

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
Draw the Circle Whole
March 27, 2011

Song “Circle Round for Freedom” by Linda Hirschorn

Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace
For all of us imprisoned circle for release
Circle for the planet, circle for each soul
And for the children of our children, keep the circle whole

Story “The Winds of Hope” adapted by Barbara Palmer ¹

A person never knows for sure about the wind: where it comes from, what it blows in, what it takes away, how, suddenly it changes directions, and how it can turn a life up-side-down.

It happened that way to one special man – unpredictable winds kept buffeting and reshaping his life.

For John Murray, an ambitious, young Englishman, excellent fortune had blown his way. He had a fine education, a steady job, a loving wife, and a beautiful young son.

Life was so sweet.

Then, without warning, an ill-wind blew, and everything changed. John’s wife and son grew gravely ill. They soon died. John lost his job, his possessions, and, finally, he found himself in jail because he was unable to pay his bills. Until this tragic time, John had been a very religious man, a Universalist in fact, who had preached the good news of a loving God.

After losing everything that mattered to him, he fell into a deep depression, and he was no longer certain what he believed. He felt as if all meaning and purpose had gone out of his life. However, caring friends continue to love him and finally convinced him to leave England for a new home where he could begin his life over again.

And so, on July 21, 1770, John Murray set sail for America on a ship named the “Hand In Hand.” A wholesome wind blew the “Hand in Hand,” its passengers and crew toward its final destination – New York City.

¹ Barbara Palmer adapted this story from various sources, primarily from the UUA Tapestry of Faith curricula on Creating Home, found at <http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/creatinghome/session12/sessionplan/stories/60161.shtml>

As the ship neared the coastline, and everything seemed to be going well, suddenly a heavy, dense fog rolled in and enveloped the “Hand in Hand.” With visibility at zero, the ship was forced to slow down, for everyone aboard feared a shipwreck. In the confusion, rather than landing in New York Harbor, the ship drifted southward and finally ran aground in New Jersey – at a place known as Good Luck Point, to be exact.

Trying to figure out what to do next, John and a few other passengers volunteered to disembark, in order to go ashore for directions and to gather supplies. As he made his way on land, John encountered a farmhouse with a small chapel adjacent to it. The farm belonged to a man named, Thomas Potter. Spotting John and his companions on his land, Thomas Potter ran out to greet them, offering food for everyone onboard ship, and, curiously, inviting John to return later and join him for dinner.

What John did not know at the time, was that this humble farmer had taken very seriously a vision he’d experienced several years earlier. The vision was that one-day, a minister would come to his chapel to preach the good news of an astounding kind of love – the kind of love that would nourish every person and triumph over every circumstance.

Thomas Potter had built the chapel, this small meeting-house next to his home, for that expected preacher. When Thomas saw the “Hand-in-Hand” run aground, he had the overwhelming conviction that his preacher was *on that ship*.

That evening, as John returned to Thomas’ home for dinner, Thomas greeted him with these words: “Come ... my friend, I’m glad you have returned. I have longed to see you, and I have been expecting you for a long time.” (The Life of John Murray, p. 125)

Before dinner, Thomas showed John the chapel and explained his dream of how his chapel would be the place where a truthful, loving, inclusive religion would be preached – a religion without the popular themes of the day: judgment and damnation. John confessed that he had once held the same beliefs.

Thomas Potter told John that he had built the chapel and had been waiting for that particular minister to arrive. “You, John, are that minister.”

John did not want to hear this. He wasn’t a preacher anymore and he’d promised himself never, ever to preach again. After all the pain he’d endured, and his deep suspicion of the divine, John wanted nothing more than to flee from all religion entirely. Yet, Thomas knew in his heart that John Murray was, indeed, the preacher he’d been waiting for, and he begged John to preach that coming Sunday.

“I can’t preach on Sunday, because as soon as the wind changes, my boat will sail, and I *will* be on it.”

“If the boat doesn’t set sail by Sunday, then will you preach?”

John relented, “If I am still here on Sunday, then I will preach.”

The wind did not blow. The “Hand In Hand” did not sail away.

Thomas, realizing his dream-nearly-come-true, quickly sent out word to his friends and neighbors that there would finally be a service in the meeting-house on Sunday morning, and that the man envisioned in his dream, so many years earlier, had finally arrived and would be preaching.

On Sunday, September 30, 1770, John Murray preached from that chapel the message of universal love, a love wholly and ultimately available to all people everywhere.

The Universalist message of love was good news to all who heard it, and it was especially good news to John. His experience that Sunday morning, and the winds of change and hope that had brought him to this place, finally overpowered him.

Rather than fleeing from religion and the pulpit, he realized he wanted to preach more than anything else in the world, and he did so, for many, many years.

John Murray, today, is considered the founder of Universalism in America.

And so, today, we offer gratitude to the wind – the wind that blew the Hand in Hand onto Good Luck Point, and would not blow out John Murray before changing his life – and all of our lives with the power of hope, and the message of the transformative power of love.

Poem “One Wish” by Lisa Friedman

If you had but one wish, what would it be?

Take your time thinking about it.

So much is at stake —

an end to all suffering, a stop to all violence, a solution to poverty and all of its ills.

Would you wish for love?

— For forgiveness or for healing?

Would you wish the world joy?

— Or the wisdom to change?

Would you wish to understand everything?

— Or to know less than you do?

Take your time thinking about it. So much is at stake.

For a wish is a thought, and a thought is an idea.

An idea leads to commitment and a commitment cries out for action.

A wish can be a dangerous thing — something daring.

And it need not be witnessed by the stars to come true.

Let us be glad that we are not given just one wish in our lives — but many.

Let us be grateful not for wishful thinking,

but for the discipline of the thoughtful wishing that can lead to change.

What would be your wish?

Sermon “Draw the Circle Whole”

Universalism saved my life. Me, and John Murray. Universalism saved us both.

For me, I was 22. In my second year of graduate school, at CU. And things were – dark.

Dark, for many reasons – I was living in a new state, away from family, and most of my friends. I was lonely, and a little lost. What I thought was my calling – a life in the theatre – what I thought of as a vehicle for personal and communal transformation – it was breaking my heart.

A series of disappointing interactions with my artistic idols had left my eager idealism badly bruised. I was coming to realize that a career in the theatre meant not so much a life of the spirit – or even a life of creative collaboration in the pursuit of an artistic vision – but rather mostly a life of mass-producing entertainment at below-poverty-level wages.

These were painful realities, but they weren’t the things from which I most needed saving.

The deeper darkness came – as it often does – from within my own family. See, before that point, I had been really close with my parents. We’d never met any serious strain in our relationship – they supported me and believed in me, in all the twists and turns my life had taken. But that Fall – twelve years ago – that Fall, we lost each other.

I had fallen in love – with a woman, and for that, I was bursting with joy – and fear. I knew I had to tell my parents. And I knew it was going to be hard, but I trusted in our relationship enough to believe that we would be ok. And so I flew to Washington State, and I came out to my mom and dad on a long drive from the airport to Olympia.

That initial conversation was difficult, to say the least. There was silence, and then there was sarcasm, and then there was denial. But the first conversation was pleasant compared to the conversations that followed over the course of the next few months – the sustained struggle, the ongoing alienation.

I started to doubt my original faith – would we really be ok? And maybe more, was I ok?

This was the *darkness*.

And so one Sunday morning, my partner and I walked into a Unitarian Universalist Church – walked in wounded and unsure, not really even knowing what we were looking for or expecting. We walked in, and there at the front entrance, there was a rainbow flag, pronouncing the ways this church stood on the side of love – love for all. Actually, most everyone there wore a rainbow flag, expressing how they valued diversity. But we were greeted with more than just signs. We were welcomed by the people, welcomed for who we were – people worthy of inclusion and full relationship and community. We were seen – as a couple, as individual people, as legitimate and whole.

We cried through most Sunday services, those early days. The message and experience of affirmation and welcome was overwhelming, and deeply healing.

It was a message that said, no matter who you are, you are loved. No matter what the world may say, no matter what the media may say, what the laws or politicians may say, what your family may say or do – you are held, you are whole, you are holy, and sacred, and precious. At your deepest truth and in your darkest days, you are loved. Loved not just by a bunch of individuals.

I mean individuals loving you unconditionally, that matters. It matters a lot actually.

But what we experienced in that church community, the reason it was deeply healing, was not because a bunch of individuals offered individual support. It was saving to our spirits because we felt loved by a larger community – and held by a sustained, larger truth – a truth embodied by the gathered community each of those Sunday mornings in that little sanctuary in Boulder.

It was a truth grounded in the long tradition of Universalism which has offered the simple but somehow still contested truth that the essential reality of human life, is that we are all held in rich, abiding, love. All of us.

It was a transformative message to Carri and I back in 1999. And it was a transformative message to John Murray and his gathered community way back in 1770.

For he too had come to church filled with a kind of darkness and despair. Not too long before he set sail for America, he had lost his infant son to illness, and then his wife caught the same illness, and she too died. He had lost all his money, mostly trying to pay for their health care and then their funeral costs. And he had lost most of his friends and former allies, because he kept insisting on the Universalist message that a loving God would not damn any of God's creation to suffer eternally in a place called hell. He kept insisting that humans need not live in fear or in judgment of one another. That instead they can place their trust in a force greater than themselves that would bring each and every person, only peace, and care, and eternal love.

Before I lose some of you, let me say a word on this whole eternity thing. See, it was generally accepted, even as late as the 18th century, that this life was simply preparation for another life – the eternal one. And so, the main religious question back then was who would end up where, and why. The standard answer – as you might know – was that humans were fated – by this supposedly all-loving, all-powerful deity – to fail at what this same deity had decided was “good” – and as a consequence to that pre-determined failure, they were pre-determined to suffer - forever.

Or rather, most were pre-determined to suffer. A select few – though still irreparably bad – were chosen to live in eternal bliss.

Though it came in a few different variations, this was the prevailing religious truth back then. And if you have followed the recent controversies with the Evangelical Pastor, Rob Bell – or the Methodist pastor, Chad Holtz – both of whom have been vilified by or even expelled from their communities for suggesting the possibility that there will not be – pardon the expression – hell to pay in some other life. If you've followed these stories, you know, John Murray's claim remains threatening to a world that is so sold on fear and judgment, and division as the primary motivators of the universe, we can't believe that love will have the final word – for us all.

The more I learn about all John Murray, and Thomas Potter, and all the early Universalists risked and sacrificed in spreading this message of hope over fear, and love over hate, the more I feel a duty to them to make sure their message lives on today.

But with all respect to Rob Bell and others struggling through today's fight about the afterlife – I think the central religious question for *today* is not about what happens in some other life (who goes where and why), but about what happens in this one.

Because although many think it's a big bold move to claim that Ghandi might not be burning in hell, to my mind – and in my heart – I think there's an even more urgent controversy to court.

It is the controversial claim that no matter who you are, no matter what the circumstances of your life – we are *all* meant to share fully in the gifts of this life. And the nature of those gifts – the nature of life itself, is love. Our reality is love. We are all meant for love. We are all meant for lives of wholeness, of security, of health, of purpose. For this is the nature of lives held in love.

This counter-cultural message embraced me that first Sunday twelve years ago, and this good news continues to embrace me on those days when I wonder if I'm good enough, if what I'm being or becoming is worthy, or enough, when I wonder if we - I mean, my family, my community, this congregation, Unitarian Universalism, this country, this world - all of it - if *all* of us will be ok.

This is the message that saves me. And this is the saving message John Murray experienced in Thomas Potter's meetinghouse in Good Luck, New Jersey, 250 years ago.

Just imagine, John Murray had lost nearly everything he thought mattered, he had been rejected, at his deepest truth. He set sail in darkness, and he arrived in fog.

And then there, on the shore, there was Thomas Potter saying, welcome. Welcome, I have been waiting for you. I have built this space for you. Let me feed you, and care for you, let me gather up a community around you, and let me remind you who you are, and what you are meant to be, and do. Let us rejoice together in the truth that we are all held in love.

John Murray may have been preaching about salvation in another life, but what he experienced was salvation in this one.

And this experience has been replicated again and again, in Universalist - and Unitarian congregations - over the next two centuries, and in Unitarian Universalist congregations for the fifty years since.

We build these houses of hope because we know someone in the world, maybe everyone in the world, needs to be reminded, regularly, who they are, and what their lives are really about.

We create these gathering places of love, so that with each person who arrives, we can say:

Welcome. We have been waiting for you.

The world does its work on all of us, each and every day, and we all arrive here in various states of weariness and resolve. It's not only those times of crisis that require this message of hope and love. Not only in those times when you've been rejected by your parents, or when you've you're your family to illness. Sometimes, even more, it's the little things, day-by-day. It's the bumper stickers we see on our neighbor's car that are just so, mean. It's the struggles we have with our kids and the ways we beat ourselves up for not being the parent we would've thought we'd be. It's the way we forget how to laugh with our partner, and the silence that starts to overcome us. It's in the regular, old life where we *all*, all the time, need this message of love.

Thomas Potter knew this, and so he built his little meetinghouse with the faith that the person who most needed it, would find it. With the faith that the whole world - which includes you, and me, and our world today, needed to know and experience unconditional love.

As his spiritual descendents, we build our house of hope, imagining too the great circle of people who need this message of love, creating a community that says again, and again:

Welcome, we've been waiting for you.

We draw that circle by first acknowledging that before “you” really means you, “you” often means “me.” Welcome, we've been waiting for *me*. A welcoming community begins when we let *ourselves* be welcomed, let *ourselves* be affirmed, and let *ourselves* be loved. It's harder than you might think - really receiving love. It's harder than you think.

Our building continues, as we draw the circle so that you really does mean you. All of you. Welcome. We have been waiting for you. You who sit here, together, side by side. Who have sat beside each other for weeks - or even years - in other rooms like this.

Did you know - you are held, you are worthy, you are loved - just as you are? Did you know, we are all meant for love?

But then, the circle of our meetinghouse goes further. We imagine the circle of our community reaching out wider to those who have not yet found us - people who need to hear and experience our message of hope and love.

I have yet to meet someone who does not need an ongoing experience of being held, affirmed, accepted - in love. Have you?

If you have, even better, get them in here - because that kind of embodied joy and love - that's the kind of experience that makes you share with others. Makes you serve others. You can't help it. Sharing love and resources and joy with others is the natural and even easy reaction that comes when you know deep down - how we are all bound up together, in a life that is holding us in love. ‘

Which of course means, that to draw the circle of Unitarian Universalism whole, we must include those places beyond our walls, beyond our lives, those whose lives are fundamentally insecure or even broken - those places where people do not *feel* held in the hands of love, places of injustice or suffering. And the circle of Unitarian Universalism includes our response. The insuppressible response of those who know - who have *experienced* deep in their hearts, the reality, that love wins.

The circle of this faith is a big, wide circle, a moving circle, growing and changing with each new life, each new breath, each new hope we place before ourselves.

And it *is* a circle of hope. A circle built on the hopes of those who came before us, a circle built on *our* hopes, our boldest dreams, our most precious yearnings, our most heartfelt wishes - our wishes for forgiveness, healing, joy, wisdom, understanding, and peace.

Which means, if Lisa Friedman is right - and I think she is - it's a dangerous thing, a daring thing to cast a circle of Unitarian Universalist community. Because disciplined, thoughtful wishing - wishing done amongst a gathered community built on hope, created in love - these kinds of wishes lead to change.

This circle of Unitarian Universalism is worthy of those kinds of wishes, worthy of upholding your deepest values, and your most ultimate concerns.

This is the circle we are drawing. Each time we gather, each time we sit down for the work of committees, each time we call one another to offer support, each time we cast our vision into the future.

And this is the circle we are drawing today as we officially begin our annual canvass - as we begin imagining who and what we will be in the coming year - and beyond.

How big will we make this circle? How wide will we cast our vision?

When we create our community based on our response to this good news of Universalism, based on our faith that we are all meant for love, then there is no doubt our vision will be vast - covering ground from the contours of our own hearts, to the disaster around the globe, from the present gatherings here at Bridges, to the future fully programmed, fully staffed institution of liberal religion that I so enjoy conjuring up in my mind as a vision for this valley.

When we respond together to an experience of communal, unconditional love, love we know every person is meant for, the experience we feel deep in the heart of Unitarian Universalism - its past, its present, its future - and cast our vision out of this place, out of this experience.

Then, I know we will be drawing the circle whole. And that circle. It's stunning.

This is the circle of our covenant, the circle of Unitarian Universalism - whole and holy - all of us, meant for love.

Welcome.