

“A Quest for a Larger Name”
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First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
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From the Readings: “The difference between Unitarians and Universalists (the old joke has it) is that Universalists believe that God is too good to damn them, whereas Unitarians believe that they’re too good to be damned. I am a Universalist.” The Rev. Forest Church

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After moving back to Iowa in 1996 and coming to this church, one of my discoveries was that in Mitchellville – a few miles east of Altoona – there still stands as the town museum a Universalist church built in 1868 – by Universalist Thomas Mitchell, conductor on Underground Railroad and friend to the native people. Was I overcome with joy and pride? No. I was royally – annoyed – that one of our liberal rural churches had been active and unknown to me so near my rural home during my growing-up years. I had long since worked through my anger that my parents could bring me to Des Moines to the dentist but never to discover this place. I never heard of either of our religions until I was in college.

But I looked for a Unitarian church while I was finishing college in Philadelphia. As I’ve told before, my devout landlady answered my quest for a Unitarian church by saying, “Don’t go there. They are of the devil.” Since only days before she had told us not to answer the door at Halloween because little black children might be there – I knew I wanted to go to this Unitarian place. I did and realized, “They have a church for people like me!” That became my religion.

But I didn’t join any church until I was in Chicago a few years later. There, the man I was planning to marry shared excitement about his First **Universalist** Church. I visited and found no discernible differences from the Unitarian congregations I’d visited. That minister married us and it became my church. That was 1962.

We didn’t attend church much though, and the first time we met the next minister was at a demonstration downtown against the racist policies of the Board of Education. I started attending. Soon I was chair of the Social Action Committee; we preached about Viet Nam, ran freedom schools during public school boycotts, and cheered our minister and others as they came back from their trip to Selma and Montgomery.

Yes, I learned that there had been a merger with the Unitarians the year before but I had little time for that; my life was filled with my marriage, two little sons, my community efforts, and finally a divorce. That church was my salvation and represented the best of a mythic time I now revere simply as “the 60’s.”

My church history continues with a move as a single mother to Walnut Creek California, where I immediately joined the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Church. That congregation was wonderful for me

and my sons; I met Bob there and attended Starr King School for the Ministry from there. Oh, yes, I sometimes complained that I missed having my **Universalist** religion in the name; friends reported proudly years later that it had become the Mt. Diablo Unitarian **Universalist** Church.

Going to Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley was an incredibly rich experience, maybe rich enough to be worthy of the man for whom it was named, Thomas Starr King. King was the **Universalist** minister from Boston who was called to serve San Francisco's Unitarian Church in 1860. He is often credited with keeping California in the Union – rode all over the state to carry a pro-Union message and our religion. Small wonder that he died at age 39 in 1864. A peak in Yosemite is rightfully named for him. He insisted that he was both a **Universalist** and a Unitarian; he is the one who originated that religious joke about a God too good to damn us and some of us too good to be damned.

After Starr King, I was called to serve the Sepulveda Unitarian-**Universalist** Society in Los Angeles. They were proud of that hyphen which resulted from a merger between a **Universalist** and a Unitarian Congregation there in 1943.

When I came to this congregation in my retirement years I found good reason to rejoice in this wonderful liberal church merely 35 miles away. I did not spend much time mourning that it was only a Unitarian church.

Now you may be wondering, “What is she talking about? What does she mean ‘only’ a Unitarian church? Who are these Universalists? And actually, who are the Unitarians?”

So let's switch from my religious history to *our* religious history – a superficial genealogy review of our two parent religions, the Unitarians and the Universalists, who married – or merged – in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The Unitarians appear first. The name was used in 1600 to describe a heretical group in Poland and Transylvania. They read scripture to find not the traditional Christian trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but simply one large, inclusive God. People died for espousing that belief. It is still proclaimed dramatically in the carved motif of scores of Unitarian churches in Transylvanian Romania and Hungary: “Eg Az Isten” – God is one – an easy way to remember what *Unitarian* originally stood for.

The Unitarian idea traveled to this country and grew in the state-supported Trinitarian Congregational churches of New England. Dissention reigned in the decades around 1800 as either the Unitarian believers or the Trinitarian believers left and soon there might be First Parish Unitarian on this corner First Parish Trinitarian on the next corner. Courageous thinkers and scholars, Unitarians were prominent in the founding of Harvard, in the Revolution, and in framing our Constitution.

Meanwhile another courageous heresy was brewing. In England a few Methodists came forth and declared that a punishment of burning in Hell – was not scriptural. They preached *universal* salvation – an easy way to remember the distinctive theology of the early Universalists.

American Universalism begins with an incredible story: one John Murray, a bereft and beleaguered Universalist refugee from England, waded ashore here when his boat was stranded. He found land at Good Luck Point, New Jersey where he soon met one Thomas Potter. Potter was an unlettered mystic out of local universalist tradition who had built a chapel for itinerant ministers. He thought Murray heaven-sent to fill his pulpit. Murray did – and went on to preach through the northern colonies and to begin the Universalist Church in Gloucester, Massachusetts. No wonder Universalism was a religion of such hope and optimism!

The power of the Universalist message came home to me recently when my husband, Bob Baker, literally fell into a fire we had made while clearing a slope at the farm. We were very lucky and he is mostly healed. But that gave me another reminder of the horror of fire as eternal punishment.

No wonder that the fire-free Universalist religion grew to become the sixth largest in the United States in the mid 1800's. I was delighted to read the story of Abraham Lincoln's words on Universalism. Some say Lincoln was a Universalist. Not formally, I bet. But surely there are no better words for the Universalist ideal than Lincoln's famous, "With malice toward none, with charity for all ...".

So, our two parent religions. They carried on a courtship of sorts for about a hundred years because they became more alike than different – theologically. Particularly they shared in rejecting Calvinist *predestination*, the notion that we are born *pre-destined for either Hell or Heaven* – God's punishment or God's grace. Both Universalists and Unitarians knew that did not bespeak the loving god and the redeemable humanity they knew.

So why did these two brave heretic groups not join long ago? Probably because they were separated by a deep gulf – social class. Up here we have the Boston blue blood Unitarians who accrued wealth and education and names for themselves, and down here we have the rowdy, rural, uneducated Universalists who sprang up everywhere, creating churches for the unchurched and schools for the unschooled. Both had enough difficulty organizing themselves without taking on the additional challenge of a merger – until finally, gradually they brought it off in 1961. By then they had become social equals, and they could accept that the Unitarians had moved toward a more humanist theology while the Universalists stayed with their spiritual base longer. I was very happy to read in Oval Quist's history of this church that the merger vote here at First Unitarian Church of Des Moines in 1960 was – 75 for merger and 4 against! Hallelujah! Our parents got married.

Why didn't they change the name of the church to match the new name of the religion? One of you remembered that some were too angry about the merger. I'm guessing that most were too preoccupied with their lives to add another name.

I do remember running into one of my buddies from First Universalist of Chicago some years later at a UU General Assembly. She complained about the tendency of many to say simply they are "Unitarians" or to refer to their "Unitarian" church. "I've learned!" she said, "The next time I join up with anybody I'll make sure my name comes first."

I've become sensitive to the way people in our movement casually refer to themselves and our religion simply as "Unitarian". I assume it's because that name comes first, and it's easier to say just one name. It is reinforced here each time we say the name of our church, "First Unitarian"! But I would tell myself, "Oh, it's trivial. What's in a name? Let people say what they want. It's their call." And it is, of course. But it is misleading – like leaving out the cheese in mac'n'cheese. Would the children recognize just, "mac"?

It's more than that, of course. It's like cutting off one side of my family, my heritage, my religious bloodline; it's cutting out Thomas Mitchell and all he did in our native state. It leaves out the Universalists who worked very early for the separation of church and state; they were the first to vote against slavery, the first to ordain a woman ... One of you here said you had learned that Unitarian was our "head" side and Universalist was our "heart" side. What else besides our heart might we leave out with our Unitarian naming?

Recently, I noticed myself looking up to this beautiful banner "First Unitarian Church of Des Moines" and suddenly I felt a new cut-off. It's like at least half of who I am religiously is not included. The banner is too small.

It is not just my hurt feelings that my part often gets left out. It is not just my nostalgia for the churches in my history. It is my mainly my concern for the part of our heritage and our religious values that are left out when saying the name of our very church leaves out half our religious bloodline. My longing has grown for an intentional change in our **name** so it includes both our parent religions. When I talked with Rev. Mark about this months ago, I felt his support as he said enthusiastically, "Go for it!" I'm asking now that we – **go for it!** Build on our strong foundation for the future as **First Unitarian Universalist Church of Des Moines**.

This church is in an extraordinary phase of its existence. There is incredible growth of all kinds happening here. It was not for sitting on our tradition that we were named as a "break-through congregation" by the Unitarian Universalist Association this year. It is time now, I believe, to take a name that is large enough for who we are and who we are becoming.

[Pointing to our banner] We keep and honor this banner, of course – our parent, our past, the rock of our foundation; we add a second banner that celebrates our full identity as Unitarian **Universalist**.

The name could lead us in a growth opportunity. I laugh when I think about the current issue of our *UU World*; it's as if they set out to help Rev. Shivvers along. The cover story is "The Gospel of Inclusion" and it relates how a Pentecostal bishop in Tulsa, Oklahoma has a personal conversion to heretical universal salvation and ultimately can find no better place for it than our All Souls Unitarian Church. He brings the universalist remnant from his once-huge flock to our church. They come with praise band and wondrous growth pains. Read the story. And while you're holding this *UU World* read the essay on the back page!

Many of us long-time UU's share a theology that might be summarized as "it's not what you believe, it's how you live in the world;" we tend to forget that the original brave heresies of our two parent religions may still be life-saving theology to others in the world. Right now, perhaps

thanks to the expansion of the religious right and its fiery hell, our Universalist message may be one of **current** salvation. That burning hell – no pun intended – is a burning, living issue, as Tulsa illustrates.

I gasped to hear the Universalist message in Florida early this year at my son's UU Fellowship. The guest preacher was Rev. Kalen Fristad from Iowa; Fristad is a radical/heretical Methodist who serves a circuit of small Methodist churches in northern Iowa and also travels the country proclaiming the Universalist message. (Fristad will preach here in January.)

And I realize that this Universalist belief in a good God and no burning hell is not the main message. It's that "ethical Universalism" that Gregg read about from the *UU World*. The aura of that all loving god urges us now – whatever our god image – toward unconditional love, the capacity to forgive and make amends and to seek reconciliation. Hosea Ballou, early Universalist leader, taught 200 years ago that Jesus came to the world not to atone for our sins, but to teach us how to atone for our own sins. "Atone for our own sins?" you ask. Yes, Universalism is a very large religion.

And I believe that we Des Moines UU's are big enough to take it in. I also believe that intentionally adding Universalist to our name – now, 50 years later – allows us to embrace more of who we really are – our very heart. It would be an exquisitely timely move now as our denomination calls us to "Stand on the side of love."

Those words will be important as we move on to talk about this. I've the idea with a few of you and gotten echoes of Mark's "Go for it!" or "Yes, it's time." One of you gasped, "You mean our church isn't named Unitarian Universalist now?" There are other opinions and questions and feelings and **stories**. We've set a time to talk on Sunday morning November 8. A "constructive conversation" it will be. **We** are Linda Appelgate, Diane Ford, Sally Boeckholdt, Linda Lemons, Harvey Harrison, Ellen Taylor, and Greg Pelley. Our goal through the next months will be to expand the conversation so that all voices are heard and any decision is *our* decision.

It is not simply the matter of a legal motion and a congregational vote; it can be more like our unwrapping a package to embrace the rest of who we are, that our very name could remind us of our heart as well as our head – and inspire us to **live** their dream. Oh, yes!

Closing words: From John Murray:

Go out into the highways and byways.
Give the people something of your vision.

You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine,
Use it in order to bring more light and understanding
To the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage;
Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.