broaden liberal sympathy and to increase Unitarian Universalist self-knowledge. To get where they needed to go, Universalists started at the bottom and worked their way up. They took some crazy byways, from which they learned as much as if had they taken the more respectable path. Paraphrasing the words of a hymn drawn from their sister faith, the Shakers, they turned and turned, and by turning came round right.

Universalism was, in the beginning, a movement. Its membership grew fast, embracing people with a variety of religious ideas and styles. When it became too organized, when it was passed from people who had come up in the world to others who, thanks to their parents' efforts, no longer felt the urgent need to rise, it lost its momentum and its reason for being. Universalism had to be reinvented several times to keep it going. Lately, its passion has seemed nearly extinct. But the tradition remains with Unitarian Universalism, a seed that may at any time sprout. Should that happen, perhaps we will rediscover our common touch, and shed some of our inhibitions, allowing us once more to become, in the immortal words of Steve Martin, "wild and crazy guys."