

## **Do We Need A New Story?**

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Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. LREDA is an important and vital and way cool professional association, and it is an honor and a real pleasure to be asked to contribute to your work. I also want to thank Margaret Sequeira and Gabrielle Farrell for their helpful input, and especially my colleague Nicole Kirk for sharing her insights into these important themes as we reflected with each other on what we might best be able to offer for you.

Your conference theme, “The arc of the universe is long: Why Unitarian Universalist history matters,” is well chosen. I’m guessing that most of us accept its basic premise – that Unitarian Universalist history does indeed matter. I certainly do. Yet we Unitarian Universalists often act as though our history does not matter, not really, or not very much. We are pretty good at reciting bits of historical trivia, usually about famous figures from our past such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or William Ellery Channing. And we might be more or less familiar with a few important historical moments, especially those that allow us to see ourselves as having been on the right side of history, such as our support of the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century and the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth. Identifying with figures like Emerson and movements like abolition gives us a set of historical bragging rights and helps us feel good about ourselves.

But beyond this, my own observation is that most Unitarian Universalists today do not have a very good understanding of the history of our religious movement – of how it relates to the social and economic and political realities in different historical periods; of its cultural and literary influences and contributions; of the ways it was understood and expressed in different geographical regions – including, even in the early years, the American South; of its varied and changing relationships with other religious groups; or of internal disagreements during different historical periods, especially views

that opposed the people and events we now celebrate. In short, we may believe that our history matters, but we don't really have a deep sense of how it matters or what it might mean for us today.

One reason for this, I think, is that we also share another premise, one that we hold even more strongly: that Unitarian Universalism is a religion of the present, not the past; that what we do today is more important than what we did 50 or 150 years ago. And if it turns out that our understanding of our own history is superficial or even wrong, well, that's not the important thing. We get the basic idea. Somewhere along the way our ancestors rejected the old suffocating conservatism and became freedom-loving liberals, and that's what we have been ever since. Besides, really knowing our history would require more reading than we have time for, and it's not like there is going to be a test.

Now, perhaps I'm exaggerating a little. But if this take on things is even partially accurate, then we may need to question our premise: Does UU history really matter, not just to us as religious professionals, but also to those we serve? If so, why? And more importantly, what are we going to do about it? This morning I want to offer a few reflections on these questions and to invite you into a conversation about them – a conversation I hope will continue long after we have left Williamsburg.

So you'll know what to expect, here is my plan for the morning. I'll begin by sharing some thoughts about the relationship between history and identity. I will then invite you to do a short exercise that will help us focus on some important issues around the way we think about history. That will take us up to the break. When we return, I will explore some of the problems we Unitarian Universalists confront as we think about history and its relevance for us today. Finally, in the last part of my talk, I will turn the inquiry around and look at how we might think of history as having to do not only with the past, but also with the future. I'll also leave plenty of time for questions and comments.

### **I. History and Identity**

Let me begin, then, with the relationship between history and identity. The basic point I want to make here is really pretty simple. History has partly to do with the stories we tell about ourselves, and

these stories help form our identities by giving us a framework for making sense of our lives. In other words, history matters because stories of the past help shape our identity in the present.

Our stories work like this because we human beings are meaning-making creatures. Finding meaning and purpose in life is one of the most basic human needs. This is not just a religious or psychological need, it is a biological imperative. Neuroscientists now tell us that our brains are structured to respond to this need. Our neural circuitry takes the sensory, cognitive and emotional input it receives and continually organizes it into patterns and images. Wall Street Journal science writer Sharon Begley calls this the brain's "scenario-creating, hypothesis-forming function."<sup>1</sup> As she puts it, the brain "habitually takes messy, incomplete input and turns it into a meaningful, complete picture."<sup>2</sup> We really are in a sense wired for meaning.

Responding to this need for meaning is also one of the main functions of our religious traditions. They paint a large-scale picture of reality that attempts to explain the way things are and helps us orient ourselves in the world. They help us understand which things matter most in our lives and who we are in relation to the larger world. They help us to make sense of our lives in the grand context of the universe and the movement of history. They give us a place to stand. And, we now know, they provide one framework around which our brains carry on their meaning-making, pattern-forming activity.

These worldviews are always given for us, in the first instance at least, by our cultures and our religious traditions. None of us ever starts from scratch. We learn them as children, and we absorb them into the stories we tell about ourselves. These stories become the basis of our identities.

We always belong to multiple overlapping stories. We begin with those that are given for us, and as we get older we choose others for ourselves. These stories change over time, or at least our place in them changes, and at some point we may find that our stories begin to bump into each other. I sometimes think that trying to keep our stories straight, trying to understand how our own multiple

stories relate to each other and how we fit into each other's stories, is one of the major sources of tension and conflict in our lives.

Among the stories that are given for us, those that have the deepest identity-forming influence are probably our national story and our family story. If I am an American by birth, and if I was raised in American society, then the American story has inevitably become part of my story. The same is true if I am Canadian, or Argentinean, or Korean. From my earliest childhood this story has shaped my self-understanding, my basic values, and my orientation toward the world in ways I may be only dimly aware of. National stories are complex and multi-layered. We inevitably know and see ourselves in only parts of this story, and there are always conflicting versions and interpretations even of the parts we know. The meaning the story has for us will be affected by our place in it. Our racial or ethnic identities might be expressed through other stories that overlap with the national story. If we are first or second generation immigrants, we might belong to more than one national story.

But wherever we find ourselves in our national story, and whatever we feel about it – whether we like it not, whether we feel proud of it or feel we have to apologize for it, whether I would tell it in the same way you would or the same way it was taught to me, its influence is always there. This does not mean that we have to accept the story as it was given to us. We can and should read our national story with a discerning and critical eye. We will want to fill in the chapters and sub-plots that have been left out of other people's telling; we should constantly reevaluate what the story means for us. We can close our eyes to it or wish it were different; we can even deny or reject the parts we don't like. But we can't get rid of it, and we can't eliminate its deep influence on our identities.

Sometimes we discover new information, or new ways of looking at old information, that don't fit the standard narrative. For example, my own understanding of my national story was radically shifted the first time I read Howard Zinn's remarkable book *A People's History of the United States*, and by my research into the peace movement in the United States. These projects opened up whole new

ways of thinking about a history I thought I knew. They changed much of the American story for me, and they also changed where I saw myself in the story. But they didn't remove me from it.

The same thing is true of our family story. This is another story that is given for us, at least in the first instance. Like our national identity, our original family identity is one we did not choose for ourselves. This is true however we came to be in the story and whatever the life arrangement of the person or persons who first cared for us. Like our national story, there is always more than one version of our family story, and it continually gets reinterpreted as we get older and learn about new characters and old feuds. We all have family lore; sometimes it is even true.

Our family story can be changed as the characters in the story come and go and change roles. This can happen through partnering or marriage or adoption, for example, or by separation or death or abandonment, or in other ways. At times we may discover previously unknown parts of the story. We may learn that a favorite uncle or grandmother suffered from mental illness, or spent time in prison, or held political office, or was abused as a child, or published a novel, or made an important scientific discovery. These sorts of realignments and discoveries can change the meaning of our story for us.

In my own family story, one of these forced reinterpretations emerged out of a series of discoveries about my father's childhood, and the circumstances under which his father left the United States for the plains of northern Saskatchewan where my father was born, only to return less than a decade later, broke and broken. I will never know the whole story. Much of it lies buried with those who might have told it; much was simply avoided or denied. But what I did learn helped me better understand my father's role in the story and how my strained relationship with him affected my role. I'm sure each of us could offer our own examples. But whatever our family story and however it changes over time, it always forms a major part of our identity. This is true whether we like the story or not, whether we move away at a young age or stay connected throughout of our lives. We can never leave it completely behind.

For those of us who have gathered here this week, one of the overlapping stories in which we find ourselves is about Unitarian Universalism. When I say that I am a Unitarian Universalist, I am saying (among other things) that I recognize myself in the larger UU story and in some measure identify with it. Unlike our national and original family identities, however, our Unitarian Universalist identity is one we have chosen for ourselves. This is true even for those among us who were raised as UUs: you too have chosen to stay, or perhaps to return. This choice reflects one of our core historical and theological principles, which is that religious faith has meaning only when it is freely chosen.

This brings me to a central point: Part of what it means to call myself a Unitarian Universalist is to adopt its history – its story – as my own. It is to step into the unfolding Unitarian Universalist story and find my place in it. And because I have made this choice, this story is now one part of my identity, however large or small. Like my other stories, it influences the way I see myself and my place in the world. It is one of my reference points for meaning-making, for making sense of my life and my place in the universe. For me, this means that we have a responsibility to ourselves to learn the story as well as we can, to wrestle with it until it makes sense, until we are comfortable telling the Unitarian Universalist story as our story. The more we learn, the more we know about our forebears and the circumstances that shaped their lives, the hopes and dreams they held, the struggles and sacrifices they endured, the richer the story becomes and the more meaning it has for us. This is why history matters.

It would be wrong to say that our history is our identity. But it would be equally wrong to deny that our history is part of our identity. The histories we are born into and the histories we adopt along the way are always relevant to who we are. They are part of the story of our lives.

## **II. An Exercise**

I'd like to invite you now to join me in a short exercise. You will need a piece of paper and something to write with. I am going to ask you five simple questions about Unitarian Universalist history and I'd like you to write down your responses. I'd also like to ask you to do this fairly quickly. Don't

over-think your answers; just write what comes to mind. This is not a test; it is just an exercise. There are no right or wrong answers. You may share your answers briefly with others at your table, but I don't want to take too much time on this yet. We'll do some more sharing later in the workshop. One more thing: I'd like you to write your own responses, but I also invite you to think about how those you serve in your congregations or elsewhere might respond. Would they find these questions easy or difficult, for example?

1. Name three important figures in Unitarian Universalist history. To keep this manageable, let's limit it to UU history in the United States or Canada.

2. Identify one moment or period in North American UU history where something important shifted in our self-understanding as a religious tradition. Name this moment in some way, and then, if you can, try to say in a few words what happened. What was it that shifted? Or, what did we turn from; what did we turn toward? Why was this significant?

3. Your conference theme begins with the phrase "the arc of the universe is long." With that in mind, I'd like to ask you to fill in the following sentence with one word: The arc of Unitarian Universalist history is \_\_\_\_\_. This doesn't have to be the best word; it can be any word you think might capture something useful about the flow of our history. But please choose just one word. If several words come to you, just pick one.

4. Begin with the sentence you just wrote for number 3, but this time we are going to extend the sentence so that it follows the pattern of Theodore Parker's original statement as paraphrased by Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." For you, the sentence will be: "The arc of Unitarian Universalist history is \_\_\_\_\_ [whatever you wrote], but it bends toward \_\_\_\_\_ [blank]. Again, please choose just one word.

5. The last one. Name two basic values that are illustrated by the UU story. Then, after you have named your two values, see if you can say how or where these values appear in the story. For

example, do the figures you named in your first answer demonstrate these values? Were these values, or perhaps conflicts over these values, involved in the historical turning point you named in your second answer? Do these values help shape the arc of UU history? How?

#### Exercise follow-up

I would like to follow up for a few minutes by asking a few questions about how you responded. For now, we won't try to share your table's responses with the whole group, though I do want to encourage you to share these with each other throughout the conference. We will do some sharing around this in the workshop this afternoon. For now, this is just some fodder for your own reflection.

1. For the first question, the three figures: What historical periods do your figures represent? Were they all from the same historical period? Were they from the distant past are they more recent? Are any of them still living? What geographical regions do these figures represent? Were they male or female? Were they white or people of color? Were they clergy or institutional leaders, or were they something else?

2. For the second question: Was it difficult to name a key historical moment or turning point? What historical period does the moment you picked belong to? Were any of the figures you named in the first question involved in the historical moment you chose? Was the shift you identified primarily theological in nature? Institutional? Political? Something else? How is it that this particular moment was the one that came to you? How did you learn about it? Are you comfortable with your own understanding of it?

3. For the third question: Look at the word you used to describe the arc of UU history. Was your word judgmental or simply descriptive? Was it positive or negative? How is your own experience of Unitarian Universalism reflected in your choice of words? If you had trouble choosing, was that because the arc of UU history is complex, or perhaps ambivalent, and can be described in several different ways? Or was it because you don't feel that you know enough to give a good answer?

4. For the fourth question: How does your answer about where our history bends relate to your previous answer about its arc? In other words, do you see the story bending in a direction that is consistent with your first answer, or do you see it turning in a different direction? Does it bend in a generally positive direction or a negative direction? Or does it have no discernible direction at all?

5. Fifth question: What values did you name? (Can ask more specifically: How many named justice? Freedom? Interdependence? Love? Something else?) Are these values simply abstractions, or are they demonstrated by the overall UU story arc? How do the lives of the key figures from your first answer illustrate these values?

I'll be interested to hear later what this little exercise raised for you. But for now, let's take a break.

### **III. Tensions in Thinking About History**

Let me turn now to some of the difficulties we face when we try to think honestly about our history and its value for us today. Most of these problems are the result of tensions that are built into religious liberalism. These tensions are in some sense inherent in our tradition, and we are more or less stuck with them. At their best they can be positive and creative, but they can also get in our way. I will be interested to hear your experience with these tensions, and perhaps with others I have not mentioned.

The first tension I want to address stems from our basic self-understanding as a liberal faith. I noted earlier that we Unitarian Universalists like to see ourselves as a religion of the present, not the past. The fact that a set of beliefs or a particular institutional structure has been held to be correct for centuries cuts no ice with us. We want our faith to be relevant and credible in light of the realities of our time. We expect our theological concepts to be consonant with modern science. We want our religious values and practices to make a difference to the people we serve in our congregations and communities. We want to be a positive force for justice in the world. In short, we see Unitarian

Universalism as an engaged faith tradition, one that is involved in our lives and in the world around us.

We may even gloat a little as we tell newcomers that, unlike some other religious groups they may have belonged to, we are liberated from the hoary clutches of the past.

This emphasis on the present is not a bad thing. In many ways it is one of our strengths. But it also feeds our tendency to discount the past, and this presents some problems. It's worth remembering that we are never as free of the past as we think we are, and pretending that the past is not relevant can create blind spots in our self-understanding. It would be a mistake to turn to the past uncritically and justify our current beliefs and practices solely on the basis of their importance for our ancestors. But our emphasis on the present can also lead us to discount the value of our tradition as a resource. It can keep us from seeing ourselves as part of an ongoing, evolving tradition – the “living tradition” we name in our Principles. It can keep us from seeing the large sweep of the Unitarian Universalist story to which we now belong. We know the story is there, but we often stand carefully outside of it, lest we be sucked down into the quicksand of the past. As a result, we end up starting over every generation, as though no one else's experience could possibly be relevant to the issues we face today.

A related tension has to do with the way we treat the important figures of our past – those you named in the first part of the exercise and others as well. I once made the bold claim that we Unitarian Universalists don't do history; we do hero worship. Now that may or may not be an exaggeration, but it is the impression I get from talking and listening to Unitarian Universalists over the years. I'm guessing that many of you, perhaps most, found this part of the exercise easier to respond to quickly than the other parts. I don't know if that proves anything, but I understand it - it's easier for me too.

Now I don't want to devalue the important role played by key figures throughout our history – call them heroes if you like – or to suggest that we should not celebrate them and value the things they did and the lessons they have to teach us. We should. All stories are told through characters and character development, and ours is no exception. In the context of history, these figures are in some

sense symbols of particular traits or values we want to hold up. This is why we celebrate them. Liberal moral philosopher Susan Neiman says that our heroes can show us the difference between theoretical possibilities and real achievements. As she puts it, heroes “show that the limits of life can be probed and extended, that we need not swallow every piece of the frameworks into which we are born. ... You may sense that the limits of your tribe or your town are not the limits of what’s possible. But until you see someone actually overcome them, you’re unlikely to believe that it’s possible for you.”<sup>3</sup> We see the things they accomplished and the difference their lives made, and this allows us to think that we might also be able to accomplish great things and make a difference with our lives too. I think this is basically how the life of Jesus was held up to many of us as children. In our national story, many of us were offered the models of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln in the same often simplistic way – or, depending on our family history and cultural reference points, maybe Mother Jones and Clarence Darrow, or (since we’ve been talking about the South) perhaps Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis.

One problem with our tendency to discount the role of history is that we often end up treating the key figures of our past ahistorically. This is different than saying they remain relevant for us today because they transcended their own historical location. It is to treat them as abstractions, as though they somehow exist outside of time and history. For example, we know that our heroes are always flawed, but something in the process of creating heroes means that we tend to reject or overlook the flaws. This was easier to do in the past. In today’s tabloid culture, our flaws are not only exposed to the whole world, they have become a kind of cultural currency. We are more likely to tear our heroes down, to reject them rather than to accept them flaws and all. Partly for this reason, Neiman reminds us, finding heroes is much harder now. Did anyone name a key UU figure who is still living? In this sense, my statement that we do hero worship in place of history is unfair, not because I’m wrong (thought I might be), but because in our time it is harder to speak of heroes at all. In place of heroes or role models, we have icons.

Another problem is that we sometimes forget that all the figures on our list were as rooted in their own historical context as we are in ours. They were shaped by that context, even as they managed to rise above it in some ways. If we don't know their context, if we don't understand the built-in limitations and presuppositions they started with, if we aren't aware of the other figures and ideas and social movements that influenced them, then we miss much of what they might be able to teach us. When we turn our heroes into abstractions, we take them out of the story. And when we do this, we obscure their link to us in the present. It's nice to have a list of really cool people we can claim and align ourselves with, especially if they are well-known outside our own tradition. But we miss a lot if that's all we have.

This habit of removing our key figures from their own history can lead to some interesting consequences. One example is the way James Luther Adams's writings were edited in the first well-known collection of his essays, *On Being Human Religiously*, published by Beacon Press in 1976. One of the most popular segments in this collection is called "The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism." This appears as the final eight pages of the first chapter in the book, and it offers a nice summary of several important liberal religious ideas. The problem is that Adams did not write it. The words are his, but their order and structure are not. This piece is a collage pasted together from pieces of eight essays Adams wrote over a sixteen year period, from 1939 to 1955. His original essays were cut into pieces and then reassembled with this catchy new title. The title, by the way, is an allusion to the Hebrew Bible story of the slaying of the Philistine Goliath by the shepherd boy David, an allusion Adams did not make.

Now to be fair, the new piece can stand on its own, and I'm told that Adams was consulted about the editing process and did not object. But I want to know what's wrong with reading his original essays? Isn't it important to know the social and historical context in which Adams wrote them and to know the particular concerns he was addressing at that time? One of them, for example, was written as an editorial that explained the purposes of the *Journal of Liberal Religion* when it was inaugurated in

1939, partly as a response to the dominant neo-orthodox theologies of that time. Another was written in 1943 and addressed religious responses to the war. Reading them in context forces us to dig a little deeper and ask how our present circumstances are similar to or different from his, and how that might help us understand and apply his ideas today. For me, reading Adams's original writing from more than half a century ago makes me marvel even more at the power of his insights and how deeply rooted his ideas were. Removing that context not only cuts off his roots, it cuts off some of ours too.

In this same book, the editors also "corrected" Adams' original language to make it gender inclusive. This same policy was followed in two later collections of Adams' writings published in 1986 and 1991. Even some titles were changed. Adams's essay "A Faith for Free Men," written in 1946, became "A Faith for the Free"; and his essay "The Liberal Christian Looks at Himself," written 1955, was changed to "The Liberal Christian Holds Up the Mirror." Now inclusive language is critical, and I am pleased that we were among the earliest religious groups to understand this and to insist on it in our publishing. Adams himself used inclusive language in his later writings. But like all of us, he was a product of his time, and his earlier writing reflects this. To sanitize his early language to conform to our expectations is again to treat him ahistorically. It is better, in my view, to let his original words stand, even if reading them today makes us cringe. Our cringing is itself an important reminder that we weren't always as perfect as we are now, and that our religious movement continues to evolve.

Another tension that can affect the way we think about history has to do with what I call translation. What I have in mind here is our practice of speaking in ways that seek to avoid offending anyone. You will all recognize this. I'm guessing that all of us, at one time or another, have said or heard someone say something like "the spirit of life and love in the universe that some call God, while others may use other names and some don't really believe in at all." Now there are many good reasons to do this. Used wisely, this practice is itself a form of inclusive language. Our desire to avoid offense is not simply about manners. It is rooted in our rich theological diversity, one of the things we rightly

celebrate. When we speak in this inclusive way, we are acknowledging that our own beliefs and moral reference points are based on assumptions that are not shared by everyone, and that we don't want to impose them – or be accused of imposing them – on others. This is especially important in contexts like worship. It reminds us that we are theologically diverse, that we don't all use the same religious language and metaphors to express our ideas, and that we need to be as inclusive as possible in our thinking and in our ministries.

But this way of speaking has some drawbacks. For one thing, it places a heavy burden on the speaker, who now has to translate her own religious convictions into language acceptable to all of her listeners, even those whose sensibilities she might not know. For another, it can make us reluctant to state our own religious commitments with too much conviction or to engage each other in honest discussions about the differences we know we have. As a result, we might never learn from each other what we really think. And finally, this practice can also affect the way we hear each other. If we expect not to be offended, if we expect those who are speaking to us to do this kind of simultaneous translation, we can easily end up paying more attention to their word choices than to the meaning they are trying to convey.

What we end up with is a kind of polite tolerance, what I have called a theological don't ask, don't tell policy.<sup>4</sup> Sociologist Alan Wolfe gets at the same idea when he speaks of liberalism's eleventh commandment as "Don't be judgmental."<sup>5</sup> Our fear of being judgmental can leave us reluctant to make any judgments at all. Rather than say something that might offend someone, or that might not fit our listeners' preferred language, we end up avoiding the deeper conversations we say we want to have.

I'm not suggesting necessarily that we should change our practice, but I am suggesting that we should pay attention to these potential side effects. At Pendle Hill, the Quaker Study Center where I worked for five years, we adopted the opposite practice in our classes. We asked the listeners rather than the speaker to do the translating, and thereby invited each speaker in our very diverse groups to

speaking in her or his own words. This practice worked extremely well in that context, though whether it would work for us is a different matter.

All of these tendencies within religious liberalism affect our approach to history. History is in some sense about having a conversation with our past, with the figures we hold up as important and with others who have written about them. If we engage the figures of our past in the same cautious, nonjudgmental, almost apologetic way that we often use to talk to each other, we will very likely avoid getting in too deeply for fear of discovering something we don't like, something we may feel we have to explain or apologize for, something that might force us to rethink some of our own beliefs or change the way we tell our story. Ironically, this practice can make us reluctant to engage in the kind of honest and critical self-analysis that has always been the hallmark of liberalism.

Fortunately, we don't always fall into this trap. Whatever your view of the name change of the district where we are meeting from the Thomas Jefferson District to the Southeast District, it seems clear that Jefferson's historical context was well researched and taken seriously by many on both sides of the debate. Actually, I think this episode illustrates all of our tendencies around heroes – either to sanitize them and ignore their flaws, or to reject them entirely once we discover the flaws. But it is also clear that many people had a much more nuanced and historically grounded perspective.

On a more general level, I can also say that there is now, and has been for a long time, much excellent research and writing on Unitarian Universalist history, writing that delves deeply into context and gives us a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of our tradition, of our historical figures and their times. It's not that we don't know how to do this. But far too many Unitarian Universalists have a truncated view of history that distorts our story by creating and reinforcing gaps and blind spots.

The standard short-story versions of our history focus largely on New England, with occasional references to the Midwest and the west coast. Because this version of the story makes sense as far as it goes – it holds together as a story on its own terms – we often do not ask what is missing. Weren't

there also Unitarians and Universalists in the South, even in those early years? Why don't we know about them? How might their stories enrich our understanding of our tradition? What might they have to teach us about the role of liberal religion in settings where it was not widely accepted in the established academic and cultural institutions?

The truth is that our Unitarian Universalist story is complex, multi-layered and contradictory, pride-inducing in some places and downright embarrassing in others. Like our family stories, it has its share of goofy grandparents and narrow-minded cousins, its share of distant relations whose stories we don't like to tell, figures who embarrass us every time they show up. To ignore this is to do a disservice to our history. But our story is also filled with characters and subplots that demonstrate the richness of our heritage and the moral and theological depth of the liberalism we hold dear. All of this is part of the history we have adopted by identifying ourselves as Unitarian Universalists. We owe it to ourselves and to each other, to those who came before us and to those who will come after us, to learn and to tell this story in all its colorful and contradictory richness.

#### **IV. UU History and the Future**

I want to turn now to my final point, the relationship of our history to our future. This is really the question of how our Unitarian Universalist story continues after today, from this moment forward. My premise is that just as we in the present never really start from scratch, despite our stubborn tendency to behave as though we do, so too our future will not start from scratch. The arc of UU history may be long, but the story always continues from where it is at any given point. And it tends to move along the trajectory it has followed over time, including – we often forget – the time before ours.

This does not mean that the story line is fixed or that the arc cannot be redirected. It can. I'm guessing that some of your answers to my exercise questions had our story arc bending in some new and interesting directions. The stories in which we are embedded always shape us, but we also shape them. How we live out our parts in this unfolding story matters. And how we tell the story matters too.

What we do, and what we say about what we have done, affect how the story is heard and understood by others in the present and by others in the future who will come to see the story in part by our telling. We are their past.

It's worth remembering that we influence the arc of our Unitarian Universalist story whether we intend to or not. If we ignore it, or take it for granted, or fail to nurture it, it may drift toward a trajectory we did not intend, or perhaps just wander along without any discernible direction. But it will continue to move and evolve somewhere. The arc of the universe may be long, and Parker and King may be right that it bends toward justice. I hope that we can say the same thing about the arc of UU history. But we have to be careful about statements like this. It is contrary to the liberal way of thinking to see any particular bending as inevitable, as somehow predetermined. We have to help it along, just as they did.

Nevertheless, to say that the arc of the universe bends toward justice is to say something extremely important. A statement like this is not simply an empirical observation or even a prediction. More than this, it makes a moral claim. It says that the story of the universe, or our UU story if you prefer, is governed by a moral ideal. And it is our moral ideals, our vision of the future we want, that link our future to our past.

Ideals are about idealism, and idealism is something we need more of today. Idealism is not the same as ideology. An ideology can be any system of beliefs about the world, though today we more often use this term in a negative sense, at least when talking about those whose worldviews we disagree with. But idealism is not the same thing. Neiman defines idealism as "the belief that the world can be improved by means of ideals expressing states of reality that are better than the ones we currently experience."<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is the belief that the world can be better than it is, and that our ideals or vision of that better world have a role to play in helping us create it. Liberals have always affirmed the possibility of a better future. And we measure what counts as better by reference to our ideals.

Idealism has taken a hit in recent years. One of the attacks on idealism comes from the ideology of realism. Realists see idealists as soft and delusional. Sure, world peace would be nice, they say, but we have to take the world as it is, not as we might like it to be. For most political realists today, that means looking out for our own interests in light of the threats we see, or imagine we see, around us. (It is interesting how often realism seems to boil down to self-interest.) For many realists, idealists are themselves part of the threat. If you aren't willing to get over your weak-kneed idealism and take the world seriously, they say, then you are part of the problem.

But the realist critique of idealism is wrong. Contrary to popular belief, ideals are not just metaphysical castles in the air. And they are not unrealistic at all. Idealists do not ignore the world as it is; they start there, just like the realists. But idealists take an additional step. They don't just look at the world as it is and then circle the wagons and hang on for the ride; they envision the world as it could be and then set out to create that world. As Neiman says, "it is wrong to conclude ... that ideas of right are unreal. For ideals ... can be practical: When we use them as orientation, we can use them to change reality itself."<sup>7</sup> In other words, our vision of the future guides our actual work in the present. This means that our moral ideals have practical consequences.

The hard work comes in discerning a path from here to there. This involves lots of small and large steps. We may want to rearticulate our ideals in a set of religious principles and commitments that can guide our ongoing day to day work. We need practical strategies and plans of action that put these principles into practice and move us along the path. We need means of evaluation and self-correction to help us get back on the path when we wander off, as we inevitably will. And we need a program of life-span religious education that is rooted in these ideals, one that can help us internalize them so that they become more than intellectual claims; they become embodied values that guide our whole lives. We all need what you do.

And this is where our history fits in. Our religious movement stands for the moral ideals of justice, love, compassion, and human dignity. We share a vision of a world in which these ideals have become the reality. But, to paraphrase Barack Obama – who was paraphrasing Elizabeth Warren – our generation did not invent these ideals. They are rooted deep in our tradition. They emerged out of the commitments and actions, the writing and preaching and teaching, of those who came before us, those who set our Unitarian Universalist story arc on a trajectory toward the realization of these ideals. This vision remains strong and compelling because of these deep roots. But those who started us along this path are gone. We may not have invented these ideals, but we are the ones responsible for keeping them alive today. If our Unitarian Universalist story arc is to bend toward a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, then we are the ones who will have to bend it.

To do this means that we have to understand the directional tendencies and forces that have moved it to where it is now, as well as the internal and external dynamics that have interfered with it or blocked its movement in the past. This understanding comes from knowing our history. It is why our history matters. We may continue along the arc our ancestors set in motion for us, or we may decide in our time to bend it in a different direction. Fine. After all, we wouldn't be good liberals if we didn't critically examine and sometimes reject what came before. But whatever we do with the story as it was given to us, by calling ourselves Unitarian Universalists we align ourselves with this living, breathing, evolving, justice-oriented tradition, and with the moral ideals it has long held up for us.

### **Conclusion**

So, do we need a new story? Our link to our own past means that a completely new story is not really possible. But I think we need new tellings of our story. And while I have been speaking in very broad terms, in fact our UU story is itself made up of many smaller stories – stories not just of individuals and heroes, but of congregations and communities, stories that will be different in various parts of the country, not to mention the stories of our fellow UUs in other countries. And these stories

will be experienced differently, depending on our own locations of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, geography, age, theology, and more. One of our challenges is to tell these countless local stories as part of a bigger story, one that is more inclusive than the story told by many of our ancestors, a story that enlarges the moral vision toward which the arc of Unitarian Universalist history bends.

May we be up to the task.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Begley, "The Hidden Brain," *Newsweek* vol. 155, no. 23 (June 7, 2012), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Begley, "Why We Believe," *Newsweek* vol. 152, no. 18 (November 3, 2008), 56-60.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grownups* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 330.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Rasor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2012), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 95.