

“Imagination’s Importance in Unitarian Universalism”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on January 24, 2021

Before I begin talking about imagination’s importance in Unitarian Universalism, I want us to hear again the first few lines of our reading this morning.

It is highly likely that, as the theologian Wentzel van Huyssteen suggests, there is a naturalness to the human religious imagination and that it is part of the process that facilitated human evolutionary success over the past few hundred thousand years. If this is indeed the case, an important part of reconstructing the path to humanity has to include the possible roles that imagination, belief, and even religious activity have played and continue to play for humans around the planet.

I share this portion of the reading a second time because I believe it is important that we put what I am about to share about Unitarian Universalism in the proper framework—the framework of how our religious tradition has played an important role in “the path to humanity” that Fuentes refers to.

Our Story for All Ages this morning is one example of how a King who belonged to the Unitarian branch of our faith tradition played a significant role in setting a path to humanity as it is today. He set a path that was very different than what was occurring in other countries in Europe. Through his proclamation he set a path that allowed religious freedom. The path that he set wasn’t just for those who were Unitarians. It was a path that included people of any and all faiths. This was a radical idea in the middle of the sixteen century. It was an inclusive idea.

From the very origins of our faith tradition, Unitarians and Universalists have allowed their imaginations to come up with perspectives that were outside of mainstream beliefs and practices. Both branches of our faith tradition emerged in the early, formative years of Christianity. Origen of Alexandria, an early Christian scholar, aesthetic and theologian who lived from 184 to 253 Common Era, was the first to assert what is considered to be the foundation of Universalism. In his writings he held out the possibility that all people would eventually be reconciled with God. This perspective was in stark contrast to the predominant belief that only those who believed in Jesus as the Son of God would be reconciled with God upon death. Origen’s views eventually were expanded upon and became the foundational principle of Universalism. That principle includes two important elements. The first is that God is, first and foremost, loving. The second is that all humans will be reconciled with the God who loves all of us, not just some of us. This is another example of how our faith tradition has imagined a path to humanity that is inclusionary of everyone. This inclusive perspective allows and encourages us to focus all of our attention and energy on this life and this world, not on what will occur after our human lives end.

This country has produced many famous and imaginative Universalists. Benjamin Rush, the most celebrated physician and a leading social reformer of his time, was a signatory of the Declaration of Independence. He established the first free medical dispensary in this country and he insisted that those who suffered from mental illness had a right to be treated with respect. Hosea Ballou, a Universalist minister of the early to mid-1800’s, wrote the book, *A Treatise on Atonement*. This book laid out convincing arguments against the Calvinist teachings that only some people would be reunited with God upon death while all others were bound to spend eternity in hell. And Clarence Skinner, who is widely regarded as the most influential Universalist of the first half of the twentieth century, advocated for a “universal religion.” The religion he imagined would not be based on dogmatic beliefs or a creed. Instead he imagined “a free fellowship of men and women united for the study of universal religion, seeking to apply ethical ideals to individual life and the cooperative principle to all forms of social and economic life.”

Like Universalism, Unitarianism emerged in the early days of Christianity. Unitarianism was based on the idea that God was one, not three, as the doctrine of the trinity asserts. Arius of Alexandria is considered by many to be the first theologian to question and challenge the concept that Jesus was equal to God in all ways,

including being eternal. Arius was born about the time of Origen's death and looked to the writings of Origen for much of his own theology.

From the early 1700's on, there have been Unitarians living on this continent who have imagined our religion and society in general quite differently than many of their contemporaries. I will mention here only a few of them. John Adams, a Unitarian born in what is now Massachusetts, became the first Vice-President and the second President of the United States. Adams played a significant role in editing the Declaration of Independence and later helped to "shape" the U. S. Constitution. Both of these documents have had, and continue to have, tremendous influence on the lives of every person in this country. Even though the U. S. Constitution and our form of government has been challenged and severely undermined recently, it has withstood the assaults on it. We can be thankful that Adams helped craft a document that has weathered the storms which have battered it and us. William Ellery Channing is another famous Unitarian. Channing was ordained as a minister in 1803. His theology was unitarian, not trinitarian. In the early 1800's being referred to as a unitarian was a slur or an insult. To be called a unitarian was to be labeled a heretic. At that time our faith tradition had not yet claimed the name "Unitarian." That changed after Channing delivered a sermon in 1819 titled "Unitarian Christianity." Channing imagined changing the way the word unitarian would be used and viewed. Today, we can hold our heads high when we call ourselves Unitarians and be grateful to Channing for his part in making that possible. In the 20th century there was John Hassler Dietrich, who, in 1911, became the minister of the First Unitarian Society in Spokane, Washington. When he arrived in Spokane the church had 60 members. When he ended his ministry there 5 years later the church had over 1500 people attending. He was one of the first ministers in the United States to use the term "humanism," as it relates to one's religious perspective, in his sermons. He identified his religious philosophy as naturalistic humanism. He asserted that the scientific method was the only acceptable approach to understanding truth. Dietrich was one of the signatories of A Humanist Manifesto which was published in 1933. Dietrich, however, wasn't the only Unitarian to sign that document. Of the people who were signatories, half were Unitarians and 13 were Unitarian ministers.

In 1961 the two branches of our faith tradition in this country merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. Since then, Unitarian Universalists have sought, through imagination and hard work, to become a more inclusive faith. And Unitarian Universalism has actively and energetically worked for equality and justice in our communities and in our country. Just 9 years after the merger, the delegates at the 1970 General Assembly passed a resolution calling on the UUA and its member congregations to work "to bring an end to all discrimination against homosexuals, homosexuality, bisexuals and bisexuality." And this resolution wasn't just limited to our congregations. The resolution called on Unitarian Universalists to seek an end to such discrimination wherever it might exist. This is just one example of how Unitarian Universalism has been imagining and working toward a more inclusive and just society and world.

And in the past few years Unitarian Universalists have imagined ways to change the direction this country has been heading in. In line with our Fifth Principle, the UU the Vote Program engaged in making direct contact with voters across the United States in the run-up to the national election in November. And even more recently, the UU the Vote Program assisted in getting Georgians to the polls for the run-off election that would determine which party would hold the majority in the U. S. Senate. The result was the election of the first Black U. S. Senator in Georgia's history. There is no way to know just how much influence the UU the Vote Program had on the outcome of these two elections. It seems quite likely, however, that the efforts of Unitarian Universalists made a difference in the end result.

What I have shared with you so far is a tiny sample of ways that Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists have used the power of imagination to expand theological perspectives, to advocate for more inclusivity in our religious tradition and beyond, and to call for a more just society. I want to shift now to our Fellowship and how we are using our imaginations for some of the same purposes. If you haven't yet read the UUFB Vision Statement that was adopted in June of last year, I want to encourage you to do so. It can be found on our website, uufbozeman.org. At our service on January 3, the Rev. Sarah Schurr, who is our Pacific Western Region staff contact person, shared the entirety of our Vision Statement. In my conversations with

her prior to that service I had mentioned that I was quite impressed and pleased with our new Vision Statement. After reading it, she told me that it offered this Fellowship a path forward that was both inspiring and expansive. That was the reason she included the entire Statement in her sermon.

With all of the challenges that face our community, our state and our country, we will need to have vivid imaginations to find ways to, as Agustín Fuentes states, “reconstruct the path to humanity,” to a humanity that does not yet exist. Reconstructing the path to that future humanity will take more than just imagination. It will take time, energy, determination, and commitment on the part of many, many people to achieve the kind of humanity that we imagine. The task may seem daunting, because, in fact, it is. The task that is set out in the last line of our Vision Statement, namely, “making our fellowship, larger community and world a safer and better place,” has always been daunting and it always will be. None of us can accomplish the task alone. Together, however, our power and our ability is amplified. Together, we can turn our imaginings into reality.

So may it be