

“Deep Universalism”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel

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At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist

*“Behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things.”
“Honor the ocean of love.” – George DeBenville, Universalist, 1703 – 1793*

There are places and times in history when human beings start to believe that the world *as they know it* is coming to an end.

One such time occurred about 525 years ago, in 1493, in Europe.

A book called *The Nuremburg Chronicle* described a depressed society, one with little vision or hope.

A few pages were left blank at the end of the book so readers could record “the rest of events until the end of the world.”

From our perspective over 500 years later, such doom and gloom was premature.

As Rabbi Edwin Friedman notes in his writings,

Europeans were about to undergo a complete re-orientation to reality.

They would realize that the universe did not orbit the earth,

that all land was not located above the equator,

and that two formerly unknown continents- the Americas- lay to the west.

As these limits within the common imagination were broken, Europe made a quantum leap into creativity that we call the Renaissance.

Over the next 50 years, there was more change and discovery in Europe than had ever happened before or since, at least until the first half of the 20th century.

At the same time, European arrival in the Americas would mean devastation to the native peoples.

It would take more than a few pages to tell the rest of the human story.

Since then, many complicated chapters of human history have been written... and I expect there are quite a few more to come.

We may wonder, what kind of story will they tell?

Will it be a tragedy or comedy? An adventure story, a mystery, a dystopian novel?

Will it be a story about the end of the world or a quantum leap into creativity?

One thing is for sure: it will be a story about change.

Now, change tends to make some of us anxious.

Anyone here ever feel anxious about change-

in your personal life, your spiritual life, or by what you see in society?

Anyone ever feel anxious for no particular reason at all?

If not, congrats on being above the fray!

Our society is swirling with anxiety,

and it can be challenging to stay positive, serene and sane.

If you're paying attention these days, you might almost *need* to have

some sort of centering faith or practice to fall back on!

In anxious societies, there tends to be a lot of reactivity, blaming of others, as well as a strong desire for some sort of quick fix that will make everything better.

People in chronically anxious societies are given to group-think

and herding together in tribal groups.

They are given to polarization, either/or, all-or-nothing thinking.

They tend to be oriented towards pathology instead of strength, crisis instead of opportunity. They tend to lack curiosity.

They tend to adapt to most their immature members

and choose the least mature to be leaders.

And since anxiety is an emotional phenomenon, it is not particularly impacted by information or facts.

This is where new terms like "post-factual democracy" can be useful.

I heard that unsettling term for the first time this past summer, after the "Brexit" vote.

So what's going on? Why are folks so anxious?

The progressive evangelical Christian Jim Wallis suggests that there is one *particular* historical change that is troubling the waters and which undergirds all politics this year.

Can anyone guess what that is?

He suggests this: *It's demographics*-- an intriguing claim.

By the time the 3 year olds among us are 30, the 13 year olds among us are 40, and the 63 year olds are 90, our nation will no longer have a majority Anglo or so-called "white" population.

Now, we know that "whiteness" and "race" are social constructions, but these constructs do have real-life impacts.

So it means something to be able to say that in about 27 years, *once again* the majority population in this land will be people of color, as it was before the arrival of Europeans about 400 to 500 years ago.

Talk about a reorientation to reality!

Talk about breaking through limits in our common imagination!

Talk about potential for change, discovery and a quantum leap into creativity!

For some folks, this shift is pretty thrilling and intriguing.

For others, not so much.

Wallis suggests that for those who are fearful of this change and the subsequent loss of power and privilege, the thinking goes something like this: *If we can't avoid this shift, we can at least try to prevent it from changing society.*

He suggests there are all sorts of strategies to try to stop the inevitable-- gerrymandering, voter disenfranchisement, mass incarceration, restrictions on immigration or promoting particular kinds of leaders.

Now, you may not agree with Wallis at all.

And you may be wondering what all this has to do with religion!

For one thing, reminding myself how deeply folks are awash in anxiety and fear helps me try to pray for those I might consider my "enemies".

I do this for selfish reasons- because I don't want to become consumed by anger, hate or fear myself.

For another thing, it reminds me that in such times, being a Unitarian Universalist offers me profound gifts but also makes of me certain demands.

Our nation, and much of our world, is awash in fear of the "other" and a sense that the world as "we've" known it is coming to an end. The lines of division between "us" and "them" are becoming ever more entrenched. This is nothing new in the human story, and religion is partly to blame.

Religions and religious institutions have been major culprits taking "us/them" dichotomies to a new, divinely-ordained level. Too often, religions have determined not only who is part of the "in group" in this life, but who's better and who's worse, who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out in the next life too, even for *all eternity!* That's determination, isn't it?! It's taken some very creative theological thinking!

In case you were wondering, that is not the Unitarian Universalist way.

For centuries, Unitarianism has said there is one reality, and we're part of it. For centuries, Universalism has said that whatever our ultimate destiny is, it's not hell... and whatever it is, it is the same for everyone. The real question of religion is not who is saved and who is not, but how our theology impacts how we live.

Are we "saved" in our daily life? Are we awake, alive, every day?

As believers in one reality, one destiny, we are called to undermine false divisions in visible, tangible ways. We are called to create and hold out a vision of Beloved Community- not in the hereafter, but right here in *this* life.

We are called to be as loud and clear as our ancestors were

when they proclaimed unity over division, love over damnation, and joyful assurance over anxiety and fear.

Universalists were especially good at proclaiming and evangelizing, in part because they were personally aware of how anxious, afraid and miserable non-Universalists could be.

As the Rev. Thomas Schade points out in an essay in the 2016 book *Turning Point*, Universalism began as a particular Christian doctrine of salvation: Jesus Christ saved *all* of humanity, not just an elect. *All* are restored to the divine and *no one* is destined for an eternity in hell. This theology made Universalism the 6th largest denomination in the U.S. at one point.

The theistic but non-Trinitarian version of Universalist salvation removes Jesus as Savior from the equation, but still affirms the idea that all will be restored to God. This is the Universalism proclaimed by those congregations that have the words “God is Love” written over the altar. For some, this Universalist theology of Welcome to Divine Love is still at the heart of their faith.

A **second** kind of Universalism was influenced by Humanism and a pluralistic approach to world religions. This is the Universalism that affirms the validity of all religious traditions. In one metaphor, there are many paths up the same mountain.

This is the Universalism proclaimed by those congregations that have the symbols of the world’s religions in their sanctuaries. It is affirmed by the long list of religions named as sources of our UU faith. For some, this Universalist religious pluralism is still at the heart of their faith.

Rev. Schade suggests we use a new term to refer to a **third** kind of Universalism: Deep Universalism.

Deep Universalism, he suggests, is discovered when we arrive at the final stage of faith development.

It is an inner sense of one's self as related to the whole of humanity, all of life... an inner consciousness of- and identity with- a global Beloved Community.

This sense of universal solidarity can be felt by scientists working with DNA and mystics awash in unitive experiences. It is aware of both the unities and diversities of cultures as well as the power dynamics between them.

For some, this Universalist solidarity is at the heart of their faith. And it is nothing new.

It was two and a half centuries ago, in the mid-1700's, that Christian Universalist George DeBenneville immigrated to America at the age of 38. You heard some of his story and his words already this morning.

DeBenneville was a mystic, a healer, a preacher, a 18th century practitioner of pluralism. He was convinced of God's "boundless, universal love for the entire human race." Long before interfaith dialogue was popular, he interacted with others as equals- whether as a young sailor confessing his false sense of superiority over Muslims, or as a physician trading herbs and healing remedies with Native Americans.

Let's listen again to some of his words, from about 250 years ago: "...love must be based upon mutual respect for the differences in color, language and worship, even as we appreciate and accept with gratitude (those) differences..."

Am I wrong, or might these ideas still be useful in our nation today??!
Mutual respect for differences in color, language and worship.
Appreciating and accepting our differences with gratitude.
Boundless, universal Love for the entire human race.

It's a pretty easy theology up until that last piece- the one about boundless love for the entire human race. You've got to be kidding me!

But I'd rather wrestle with this theology
than with one that creates an "us" and "them".
I'd rather wrestle with a God of boundless love
than with one that damns people or separates them for eternity.
And I believe this kind of Deep Universalism is a theology, a viewpoint, a practice
that is sorely needed in our anxious nation and our interdependent world.

DeBonneville was a mystic.
His visions were wild- you can read about them online-
and were profoundly shaped by the religious culture he grew up in.
He experienced overwhelming shame and then overwhelming love in his visions.
He dropped the shame... and kept the love.
Way back in the 1700's, he wrote these words for posterity: "Honor the ocean of love."

I might even expand on his words and put it like this:
*Honor the ocean of love with all your heart, mind and strength,
and your neighbor as yourself.*
If "ocean of love" doesn't work for you, you can substitute what does.

Love the Earth our home with all your heart,
mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.
Love the Spirit of Life with all your heart, mind and strength,
and your neighbor as yourself.
Love the Mystery of the Universe with all your heart, mind and strength,
and your neighbor as yourself.

You might even prefer the way Jesus said it about 2,000 years ago,
in his old-fashioned, patriarchal, anthropomorphic but oh-so-familiar language:
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind and strength,
and your neighbor as yourself."

In the days ahead, perhaps there's one part of this
which calls to you on a personal level. What do you most need to do?

Love your neighbor a little more? Love yourself a little more?

Love the greater reality that holds us all?

And as a congregation, what do we most need to do?

How might we undermine false divisions--

and move towards our vision of an earthly Beloved Community?

How might we be as loud and clear as our ancestors once were

in proclaiming unity over division, love over damnation,

and joyful assurance over anxiety and fear?

In the days ahead, may we visibly, loudly, persistently love our neighbors...

and in doing so, honor the Ocean of Love.

I invite you to join with me in a few moments of mediation, reflection, prayer:

Spirit of Life and Love and God,

we find ourselves living in an anxious time.

When we ourselves are anxious or full of fear,

may we regain our footing in love and awe, connection and creativity.

May the limits to our common imagination be broken.

May the limits to our communities be expanded.

May a sense of kinship infuse our spirits,

and may our ancestors give us strength. Amen.

The story about Europe in 1493 and the observations about how anxious societies behave are from the writings of **Rabbi Edwin Friedman, from his book *A Failure of Nerve*, Chapter 1, "Imaginative Gridlock and the Spirit of Adventure." **Rev. Jim Wallis** shared his theory about the impact of demographic change in America in a talk on "America's Greatest Sin: A Frank Talk on Race" at The Leading Edge conference, New York City, April 15' 2016. **Rev. Thomas Schade** writes of Deep Universalism in the book *Turning Point* in the essay entitled "Unitarian Universalist Faith Development in Stages". **George DeBenneville's** autobiography of his mystical experiences and Universalist conversion is entitled *A True and Remarkable Account of the Life and Trance of Dr. George de Benneville* (1791); this was published against his will, and, sadly, led him to destroy many of his other papers.*

Historical Reading:

Our historical reading today comes from the early Christian Universalist, George DeBenneville. DeBenneville was born in London in 1703 and immigrated to America in 1741 when he was 38, seeking religious tolerance. As a young sailor in Europe, he encountered people of other faiths and cultures, which started him on his path of respect for other faiths and humility as a Christian.

He had several near-death experiences and mystical visions, which convinced him that theologies of eternal damnation and predestination were false. He began to preach his Universalist conviction that every human soul would be restored to the eternal love of God. He was sentenced to death for his beliefs more than once, and once was granted reprieve just before the guillotine came down on his neck.

In America, he settled in Pennsylvania and worked as a physician and apothecary. He was on friendly terms with Native American groups in the area, meeting them as equals, trading herbal remedies and trying to understand their languages and symbols as he believed all symbols of the same truth equally valid.

In his free time, De Benneville felt called to preach Universalism- in his words, "...the universal and everlasting gospel of boundless, universal love for the entire human race." He is considered the first Universalist preacher in America. He died in 1793, at the age of 90. These words come to us from his pen, in the 1700's.

"The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members.

That love must be based upon mutual respect for the differences in color, language and worship-- (just) as we appreciate and accept with gratitude the differences that tend to unite the male and female of all species.

We do not find *those* differences obstacles to love."

"...behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things."

"No church is pure in all things, so none can be found that does not contain some truth. Glorious truths are found in every church and religion under the sun.

And this glorious chain of truths which we believe will someday unite all of them into one form of love."

"Honor the ocean of love."

Opening Words, excerpts from a meditation by Rod Richards, from *Falling Into the Sky*.

"We humans are the line-drawers. We are the border-makers. We are the boundary-testers... We congregate within those boundaries in families and tribes and cities and countries that we call *us*. And we call people on the other side *them*. But...The recognition of human kinship does not end at any border... The rain, the sunshine, the breeze, the life-giving air we breathe- they know no boundaries. Neither do our empathy, our good will, our concern for one another. God has no borders. Love has no borders. Let us lift up the awareness of our unity as we celebrate our awesome diversity on this beautiful day."

Closing words, by Teresa of Avila: "The Divine has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Divine compassion is to look out to the world."